

Holy Ouch! God's Purpose for Pain

Nathan B. Werner

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HOLY OUCH! GOD'S PURPOSE FOR PAIN

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Written by Nathan B. Werner.

Praise for *Holy Ouch!*:

“When the events of life throw a devastating crisis our way, our Christian faith may be challenged by our attempts to understand the loss and pain we have experienced. Nathan B. Werner has explored this in “Holy Ouch!” by presenting a scriptural search as well as some words from strong spiritual writers helping us find answers to our questions. Nathan Werner leads us through the process of using these dark valleys of life to move towards an opportunity for faith strengthening growth, as he shows us step by step how we must truthfully acknowledge our vulnerability as we turn to our God with trust.”

Rev. Sonja Kvale, PhD, LPC, NCC, Author of Mirror Images Retreats; Founder and Executive Director of sKKs, Inc.

“Pain is an existential reality of life. Understanding pain has profound ramifications in the way we live our lives. How you deal with it matters a lot than just reasoning about it. In this excellent book, Nathan Werner, deals with the complexities of the problem of pain and offers a refreshing hope for those who are going through adversities. If you are looking for answers as to why God allows pain and how pain can shape us for good, here’s a book that is a must read. This book will help you navigate the complex world of pain and lead you into a deeper understanding of life.”

Reuben David, Professor and Former Visiting Scholar, The Wilberforce Forum

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Author: Nathan B. Werner

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Nathan B. Werner

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Prosperity doth best discover vice, but adversity doth best discover virtue.

Francis Bacon, *Essays*

Prologue

I was sitting at a banquet table in a hotel in Tel Aviv, Israel, where perhaps a dozen people were enjoying conversations. Most of us were just getting acquainted and finding interesting topics to talk about. We had been on an excursion, touring the Galilean countryside, witnessing the beauty and wonder of northern Israel.

A lady at my side was a mature Christian woman, and we were engaged in a thoughtful spiritual discussion, agreeing about the goodness of God. It was a natural conversation to have for us since we were both devoted Christians.

Unbeknownst to us, across the table was a middle-aged Jewish woman who was a Holocaust survivor. The woman had experienced the wrenching loss of her loved ones while she had barely survived. She had been listening to our conversation with interest, and we sought to include her in the dialogue. She had a very direct response to us. It was short and pointed.

“I don’t believe in a God who would allow such horror upon people. He cannot exist,” she explained. Her face was hard and flinty, showing the pain of deep sadness and bitterness.

I was interested in her response and wanted to engage her in a thoughtful argument; however, the woman at my side immediately took her cue and with grace and sympathetic language agreed with her feelings. She was full of kind words and noted how she understood her outlook. She did not find fault nor argue but noted the extreme distress that survivor must have experienced, and she wonderfully wove in her language words of the goodness and love of the Lord.

The Jewish woman’s face softened as she heard the words. I watched her face turn from anger at God to hopefulness and then softness. The woman wanted to believe the kind words and the characterization of a good God, but her awful survival experience was too bitter to succumb entirely to the language. I noticed her reserve took control. I watched the angst in her soul being played out on her facial expressions. She was safe with her assessment and unsure about the hope of a good and kind God that was being expressed.

The survivor heard and even had an emotional response to the hope that was conveyed. However she trusted what she had experienced. Understandably, the woman retreated to what made absolute sense to her, unfortunately, she rejected the idea of a good God.

Why did she not believe in an eloquent and kind response to her objection? Her horrible experience was reality, while platitudes were the things of fairy tales.

Suffering is part of the human condition, and it comes to us all. The key is how we react to it, either turning away from God in anger and bitterness or growing closer to Him in trust and confidence.

Billy Graham, *Just As I Am*, Notable Quotes.com

The Problem

The issue of pain and suffering has been one of the conundrums that mankind has pondered since time began. Various answers have been given for the troubling question, and few answers have supplied any real comfort. Are there truly reasons for pain? Is there a purpose behind suffering?

When we look at the world, we see misery. Wars bring death, injury, and privation. Diseases ravage old and young alike, a seeming disregard for the innocent or weak among us. Crime is ever present, from petty theft to malevolent hate crimes. Car accidents, jealousies, natural disasters, murders, corruption, bankruptcies, rapes, and a host of other evils beset this world. Why is this so? If there is a God, why does he allow this? Is there some reason for it?

But man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.

Job 5:7

Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.

Job 14:1

The logical approach views the issue of pain and God like this: God is omnipotent, God is wholly good, and yet evil exists. The seeming contradiction between these three ideas presents us with the understanding that if any two are true, then the third is false. In most theological systems these three propositions are held, yet it seems that this is not logically consistent.

If God is omnipotent and good, he could not allow evil. Since there is evil, the other propositions must be false: God is not omnipotent or God is not good. It was precisely at this point that Charles Darwin struggled. Charles Darwin, when studying for a vocation in Christian ministry, confronted the issue of pain and suffering. He could not reconcile the existence of God and the existence of evil. This was a stumbling block that he struggled to come to terms with. Ultimately Darwin chose to deny the existence of God since he could not rationalize the reality of evil in the world. This simple choice led him to a pursuit of replacing God with a system that allowed for evil. Thus, Charles Darwin became a naturalist and came to view nature in light of a theory he proposed.

Darwin replaced God because evil was evident, just as the Holocaust survivor did. His theory of evolution was an answer to this problem. He denied a good, omnipotent God and changed the course of our present world with a theory that allowed for the reality of pain: survival of the fittest.

Darwin thought that the suffering and misery in the world was evidence against God, and for natural selection. He wrote that many sentient beings *'occasionally suffer much. Such suffering, is quite compatible with the belief in Natural Selection, which is not perfect in its action...'* But he continued:

"A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as a God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that his benevolence is not unbounded, for what advantage can there be in the sufferings of millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time?"^[1]

Consider Gautama Buddha, who began his quest for the answers to life because he witnessed disease, death, and a plethora of pain and suffering. His quest compelled him to abandon his wife, home, and all material comforts. Buddha thought the answers of life lay in a belief that at the heart of all human suffering was desire, and if desire could be extinguished, nirvana lay around the corner.

Buddhist teaching points to the obvious, the presence of hardship and suffering, and from that Buddha wanted people to change their minds concerning what motivated them. Self-centered choices could be enslaving, thus each person was to probe deeply into one's choices to understand what they were really looking for from a possession or person. If one piled expectations onto a person one will be disappointed since they will not deliver what you need. As Buddha saw it, no one can be free so long as they cling to the notion of "I, me, mine."

Ultimately, Buddhism was the understanding that the answer to suffering lay in the eradication of desire. For the Buddhist, meditation, self-renunciation, and transmigration of the soul would bring an enlightened state. Nirvana was the extinguishing of all desires, and where one arrives at the condition of bliss. This condition comes by rising above or transcending the human cycle of life.

Both Darwin and Buddha tried through intellectual and aesthetic means to understand the reality of pain and suffering. Their initial worldviews could not give answers that comported with reality, so they found alternatives that gave a hopeful explanation for the world as it was. However, both systems are inadequate.

The quest in this writing is to examine and then provide some answers for these paradoxes. The option that the theist faces is a God who permits an instance of suffering might be powerful and good, providing that there is a morally sufficient reason for his action. This powerful and good God must have a transcendent reason for allowing evil to have an influence within his domain. Our proposal is one that contemporary Christian apologists would generally agree on: if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that would not be provided without the suffering.

Our attempt is to identify some of the reasons God permits the existence of evil in our lives. The assumption of this book is that there is a God, and according to the Bible, he does care about us and about our lives.

Since we contend that God allows evil, we must note that this evil could fall within the range from mild frustration and discomfort to cruel agony. Each individual identifies what impacts their life. It is also noted that evil is different than pain or suffering, but we are using these in a generic sense to easily categorize events that

occur to oneself. Additionally, those who have privileged situations would consider a condition as suffering while many in other circumstances would consider the same experiences as normal. Hence, we will not be specific but only generalize about the categories of evil, pain, or suffering. We will use these concepts interchangeably.

Alternative Philosophies

There are many philosophies that have tried to explain the existence of pain.

Most philosophies approach the problem by noting there are two ultimate principles in the universe: God and the power of evil. God is attempting to overcome evil and would if he could, but he is simply unable to do so.

For instance, Hinduism explains suffering as a catalyst, something that compels a person to do the things he is supposed to, so that through death and rebirth the Hindu goes to a higher and higher order of things.

Its way of salvation is not through sacrifice nor through knowledge, but through loving faith and devotion to the great god. Hindu tradition offers ways to rid oneself of selfish motive by progressing toward the ultimate goal of liberation of endless births. Pain and suffering become an obstacle of devotion, and to elevate to the next reincarnation, a Hindu should assimilate or endure to progress.^[2]

Another philosophy, existentialism, tries to interpret reality in light of circumstances. It tends to decide things in terms of a plus or minus. That is, if something is a negative experience, it is of an evil nature. Most of Western culture tends toward this perspective, trying to interpret reality on the basis of circumstances.

Ernest Hemingway, the great American writer, was seduced by this philosophy. He viewed life as a short journey from nothingness to nothingness, though there still was a meaning to the performance in route. He invented meaning in life as “what we have instead of God.”^[3]

Existentialism views life as asserting self-control over circumstances. In Hemingway’s era, there was a boon of technology and declining belief in orthodox religion. Hemingway was challenged by constantly facing breakdown in his human existence. He needed to project meaning into his life, since it seemed to him absurd and without meaning. He decided to take control over his last choice in life. He found a way for coping with life’s troubles—his own death. With no God, it was up to him to assert control over the one thing he still could—the ending of his own life. Hemingway’s work and pleasure were exhausted, so he exerted a choice to end it all by killing himself.

Both Hinduism and existentialism have their weaknesses. Whereas Hinduism does note the reality of pain, it does not realize any good that comes from it other than it is a catalyst. Existentialism views pain as a result of evil and colors the world in black and white. In other words, bad things happen because of bad attitudes or bad behavior. Good outcomes are the result of good attitudes or good behaviors. These are just two categories that many people will tend toward.

Another philosophy is the biblical one. The Bible departs from these previously mentioned philosophies and views the problem of pain and suffering in a multifaceted way. The following chapters will reveal some challenges to modernity's mindset. We will see that God is ultimately on our side, and is moving circumstances to enhance our lives for our benefit or for others. We will note that the Lord is moving in our world to influence us and others. We will point to areas where he will be direct, showing how he will use circumstances to alert us to his ways and compel us to act. Conversely, we will also direct attention to ways in which the Lord hinders us, slowing or even stopping our plans and behaviors

In the final analysis, it seems the Lord is on a mission to make us into people of noble character, since it is our destiny to impact this life, and eternity with the highest significance. Thus he uses the best means for the development of godly character. Often the best means to develop us is through arduous circumstances. If we understand that God is doing something beneficial through pain, then we might have better staying power in the midst of bitter circumstances.

The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highland of affliction.

Charles Spurgeon, *Herald of Holiness*, Dec. 15, 1978, p.17

In this book we will examine many reasons for pain and suffering. Some of these reasons will bring joy, some relief, some consternation, and some consideration. Our primary source will be the Bible. We will try to bring the mind of God to the forefront and to let one see through his eyes.

As we cry to God, he hears, and dares us to look at things from his perspective.

Karen Bosch *Church Herald*, March 19, 1976, p.6

Why the Bible?

Nobel laureate Erwin Schroedinger put it succinctly when he bluntly stated:

The scientific picture of the real world around me...is ghastly silent about all...that is really near to our heart, that really matters to us...It knows nothing of...good or bad, God and eternity...Whence came I and whither go I? That is the great unfathomable question, the same for every one of us. Science has no answer to it.^[4]

Mankind's hunger for truth seems a universal need. The human body does not hunger for nonexistent food but only for that which gives sustenance. Thus mankind's hunger for revelation of God and from God argues that such information exists. There are many claims to divine revelation; it therefore follows that because of this intuitive belief, true prophecy must be possible and important. It necessarily follows that there are many competing faith traditions, all of which cannot be true.

Moreover, if the false claims to divine revelation are found to be lacking, that does not void the Bible. It should be proved either true or false on the basis of its own internal and external evidence, not comparison to other religious writings.

Thus our standard will be the Bible, since its veracity and authenticity is beyond reproach and is unquestionably reliable. Further questions concerning irrefutable evidence of its content can be explored to such depth and degree that anyone who questions its merit can literally spend a lifetime exploring every facet of textual criticism for truth. The Bible invites seekers and critics and lays itself open to all who want to know its internal evidence. Thus we boldly say that we rest our lives on its content.

Now it is our preference that decides against Christianity, not arguments.

Friedrich Nietzsche, Quoted by Charles Colson in *Kingdoms in Conflict*, Zondervan, 1987, p. 63.

Discipline

We are in bondage to the law in order that we may be free.

Cicero, *Today's Education*, Nov-Dec. 1974, p.17

Probably the most elementary of reasons for pain in our lives is because of discipline. That is, the Lord allows us to personally experience the consequences of our sin. This can be for overt rebelliousness or something that we are unaware we have done or are doing. The Lord does promise to deal with our sin; it will not be glossed over nor ignored.

For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives. It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?

Hebrews 12:6, 7

When my children were young, I had to teach them consequences for inappropriate behavior through discipline. When they had done something wrong, I often trained them by providing consequences for their bad behavior or attitude. Or if they did something that put them at risk, I would instruct them of the dangerous results.

The word *discipline* used in this reference carries the idea of instruction or teaching. It's purpose is to mold the character of another by reproof and admonition. If a young child unknowingly wants to touch a hot stove, a loving parent will caution and warn them of possible danger. If the child does not heed the warning and attempts to touch something that will harm him, the parent seeking to save the child might use means beyond words to prevent the child from hurting himself. The parent at the time of hazard might hinder the child's actions.

If the parent holds the hand of the child, this may seem unkind to the child, since it overwhelms the child's sense of entitlement or inhibits his curiosity. Additional measures might be used if the child is resistant to instruction.

Sometimes I had to spank my children when their behavior was so naughty that other means of instruction did not work. They usually got the message when the pain on their behind sent a message to their brain about the foolishness of their actions.

The opposite is also true that a parent can be too lenient or too permissive, which then conveys a message of privilege to a child. If the child does not learn healthy boundaries, then learning to be self-centered is natural, which ultimately is destructive.

These illustrations exemplify how the Lord deals with us as his children. If we do not heed warnings, he will use stronger means to train, keeping us from jeopardy, or directing us toward benefit.

Caution

It is important to distinguish between abuse and discipline. Discipline should not be done with anger but done with a desire to instruct. Abuse is to use someone wrongly, even to be destructive. Abuse is a result of anger, frustration, or an urge to overwhelm the perceived poor behavior. Abuse is never right. It is never permissible. Our heavenly Father will never abuse us. He will use the tools needed to get our attention and nothing more. He is not malicious, vindictive, or cruel. *“As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you”* (Isaiah 62:5). However, he loves us too much to let us loiter in sinful behaviors, so he will confront them.

Liberty without limits leads to license. Limits without love leads to legalism.

God’s Determined Goal for You

But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the Lord; and be sure your sin will find you out.

Numbers 32:23

Do not think poorly of the Lord because he has high expectations of you. In every facet of life, institutions, organizations, and people have the same sort of goals for you. When I was in the Marine Corps, I was subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. This was a set of rules and regulations that I was commanded to obey. There could be severe penalties placed upon me for disobedience.

The Marine Corps describes this:

Military discipline is the state of order and obedience among military personnel resulting from training...What we mean is the exact execution of orders resulting from an intelligent, willing obedience rather one based solely upon habit or fear...Discipline is necessary to secure orderly action which alone can triumph over the seemingly impossible conditions of battle.^[5]

Discipline is for the sake of success. It seeks one’s highest good and will strive for victory. Discipline will train one to avoid pitfalls that would only bring more pain and more loss. Speaking of our parents, the writer of Hebrews says, *“For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure...but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness”* (Hebrews 12:10).

We must remember that discipline comes from our Father and is sent from love, not anger, and is not designed to crush us or shame us but to profit us. The phrase *“for our good”* means God is collecting or contributing beneficial items in order to help us.

“He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him” (Proverbs 13:24). Correction is the focus by the parent in this verse and is based on love. The prevailing attitude of the parent is for benefit to his or her child, wanting the best, preventing the worst, and it is done through training, by discipline.

Remember

Keep in mind, God is on our side, and yes, just as the parent hinders the child who wants to touch something hot, he may use pain to get our attention. The process of instruction is one of learning to ultimately bring us benefit. If words don't impact the learner, then another level of influence is implemented.

When words don't work, then another tool becomes available—chastising. *For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.*” (Heb. 12:6 ESV). The word *chastises* means to scourge.

Note: The Jewish method of scourging as described in the Mishna was by the use of three thongs of leather, the offender receiving thirteen stripes on the bare breast and thirteen on each shoulder.

The Lord will ratchet up force that is necessary for compliance.

Self-Deception

If we insist that there is not sin in our lives, then we might be deceiving ourselves about the pain we experience. In other words, we may misinterpret the pain as punishment rather than instruction. Hebrews 12:6 says he scourges every son! So if we have flagrant disregard and don't do what is right, our Heavenly Father will respond.

Ouch!

The pain might not be from the Lord because of his anger. It might be because of his immense love for you. He wants you to be healthy and whole.

Yet, open sin and rebellion can cause severe pain. The church at Corinth had open, unconfessed, and unrepentant sin. This was a church of believers who claimed Jesus as their Lord and Savior. God reacted with discipline to them.

“That is why many of you are weak and sick, and some have even died” (1 Corinthians 11:30).

The consequences of their denial were very strong. Death was even part of the discipline. Pain was the means by which the Lord got their attention and gave them an opportunity to change their behavior. The same can be true for us.

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

We might rationalize our sin and think that it is not too great, minimizing its impact. Or we might compare ourselves to others and think that we have done better than they have, so after all, we're not so bad. In truth we might love our sin too much to quit!

Often we just choose to deceive ourselves about the value of sin in our lives. We like it! But God hates it, and he will deal with it.

Repentance

If the Lord is disciplining us for sin, then the appropriate response is repentance. Repentance is not a mystery, however it may be difficult. It is not just stating that one has done something wrong, it is intentionally doing that which is right. It is putting behavior to attitude. The word *repent* means to turn around. It is an action verb. It implies a 180-degree change. It not just any change, but a change for the better, a change from sin. Repenting is agreeing with God in his assessment that what we are doing is sinful, harmful or destructive. We then implement healthy, wholesome, behaviors.

Jesus' very first message in his public ministry was "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 3:2). His call was to everyone, believers and unbelievers. This change was without qualification to ethnic background, economic standing, educational level, spiritual sensitivity, age, or any other qualification. No one is exempt from the prerequisite of repentance.

As the child who was going to touch something hot had to change their behavior, to ensure health and well-being. It is incumbent upon everyone to repent, to secure that which is best for his or her spiritual health.

Commit or Omit

We should bear in mind sin may be something we are doing or something we are avoiding. "*Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin*" (James 4:17). An example of omission would be distrust. We don't trust the Lord and thus deny his faithfulness.

This verse means we can be in deliberate rebellion by not doing what the Lord has called us to do, trust him. There are scores of admonitions in the scriptures we should be doing. "*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth*" (2 Timothy 2:15, KJV).

Reading the Word of God is fine for devotional purposes, but the Bible demands we go deeper with more intensity. We need to implement '*study*' into our habit life.

"*Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord*" (Hebrews 12:14).

This is a difficult verse, especially if we have driven the freeway, and someone has cut us off. Or, have we received poor service in an eating establishment, and we did not leave a generous tip. Or, we failed to apologize after having cross words with a co-worker. These are examples of not striving for peace.

"*Pray constantly*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

This verse is always good for making people squirm. How's your prayer life?

The issue about these verses is they are not suggestions, they are imperatives. These are admonitions, if you are not obeying, then the Lord might impose some conditions on your life, some learning tools to compel your obedience.

Here is the sobering thing about these issues: there are no shortcuts or oversights, God does not allow them. He will not overlook issues in our life that need to be addressed. He cannot do otherwise. Remember, he is a loving parent and always does what is perfectly right concerning us.

If the Lord is speaking to your heart about anything that is lacking in your life, now is the time to interact with the Lord and address it.

For the believer who is responsive to the Lord's discipline, it proves two things: his love and our sonship (Hebrews 12:6). Jesus was very clear about the evidence of our love for him. *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments"* (John 14:15).

Obedience to his commands is the evidence of our love for him. He exhibits his love for us by carefully disciplining us and helping to bring us into conformity with what is beneficial for us. When there is willful insubordination, a loving parent will not fold. Rather, they will help the child to come to a place of repentance, for the child's good.

It may be time for some reflection on the things that we observed. Search your heart and let the Holy Spirit shed light into the dark places where light has not shone for some time. Take a moment with the Lord and make a determination that with his help, you will repent of the things that are perhaps hurting you.

Prevention

Bolt that door!

Each sin has its door of entrance.

Keep that door closed!

Bolt it tight!

Just outside the wild beast

Crouches in the night.

Pin the bolt with a prayer,

God will fix it there.

John Oxenham, *Christian Standard*, Sept. 26, 1976, p.16

The issue of pain and suffering takes an interesting twist as we explore a reason for pain that is rarely mentioned. Pain can be a preventative to temptation. Pain can keep us from falling into sin. Pain can be a barrier that provides protection for us so temptation does not even have a chance of knocking on our door.

When I was in the Marine Corps, I was sent to Vietnam to fight the United States' war against communism. I was in the infantry, carrying a rifle, and actively engaging the enemy. One very hot day, my squad was on a long patrol, checking the foothills of a nearby mountain range where the enemy had large caches of materials and large concentrations of troops. Our lieutenant radioed us and demanded that we return to our unit ASAP! We were not given a reason, we were brusquely told to return immediately without any questions.

We moved through the terrible heat at breakneck speed. We went through all kinds of difficult terrain. We skipped short breaks to drink water or to get a quick rest. We were mad as hornets when we got back to our position until we found out the reason for our return.

Apparently, U.S. intelligence intercepted enemy radio transmissions and heard of large enemy troop movements in the area where we were conducting our patrol. Rather than risking our lives in an encounter with an overwhelming force, our lieutenant may have saved our lives by being so demanding and ordering us through difficult circumstances to return to safety.

The Lord might do that with us. Let's see what the Bible says.

David

David, who was the great king of Israel, was a man after God's own heart

(1 Samuel 13:14). The things that were important to the Lord were important to David. David had conducted himself with integrity and virtue. He had endured difficult circumstances with grace, maturity, and wisdom that were far beyond his years. David became king, not by deceit or guile, but through appointment by God. David then conducted himself like a great leader, winning wars over Israel's enemies, having thoughtful diplomatic outreaches benefiting his people with his wise governance.

"And David perceived that the Lord had established him king over Israel, and that he had exalted his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel" (2 Samuel 5:12).

But with great power comes great temptation. At the height of his wealth and fame, power brought other challenges.

"In the spring of the year, the time when kings go forth to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they ravaged the Ammonites, and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem" (2 Samuel 11:1).

Two things in this verse are important to note. First, kings were the commander in chiefs of their armies leading their armed forces in military campaigns. Second, David stayed behind and let others do his job. The word *remained* in the verse carries the idea that he delayed. He was procrastinating.

David had been a man of war. He knew how to fight and to wage war, so he was adept at overcoming an enemy. But this war was going pretty well, and like any good manager, he delegated authority. He may have been tired of campaigning; after all, he had known conflict and death his entire adult life. Soldiering is a challenging, and uncomfortable, dreary life. Who would fault David for his procrastination.

Real trouble, though, came as he shirked the hard circumstances of the battlefield.

"It happened, late one afternoon, when David arose from his couch and was walking upon the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful" (2 Samuel 11:2).

Here is an anatomy of an illicit affair. Late in the afternoon, David was at leisure, not really having anything constructive to do. He is not looking at terrain maps for planning a military attack, he's not devising tactical maneuvers, and he's not designing new siege weapons. Then David saw a beautiful woman. He titillates himself by taking a long, long look at Bathsheba.

From this point, of course, David fell into the black hole of sin. He gave his temptation life by calling Bathsheba into his bedroom. This then spiraled out of control. She became pregnant while her husband was fighting in David's war. David manipulated her husband's return (his first military decision), but Uriah, the husband, will not go home because his warrior brothers were still engaged in battle. David needed him to go home, to Bathsheba, so David's actions with her would be hidden. Uriah had a noble idea but it was not productive for David's plan to cover the pregnancy.

David then arranged for Uriah to be sent back to the war (his second military planning decision) to lead an attack against a fortified position that would result in Uriah's death. In other words, David murdered Uriah. Adultery and murder were now legacies of David's life. Through millennia people have considered David's failure.

The consequences of sin compound and can grow exponentially.

The point is, if David had been off to war, he would have been prevented from sinning with Bathsheba and killing Uriah. Though war involves pain and suffering, it is a small measure to pay for the prevention it would have provided to keep David from the sin in which he embarked. I daresay if we could ask David today about his reputation, David would rather put behind him the gross failure on his part, and he would choose to go off to war, no matter the circumstances.

The mystery of this sort of pain is that on this side of eternity you will never know if it prevented some sort of sin. Preventative pain will not be understood until one gets to heaven. Then we will be able to observe the strategic influence of adversity in our life. Thus, the pain or suffering that we experienced may have been a benefit to keep us from greater sin. Let's look at a New Testament example.

Paul

The Apostle Paul was a man of extraordinary abilities and impeccable credentials. He was a brilliant theologian and cunning leader and a great strategic thinker. He accomplished so much in his life that he was in danger. Paul was in danger of pride.

"To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me" (2 Corinthians 12:7, NIV).

Paul had a significant problem we are never told the exact issue he experienced, but he does tell us the reason: *"To keep me from becoming conceited."*

God, in his infinite wisdom, gave Paul a thorn in the flesh to keep him from sinning. The Lord might do that with us. He desires to preserve us from our own self destruction, and he will at times intercede against our own attitudes or behaviors that would damage us.

When my children were little, I had to take them to the doctor for inoculations. These shots were painful. They cried from the sting that came from the needle, but the injections prevented a much greater calamity for them. The inoculations protected them from disease and perhaps from death. As painful as the shots were, in the long run, they prevented far worse circumstances.

Whereas King David avoided the pain and reaped disastrous results, Paul accepted the pain, and gained.

“That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships in persecution, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10, NIV).

The pain that you experience may be the way God is protecting you. You may never know this in your lifetime, you may have to wait until eternity to learn the reason. This is a difficult way in which to trust the wisdom and goodness of God, because there can be no certainty on your part concerning the issue of protection. In the final analysis, it is a trust issue between you and the Lord. The Lord may be protecting you by bringing pain into your life. The pain he allows may be shielding you from a far greater problem.

Testing

In academics, there is a way to know if a student is competent in his endeavor: testing. Testing, for the most part, is a bona fide way to measure a student's comprehension, competency, and ability to apply his knowledge.

Moreover, while testing demonstrates to the instructor the student's capability with information, it also convinces the student that he is capable. In life, God sometimes tests us to assure us that we are competent - or the opposite. Testing is a tool that assures maturity and authenticity. God does not test us so he can find out something about us, he already knows us completely (Psalm 139).

Spiritual testing confirms that a process is under way.

Furthermore, the testing that identifies the most qualified is the most rigorous. Also, passing a test is a testament to the world that the student has met the standards of a governing body, thus assuring the public that the student is now able and proficient.

In the school of life, God is in the business of making Christians into people of character. Character is what we take into eternity and is the aspect the Lord is most concerned with. *"For I am Jehovah your God: sanctify yourselves therefore, and be ye holy; for I am holy"* (Leviticus 11:44, ASV). Therefore if we are being tested, it is to assure maturity in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:15, 16).

Perfection: Not an Option

One of the astonishing truths of the Bible is that we have already been perfected if we put our faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Even though we are imperfect in our progress of being holy, we have already been perfected. *"For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified"* (Hebrews 10:14). In this phrase the Bible says we are in process of perfection, and the outcome is assured (Philippians 3:12).

The death of Jesus Christ in our place on the cross was the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. It had immeasurable value and worth and sufficiency. We are becoming holy, though we are not yet fully holy. This may sound contradictory, so let's look deeper. The evidence of our perfection before God is not our experienced perfection but our notable progress.

This concept of perfecting carries a present sense that we are being sanctified (set apart), which is progressive during the Christian life (John 17:17; Ephesians 5:25, 26). It is a practical spiritual walk that is accomplished by a believer submitting to the control of the Holy Spirit and walking in the light of God's Word. Consequently, we can say that this present process of perfecting in our lives is not yet completed.

Thus the process of fighting our sin is not what perfects us; rather it is the evidence that we are perfect. The suffering of Jesus has secured our position of perfection, but now battling our imperfections is the theater of war. It is a process of refining, perfecting.

Here's an example. I am married. In principle, my wife Peg and I are a recognized marital unit. However, she and I must work constantly at staying married, working against our own tendencies of selfishness and pride. We work at our marriage to make it the best it can be. We perfect it so that it becomes more and more a process by which we bless one another. We are married and are working at being married.

With that example in mind, God's allowing suffering is often the measure by which we know we are maturing. Are we becoming more capable spiritually and overcoming our own tendencies to sin? This is our test question.

"If thou triest my heart, if thou visitest me by night, if thou testest me, thou wilt find no wickedness in me; my mouth does not transgress" (Psalm 17:3, KJV).

The Lord even assured Israel beforehand that he would use the process of testing as a means for their good.

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments, or not.

Deuteronomy 8:2

The wilderness experience was a time of testing, so Israel had no resource other than the Lord. God forced them to trust through testing.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may prove [test] them, whether they will walk in my law or not."

Exodus 16:4

The Testing of God

We might not like the concept of God testing us. However, we do not hesitate to test God. We expect him to jump through all sorts of hoops to assure us of his authenticity. We have high expectations and demand that he satisfy them.

"When your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work" (Psalm 95:9). Two words in this verse confirm that humans have a procedure for validating God: *tested* and *proof*. *Tested* is the same word we viewed before with regard to what God does with us. *Proof* means to examine or scrutinize. Humans go beyond the evidence: *"they have seen my work."* This presumes that more than experience is needed. We want God to prove himself to us.

Though this is an affront to the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:9), humans think it perfectly reasonable that such a procedure is instituted. Accordingly, if God tests or proves mankind, it is entirely sensible and equitable.

Conclusion

The time of testing is not meant to menace or cajole or punish. Rather, it is a time where character development takes place, assuring we are competent or revealing that more development is needed.

The hottest fire makes the strongest steel.—Marine Corps slogan

Strengthening

Of Thee, dear Lord, I do not ask

That you would lighten any task,

But rather

Make me adequate.

I do not ask for lighter loads

Nor do I ask for smoother roads,

But rather

Make me adequate.

I do not ask for greater rest

From fears and failures that oppress,

But rather

Make me adequate.

James L. Flick, *Wesleyan Advocate*, Jan. 31, 1977, p.20

Do you want to be a fern or a majestic oak? How about a couch potato or athlete? Most would opt for the majestic oak, and athlete. However, each comes with a significant cost.

Consider the example of pottery. In order to make fine, durable, valuable pottery, it must be put into a kiln, for firing clay.

Pottery is fired to alter the chemical composition of the clay by driving off the water that ordinary drying does not remove. Once moisture is driven off, the clay is never softened by water again. The firing also fuses various fluxes and impurities, cementing together fine particles of clay substance and flint. According to the composition of the clay, different degrees of heat are necessary to bring this fusion to the exact point. If carried too far, vitrification (literally glassification) results. The firing techniques for porcelain and stoneware are based on bringing the clay body just to the point of complete vitrification and stopping before it starts to sag and melt down.

The Lord is in the business of making us into fit vessels for spiritual use; thus he puts us through fire that will strengthen us. "*Yet, O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter; we are all the work of thy hand*" (Isaiah 64:8). In order to make us vessels that won't melt down or sag, we have to be fired in just the

precise manner—the right amount of heat in conjunction with the right amount of time. The composition of the clay is already set. It has to be shaped, put into its proper form and then fired for its proper strength. God, in his infinite wisdom, will put us into this firing process to make us into valuable, strong vessels. He will use the finest process and, at the precise point, take us out of the fire.

Or consider an athlete training to become stronger and more effective. A rigorous training regimen guarantees an increase of competency and strength. Repetition leads to skills that are done instinctively. Often, strength comes from tearing down muscle fibers and then building muscle mass by proper nutrition. The Lord often puts us through a severe, exacting training program so that we can be most effective. Is he being malicious? Does he delight in tormenting us to prove a point? Of course, the answer is no. Remember, God is on our side. He is for us.

“He brought me forth into a broad place; he delivered me, because he delighted in me” (Psalm 18:19).

Before David was made king of Israel, he was a shepherd. He was given the humble and dangerous task of tending his father’s, Jesse’s, flock. This was the boot camp training for David’s later responsibilities for being leader of Israel. David was ordered to leave his father’s flock and bring provisions to King Saul’s army, who were fighting the Philistines. Of course, Goliath was the Philistine’s champion. Israel was absent any such champion.

Goliath was fearsome, both in reputation and in size. When David saw him, unlike everyone else in Saul’s army, he was unimpressed. David was not unaffected because the Lord had put David through difficult training and equipped him to be able to face the giant.

And David said to Saul, “Let no man’s heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are but a youth, and he has been a man of war from his youth.” But David said to Saul, “Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and when there came a lion, or a bear, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and smote him and delivered it out of his mouth; and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and smote him and killed him. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God.”

1 Samuel 17:(32-36)

David learned to be a champion through this challenging training regimen. God’s crucible of strengthening made David into an accomplished warrior. It is likely, that the Lord will do that with us.

David needed to go through the terrifying experience of fighting the bear and delivering an insignificant lamb so that he learned to be fearless in confronting other dangerous situations. Goliath had to be confronted and defeated so Israel could be set free from tyranny.

Our antagonist is our helper. He that wrestles with us, strengthens our muscles, sharpens our skill.

Edmund Burke, *Christian Standard*, March 16, 1975, p.6

Saul of Tarsus

Another person God strengthened, was Paul in the book of Acts. Before his conversion, he was known as Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:11), and he was a great persecutor of the fledgling Christian community. Though he was man who did extraordinary evil (Acts 9:13), the Lord was going to use him to do extraordinary good for him.

“But the Lord said unto him, “Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15, KJV).

This was good news! This was going to be an incredible privilege not given to just anyone. Paul (Saul) was going to be a person of significance. He would be influential so he would appear before leaders of his day. This would be an exciting and stimulating career change. But the Lord had a process for how this would be accomplished. We can imagine a program of privileged education or international diplomatic instruction.

“For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16).

This should cause everyone to pause. What? Suffering, not education? Suffering, not the best diplomatic training? Suffering, not wealth and influence? Wouldn't wealth and influence open the same doors?

“But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ” (Acts 9:22).

Strange, the Bible said he increased in strength. God used suffering to increase Paul's effectiveness. His effectiveness was so irresistible that he confounded the Jews in Damascus. He had gone there to persecute the church. He ended up preaching Jesus.

God's wisdom in shaping us will include whatever process that will make us most effective. To make a work of art, a sculptor must chisel and pound and shape his medium to produce his masterpiece. We are the Lord's work of art. He will form us into his magnum opus. *“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).*

A believer in Christ becomes clay for God. The Greek word *workmanship* (poiema) denotes a work of art, a masterpiece. We get our English word *poem* from this word. There is a contrast to the previous verse Ephesians 2:9 where human works cannot produce magnificent, eternal results. God, however, can. The word *created* means to completely shape or transform. The Lord uses many ways to shape us. Pain is one way he makes us into a classic treasure.

C.S. Lewis said, “I am not arguing that pain is not painful. Pain hurts. That is what the word means...to prove it palatable is beyond my design.”^[6]

I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.

Thomas Paine, Quotation #4379 from Cole's Quotables.

Softening

The sun that melts the wax hardens the clay.

Ancient Mideast Proverb

A tough, gritty ex-combat veteran of Vietnam once said to me, “If the Marine Corps didn’t issue God to me, I didn’t need him.” This six-foot-two, two-hundred-pound slice of muscled manhood came to a hard realization after he had been wounded and was a paraplegic. “I thought God was only for my wife; she needed him. He got my attention, though, and now even in this wheelchair, I stand up for Jesus everyday.”

Being fiercely independent can be a great character asset. However, it can be a liability if it hardens us to the imploring of the Lord in our lives. Pride can make us insensitive to the call of God. We can be so focused on our own agenda that we cannot hear the “still small” voice of the Lord (1 Kings 19:12). Or, we can be so dedicated to our own ideal or goal that even with the presence of the Lord, we go blundering headlong into trouble. The Lord sometimes has a solution for stubborn, headstrong individuals, a surefire way of getting their attention: suffering.

Peter

Simon Peter was a leader. Of the twelve disciples, he was an unquestioned prime mover. He was brave, he took initiative, and he was brash. Often, he was a train wreck. At the Last Supper, the disciples were arguing among themselves who of them was the greatest (Luke 22:24). Peter, not being a timid type, was no doubt in the middle of that discussion.

At this time, Jesus makes an interesting observation. He only noted Peter, the leader, and states, “*Simon, Simon, [note: not Peter, Simon is his old self] behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren*” (Luke 22:31, 32). Later, Jesus even warned Peter that he would betray and deny him three times. Peter, of course, had assured Jesus that “*I will lay down my life for your sake*” (John 13:37).

We all know the outcome. Peter failed miserably. He denied the Lord, and the agony of his failure caused him deep sorrow (Matthew 26:75). He was a broken man who had anguish over his failure. The Lord allowed Peter to fall. He had warned Peter, but he did not spare Peter the heartache because Peter needed the lesson. There was no soft, cushy landing for Peter. It was a tough bounce.

After my children became teenagers, they progressed in their maturity to adulthood. On the verge of their emancipation to being full-fledged, responsible adults, I had to take the protective shield off and allow them opportunities to succeed or to fail. Failure hurts. But it can bring the best of life lessons. Failure alerted my children to their own limitations and could make them sensitive to the leading of God.

Failure can make us sensitive, allowing us to be compassionate to others.

Jesus' directive to Peter was: "*When you have turned again, strengthen your brethren*" (Luke 22:32). Peter was not to scold them, nor to point out his leadership capabilities. He was to strengthen them. The word *strengthen* means to make stable and to place firmly. This requires a sense of empathy, an understanding of how to encourage and motivate others. At the Last Supper Peter did not 'strengthen' his fellow disciples, he was busy arguing with them.

The agony of his failure would make Peter a more thoughtful, caring, and yes, a more sensitive man. This would make him an outstanding leader. There is a saying: "A good leader inspires other men with confidence in him; a great leader inspires them with confidence in themselves." This was Peter's mandate. He could not lead, without the pain of failure.

We may be like Peter, headstrong and confident. The Lord might let us fail. He may not protect us from difficult circumstances, so that we might be sensitive to the needs of others and then able to help others.

David

King David provides another illustration of God's softening process. We have already seen how David, the powerful king of mighty Israel, had illicit sexual relations with Bathsheba. He had her husband Uriah killed and then proceeded to cover up the whole sordid affair. However, Bathsheba became pregnant with David's child, and David's problem became public.

His denial became shameful. Yet he refused to repent. His sin became a grievous pain to God: *But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.* (2 Sam. 11:27d ESV). So the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to David (2 Samuel 12:1-13). David became convicted of his sin and confessed. However, his child with Bathsheba was gravely ill.

For seven days David fasted and prayed, begging the Lord to spare the life of the baby. However, the child was taken by the Lord. The Lord did not spare David pain and heartache. However, David learned sensitivity and compassion.

David did not comfort Bathsheba when her husband Uriah was killed. Instead he waited for an appropriate period of time and then "*And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife*" (2 Samuel 11:27). David was strategic, not necessarily caring. He wanted the appearance of propriety, but he wasn't thoughtful.

Later, when the baby died, the Bible says, "*And David comforted Bathsheba*" (12:24a). The word *comfort* carries the sense to be moved to pity, to have compassion, even to be sorry. It also means to suffer grief. Until this time, David had been treating Bathsheba like his paramour. He merely had been using her for his own amusement because she was a beautiful woman. After the death of their child, he became sympathetic and concerned about her instead of his own pleasure. David was able to focus on another's abject grief, even with kindhearted tenderness. His compassion came after he'd been subject to searing pain and loss.

The Lord uses pain to change us from hard-charging go-getters to thoughtful, concerned individuals who have sensitivity toward others. This component of pain sometimes is his most efficient way of changing self-interested people into compassionate people.

Rejoicing

If God is in charge and loves us, then whatever is given is subject to his control and is meant ultimately for our joy.

Elisabeth Elliot, *Christian Herald*, Jan 1978, p.40.

“*Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials*” (James 1:2). It is here that secular thought is challenged. This does not seem to be a logical statement that deals with the reality of life. In fact, this verse introduces a very troubling ideal, as if there is a touch of masochism. If so, this verse seems like a schizophrenic idea.

Shouldn't we be rejoicing in great music, fine foods, romance, great epics of courage, ice cream, excellent literature, and a plethora of other superlative things in life? But telling us to rejoice in trials is troubling and seems to contradict common sense.

This is one of those paradoxes that is hard to swallow. The idea of rejoicing over trials is so antithetical and the concept so jarring that when you hear it, you might have the idea it should be in the recycle bin. This is like the statement by our parents when they disciplined us, “This hurts us more than it does you.” Yeah, right!

However, if we get past our cynicism and explore the evidence, we can find some merit for rejoicing over pain. Paradoxes are not contradictions, rather ideas that are contrary to commonly held opinions.

An example is the boll weevil.

Disaster struck when the boll weevil reached Coffee County, Alabama, in 1915. It destroyed many cotton crops, leaving farmers in a financial bind and the area in a slump. However, a businessman from Enterprise, Alabama realized the boll weevil was on a course to severely damage local prosperity, so he took matters into his own hands. His name was H.M. Sessions, and he determined that peanuts would make a good crop for the area. In 1916, he convinced a deeply indebted farmer named C.W. Baston to take a chance on peanuts for one year. Baston was a cotton farmer who had been hit hard by the boll weevil, and Sessions's offer to supply the peanuts for planting, and a picker to harvest them with, and one dollar a bushel was too good to refuse.

Baston's crop was a success, leaving him able to pay off debts and have money in the bank. The eight thousand bushels of peanuts he produced were used as seed by other farmers who, by then, were clamoring to get into the peanut-growing business.

Farmers had bet their farms on king cotton; it was their only real cash crop, and they didn't have anything else to fall back on. Baston's success with peanuts, however, convinced other farmers to diversify their crops. Cotton was still important, but it was no longer the only game in town. Thanks to the hard times brought on by the boll weevil, farmers were forced to make some changes that brought a new era of prosperity to Coffee County.

It wasn't long before another local businessman, Bon Fleming, came up with the idea to honor the bugs for forcing farmers to diversify crops. That seems strange to some, but time proved it wasn't so crazy after all. The monument continues to be a popular tourist attraction, and it has gained national and international publicity for the city over the years.

The peculiar idea of celebrating a tragedy that actually led to recovery and prosperity is now accepted. Without the boll weevil and the threat of devastation, the people of the southern United States would have continued to accept the status quo. It took paying tribute to a pest for people to make the paradox understood. In Enterprise, Alabama, stands the Boll Weevil Monument. It is an odd monument that appreciates the good that comes from bad. Southerners rejoiced over a seeming tragedy because a greater good came from it.

The rejoicing is public and sends a profound message. Can this same concept be understood in the spiritual realm? Let's look again at our scripture passage.

"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials" (James 1:2). Why should Christians be joyful? *"For you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness"* (James 1:3). Trials are not to be seen as anguish, rather as a test. Tests are given to see if students can pass, not pass out. Tests can produce positive outcomes, just like the test of the boll weevil produced positive results.

The advantage of trials is that positives can result, and it's the results that bring the joy. James wrote, *"For you know,"* literally meaning, 'knowing through experience.' Many have experienced both the pain of problems and the satisfaction of persistence. There is no gain in endurance without some investment in trials.

In this case, James noted that faith is tested. Faith is like gold, and gold is refined in fire. This refining process of testing develops faith into a purer form. Therefore, true faith, like gold, endures but needs to be developed. Faith is developed by the Lord so that it has staying power. The word *steadfastness* means perseverance in the face of difficulties. James uses the word in 5:11: *"Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast,"* which indicates that happiness comes with perseverance.

Dying Men

There is a monument to the fighting men who won control of Iwo Jima from the Japanese in World War Two. The statue is one of the great celebrations of the indomitable fighting spirit of the young men of the United States. These men fought to defeat tyranny and assured the world of freedom. All the men in the statue were real men, and all but one was killed in further fighting.

We don't rejoice over their sacrifice because they were dupes or victims of misguided men. We understand them to be honorable heroes who understood a greater good. We honor and rejoice over them because they endured the worst pain—death—and helped redeem mankind from the moral decay of tyrants.

The lofty goal of steadfastness then produces more benefits. *"And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing"* (James 1:4). Spiritual maturity is the result of the finished

work of perseverance. When true faith produces steadfastness by trials, the steadfastness must be allowed to continue so that it produces the ultimate by-product of spiritual fulfillment.

Two words describe the goal: *perfect* and *complete*. *Perfect* carries the idea of mature or finished. This is partnered with *complete*, which means to be whole. Thus together they give the idea of perfected all over, or fully developed in every part. Putting this in order, James indicates that trials are joyful because ultimately our faith becomes deeper, and perseverance results. Then, a believer will develop as thoroughly mature, lacking nothing spiritually. In other words, the boll weevil of our lives really is a benefit, and if we have the long-term perspective in view, joy will be generated.

Victory over tyranny brings rejoicing. However, the cost can be significant.

Often while watching sporting events, one can see athletes rejoicing over a touchdown in football or a home run in baseball. The athlete frequently points heavenward in a gesture of appreciation to God for their particular accomplishment. However, when the athlete fumbles or commits an error or gets a penalty they don't rejoice. Rather, they hang their heads in disappointment about their failure. Why?

Because in life we often appreciate good while eschewing the negative. The fumbles and penalties of life grind us, disappointing us in our self or our situation. But the Lord is in the business of taking our failures and using them to make good come from them and this is a cause for rejoicing. This is a majestic perspective of taking negatives and knowing that positives are going to result. This is cause for rejoicing.

Eureka, We Failed! How Smart Companies Learn From Their Flops.

Article, *Business Week*, July 10, 2006

Now, consider this about joy over suffering.

"Yet it pleased Jehovah to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin" (Isaiah 53:10, ASV).

This is an astonishing verse. This phrase outlines the fact that God the Father was *pleased* to bruise his Son, Jesus. Again, this kind of statement make no sense unless we put it into a correct context. It would be easy to think of God the Father as malicious and cruel. However, the accurate understanding would be that the Father was *pleased* because Jesus Christ made himself an offering for sin, not that the bruising was pleasing.

"Because he poured out his soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:12). The issue of mankind's God-dishonoring sin could not be ignored. Jesus chose to honor the Father by taking all the sin of mankind and making it so it would not sully the glory of God. God's glory was of infinite worth to Jesus, and he willingly demonstrated this to the world by dying for mankind's sin.

Many heroic men have died for greater principles than their own lives. Men and women have died for family, homes, nations, romance, and protecting innocents. Jesus Christ died for his Father's glory, and this deed pleased his heavenly Father.

When sin is treated as though it is inconsequential, then the glory of God is treated as inconsequential. When God passes over sin, it looks as though he is agreeing that his glory is of little value. But if God acts in such a way as to deny the infinite value of his own glory, then he commits the ultimate outrage; he desecrates what is infinitely holy and he blasphemes what is infinitely sacred.^[7]

Therefore, we can understand that the satisfaction of the Father's ultimate worth demonstrated by the suffering of the Son is an action that is of honor to the Father. The Father rejoices over his Son's value of the Father.

Though pain and suffering may be endured by believers, it can bring rejoicing. In the case of Jesus' suffering and pain, it brought such redemptive and eternal results that it ultimately brings joy.

Consider this verse: *"Fill me with joy and gladness; let the bones which thou hast broken rejoice"* (Psalm 51:8).

King David is praying a preposterous thing! He was praying for joy and gladness after he had been crushed. David experienced the devastating and humbling power of pain from the Lord. David knew that his adulterous and murderous behavior was being challenged by the Lord. The Lord was not being vengeful out of pique. Rather, the Lord was breaking David so that David could experience the joy of restoration.

The picture behind this verse is that of a shepherd and lamb. The illustration is of a wandering lamb that is continuously retrieved by the shepherd, protecting the lamb from itself, the elements, and enemies. To prevent the lamb from continually wandering, the shepherd took the two forelegs of the lamb and snapped them, breaking the bones. The shepherd set the broken legs and then carries the lamb on his shoulders, wrapped around his neck.

Wherever the shepherd went, the lamb was with him. A loving bond was created between the shepherd and the lamb, and the lamb became inseparable from him and trusted in his loving care. Finally, when the lamb's broken legs were healed, the shepherd put the sheep down to walk on its own. The lamb, fully recovered, never wanders away again, staying close by the side of the faithful shepherd.

This is the process to which King David was referring. Metaphorically, God broke his legs so that he would not wander from his heavenly shepherd (Psalm 23:1). David knew that he had wandered from the Lord and his protective care. David understood that the Lord crushed him because the Lord loved him. Our heavenly Father does afflict his sheep so that pain will generate health, hope, and ultimately, joy. The Father has a skilled hand in restoring our bones as well as our spiritual wounds for he is the ultimate heavenly caregiver. In the final analysis, the pain David experienced would bring joy. This might be our same experience if we wander. The Lord will train us to not leave his side, and in this proximity to him, we will have joy.

Fruitfulness

One of the rarest things that a man ever does is to do the best he can.

Henry Wheeler Shaw, *Evangelism*, Oct. 12, 1981, p.15.

“By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit” (John 15:8).

Earlier, we investigated strengthening. One might ask if we are really repeating ourselves but with different words. Though there might seem to be similarities, there is a difference.

Strengthening focuses on character development while fruitfulness focuses on results. One can be strong and not produce. Strength can be the intent of God’s work. On the other hand, fruitfulness can result even without strength.

Stephen Hawking was one of the most brilliant physicists of all time. He was wheelchair bound and unable to speak or to move, yet he was able to communicate astonishing insights. While he was physically weak, he was internationally known by his writings, he was very fruitful.

In John 15, Jesus was on the eve of his death. One can imagine that he had much to consider about his upcoming torture and death. His attention, though, was on the men who were his companions, the disciples. He wanted to impart to them some of the most important information that would influence the rest of their lives.

Jesus wanted to tell them something life changing and earth shattering. He forgoes his own coming trauma and presents something to eleven ordinary men. Jesus did not accentuate their education, nor stress their experience, nor did he take note of their capabilities. He focused on something so significant because these were his last words and thoughts to them.

His disciples had spent the last three years with him. They left their occupations and homes and comforts to follow him. They expected good things were coming and the new kingdom would bring benefits. They really did not expect Jesus to leave them, though he has repeatedly told them he would die.

Thus the stage was set for Jesus to give them the deepest truths of his entire ministry. One might expect that inspiring and thoughtful platitudes would be given to them for meditation and pondering. However, Jesus did something so contrary that the disciples were left stupefied. He washed their feet (John 13:2-5). They were anticipating Jesus to be a king, yet he became a humble servant.

The disciples received this object lesson in subservience and then were given a lesson in obedience (John 14:15). These were prerequisites for their next lesson, fruitfulness. Certainly, this would be the transcendent moment when Jesus expounded lofty truths that will be an inspiration. The stage was set. Jesus walked with them by the magnificent temple, one of the wonders of the ancient world. It was the most important structure

in the entire religious world. They were looking at the adornments on the temple, golden vines and branches, an awe-inspiring spectacle.

Listen as Jesus begins to speak. Here it is, the moment of deep truth. He begins speaking about a vineyard! A vineyard? One can almost imagine the involuntary groans from the disciples. Their expectations were brought down. This carpenter rabbi from Nazareth began speaking of horticulture. This seemed very odd. However, if one listens closely, one will hear the wisdom of the eternal. Though the words Jesus speaks were plain, they are profound.

Jesus started his horticultural address by talking about grapes and grapevines. His last and deepest message to his disciples and to all Christians for all times in all cultures was a message of fruit bearing. The metaphor was about believer's spiritual productiveness.

Spiritual Grapevines

In the Old Testament, Israel was God's choice vine on which he lavished care and attention (Psalms 80:8-19; Isaiah 5:1-7; Ezekiel 15:1-8; 17:5-10). God desired fruit from this vine (Israel), but the vine produced stinking or worthless grapes (Isaiah 5:2). The grapes were degenerate and produced rotten fruit, and the grapevine was only good for burning (Ezekiel 15).

Therefore, what God had intended for Israel was still to be accomplished in a spiritual sense by Christians. Jesus began the illustration by identifying his role and the heavenly Father's role. "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1).

While in the Old Testament Israel was the choice vine that received God's attention, now Jesus is seen as the genuine true vine. In John 14, Jesus and his followers are co-inheritors of the special indwelling of God. In John 15, this special amalgamation of Father, Son, and followers is explained through this figurative language of a vine.

Thus Jesus said, "I am the true vine." This vine is the trunk of the plant that grows out of the ground. "My Father is the vinedresser" refers to the keeper of the vineyard. This vine dresser was a gardener and was responsible for getting the most production out of the grapevines. Before the arrival of springtime, the vine dresser prunes off every branch that was sickly or feeble, so that the sap may flow into the healthy branches that will bear fruit. The branch that is located nearest the trunk usually bears the most grapes.

Pruning

In nature, plants do not depend on pruning for their survival, but when form or function need to be enhanced for a plant to be productive, then they need help. If a plant is to be optimized to produce all that it is capable of, then the pruning process is necessary.

The methods of pruning fall into three categories. There is formative pruning, regenerative pruning, which revitalizes the plant, and finally pruning that removes dead, diseased, or weak growth elements of the plant.

Formative pruning is done in the early plant life to avoid later problems and assures a well-balanced form where the proportions are pleasing. This is done so a mature plant is not oversized or misshapen.

Regenerative pruning will encourage the production of healthy and strong fruit. It optimizes the energy going to the limbs so that production is greater. The center of the plant should be kept open to allow plenty of light and allow air to circulate. If a plant is well fed, the harder it is pruned, the more vigorous the new growth will be.^[8] A plant pruned on a regular basis will suffer less than one pruned sporadically.^[9]

Removal of dead or diseased wood is necessary to prevent disease from spreading to the rest of the plant. Cutting away any cross branches that rub together is essential since this can cause an open wound, providing an entry point for disease.

In the first couple of seasons in pruning and training a grapevine, the emphasis is thickening the central stem. It is essential that pruning is done down to a bud near ground level at planting. Then the following winter the plant's new growth should be pruned by two-thirds.

When one understands the metaphor that Jesus used about pruning then one reads that for optimum production, two-thirds of the new growth has to be cut off, one might cringe. The question that roams believer's mind: "Isn't there any other way?" The problem with this passage of the Bible is that Jesus does not provide for an alternative system for fruitfulness. Pruning is the necessary method.

Pruning, which can involve snipping off healthy growth, is an ongoing process and is not a one time occurrence. It is a continuous method for assuring that a mature grapevine has proper form and function so that it is healthy and productive. It assures that energy is going from the central stem to the branches where the production of fruit is optimized.

If pruning is not ongoing and continuous, then trying to manage a mature plant that has not been properly cared for and trained will result in severe loss in energy to the limbs. Recouping even limited production is difficult.

Here is the message that Jesus was conveying: *"I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain"* (John 15:16). Fruit is the permanent identity of your life. Moreover, to get productive plants that bear fruit, pruning is necessary, and pruning hurts!

The action of pruning is cutting. To cut, the vine dresser must not twist and mangle but incise neatly and cleanly. Ouch!

When I was in Marine Corps boot camp, our drill instructors, while not trained vine dressers, did a lot of pruning. They cut a lot of needless behaviors and attitudes out of our civilian mind-sets, so that as recruits, we could grow a military mind-set. After several weeks of military training, we became very effective at knowing our enemy and overwhelming him. Our enemy's defeat was our mission.

When outsiders view the training methods of the Marine Corps, they often see harsh treatment of its recruits. Though this very rigorous training, the Marine Corps is very effective in producing a capable fighting force. The Marine Corps removes those attitudes in recruits that will not be advantageous to accomplishing their mission. The Marine Corps produces fighting men by using tough measures that assures they will be competent. Pruning produces fruit.

The Lord is not malicious when he prunes our life to be more fruitful. He is careful. He is on our side. Our permanent fruitfulness is his goal, and he will prune to shape us, to strengthen us, to take away from us the dead and diseased parts that are a detriment. Bear in mind that pruning is an ongoing process and will not stop, because fruitfulness is the goal.

In the passage of John 15:1-10, one sees clearly that the vine dresser desires fruit. Eight times it is mentioned in this chapter (verses 2 [thrice], 4 [twice], 5, 8, 16). The believer in Jesus Christ is in process from fruit (verse 2) to more fruit (verse 2) and lastly to much fruit (verses 5, 8). Fruitfulness is the result of the Son's life being reproduced in a disciple. There is difficulty in fruit bearing.

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4).

The difficulty in bearing fruit is abiding, or remaining. Abiding carries the sense of continuing or persevering. A believer in Jesus Christ continues to hold on in faith in loving obedience to him. Without faith, there is no spiritual life. Without the life of God in you, there is no fruit. The believer's continual abiding in Jesus will result in abundant fruit.

Thus God's pruning in a believer's life will not stop, it is the norm. Additionally, we should realize that pain free living is not a reality in the Christian life. The Lord is after productivity. The attitude of the believer should be 'abiding,' resting in the absolute assurance of God's love for us.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15:9, 10).

If you read the previous two verses and your eyes glass over, hang on just a moment. This really is basic spiritual truth. Obedience to the Father's commands is the same for a believer as is for Jesus, his Son (cf. 14:15, 21, 23; 1 John 2:3; 3:22, 24; 5:3). Jesus was obedient and remained in the Father's love.

Thus the question is, was Jesus fruitful in his ministry? The answer was, he changed the entire course of human history. Then by extension we ask can you be fruitful with the plan God has for your life? The answer, of course is we can be very fruitful if we allow the pruning process.

Paul: Being Fruitful

The Apostle Paul certainly had some impressive credentials if one looked at his heredity and qualifications. He had privilege and advantage that would hold him in good stead for having a productive life.

“Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless” (Philippians 3:5, 6).

Paul had heritage, religion, position, and tenacity. He had impeccable credentials. He had the basic elements to be successful in his world. One might understand how Paul could be supremely self-confident. Yet God would prune Paul by snipping away all his worldly accomplishments so he could become even more fruitful.

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ. Philippians 3:7, 8

On the human side, Paul was able to list impressive accomplishments. But God snipped them away, and Paul said he considered, them as a trade for better things. He reflected on what the Lord had pruned away. He was sitting in prison when he wrote these words, an abysmal situation, and yet he switched his confidence from his worldly accomplishments to confidence in Christ alone.

Paul used some extraordinary language to make his point. He used strong statements in verse 8 to indicate that his loss of things listed (verses 5, 6) was of little consequence. In exchange for confidence in his talents and abilities, Paul gained the *“surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”* In fact, his former gains (verse 7) he considered “refuse” (food scraps or dung) so that he might gain Christ. Nothing else really mattered to him.

In Paul’s circumstance, he did not focus on what he left behind, rather on what he gained. This was an effective pruning process. The Lord cut away that which was not productive so that the believer will gain fruitfulness. Did Paul the apostle have a fruitful life? He is still influencing the world today, two millennia after his death. That is productive.

We can assume that the Lord will make us fruitful. He might cut away all the things that you have counted important. God’s pruning is thoughtful and effective, and it might seem costly. The results, though, can far exceed our expectations.

It is by those who have suffered that the world has been advanced.

Leo Tolstoy, *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, 1965, p.432

Joseph

Take for example Joseph, the earthly step father of Jesus. He was a man who had wonderful character qualities, as well impeccable royal heritage. God took him and made him more productive. Though Joseph was a direct descendant of King David (Matthew 1:16), that was not the characteristic that the Bible first noted about his character.

“And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man” (Matthew 1:19, ASV). Joseph was righteous, a pious, man. The point was he was a man who kept divine law, who valued the commandments of God. He was more than an observant Jew. He was a person who conformed himself to the will of God. He did not do external religiosity. Rather, his excellent spiritual condition was natural consequence of his character.

With these qualities of royal heritage and godly character, one might think that God would build on these traits to make Joseph a man of stature, a man who could impact the world for the Lord. However, God began by pruning, cutting back on branches in Joseph’s life.

First, Joseph was directed by the Lord to take pregnant Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:20). This first snip was a costly one for Joseph. For the rest of his life, the stigma of marrying a woman who was unfaithful and promiscuous would be a stain on his life. Joseph would be considered a dupe by his community. People would think that Joseph was an unwitting fool, and Mary, deceptive.

Next, he was directed to name this child that was not his own. *“You will call his name Jesus”* (Matthew 1:21). Giving names was a momentous event in the culture of the family at this point in history. One can imagine that Joseph had been thinking his whole life the names he would give to his children. Snip. The Lord cut away another branch in Joseph’s life.

“But knew her not until she had borne a son; and he called his name Jesus” (Matthew 1:25).

Of course, taking Mary to Bethlehem, birthing Jesus in a manure-and-urine-smelling cattle stall, was the next snip. You see, Joseph was of King David’s royal blood and to have his wife giving birth among animals must have been humiliating.

Then King Herod, a usurper to the Davidic throne, was enraged that a child was born who was to be king of the Jews. Consequently Herod had many children killed in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16). Danger was added to the mix. Snip. Joseph was commanded to leave his home, family, occupation, everything, and take Jesus and Mary and go to Egypt (Matthew 2:13). Snip. Later, after Herod died, Joseph was directed to return to Israel while there was still danger to his family. He settled in the Galilee in Nazareth (Matthew 2:23). Nazareth’s reputation was awful. *“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”* (John 1:46). Snip.

God trimmed much from Joseph. He cut away many of his dreams. In the public eye his marriage was marred, he lost tranquility, and he lost his home, his occupation, even the privilege of giving his children the names he hoped for all his life. Joseph even had to give up his royal heritage to Jesus, so Jesus would have the credentials to be king of the Jews. But was Joseph productive?

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52).

Jesus, as a human being, became a young man who first had wisdom, meaning he was broad in knowledge of very diverse matters. This was generally acquired by innate intelligence and experience. The word *stature* carried a sense of maturity, both physically and emotionally. The word *favor* spoke of charm and grace, and kindness.

The family system of Mary and Joseph must have supplied an environment of loving acceptance and encouragement. Joseph certainly provided leadership, guidance, and a suitable role model for Jesus the boy. Joseph undoubtedly was productive in helping to shape the earthly life of Jesus Christ. We might say, in a purely natural sense, Joseph helped shaped the world of modernity with his willingness to be used for fruitfulness.

Will the Lord make you productive? Yes. Will he use the pruning method? Absolutely.

Revelation

There are things I can't force. I must adjust. There are times when the greatest change needed is a change of my viewpoint.

C.M. Ward, *Pentecostal Evangelism*, June 1, 1980, p.3

The reason we do not see truth is not that we have not read enough books or do not have enough academic degrees, but that we do not have enough courage.

Rollo May, *Herald of Holiness*, April 1, 1976, p. 13.

How does a person actually know what he thinks he knows? Often, people are certain of their perceptions and feel justified in their worldviews. Consequently, it is difficult for people to have their understanding of reality challenged and consider alternative philosophies that bump against their presuppositions about life.

I remember listening to a national radio talk show, and a caller remarked that she was a university professor who believed in relativism. The caller insisted that there was no absolute foundation for right and wrong, to which the commentator responded, "Are you sure?" The professor said, "Absolutely!" The irony of the professor's statement was broadcast to the entire nation. While the audience's response in subsequent calls indicated they understood the absurdity of the professor's position, the professor never caught on to her blindness.

Truth must be logically consistent. The professor insisted on a presupposition that contradicted her own argument. To claim absolute certainty about her position of no absolute certainty destroyed her own polemic.

While the professor was an intelligent and articulate person, she was nevertheless caught by the law of non-contradiction. It is one of the tests of truth. It is possible we can be wedded to ideas we believe are true, yet are erroneous. Here is the problem: we don't know what we don't know.

There are many times when we yearn for truth and seek after it with passion. Conversely, it is often the case that we do not seek truth for various reasons. Pursuing truth might be inconvenient or there is difficulty securing the information or we are afraid that it will contradict our worldview. Whatever prohibits us from searching for the truth might be an obstacle that the Lord will knock out of the way so truth comes to us.

As Christians we are granted access to the truth if we seek it.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him" (James 1:5).

The access to this wisdom might come with much trouble and hard work. The Lord will not give up on believers who are in stubborn rebellion or ignorance. He will overcome impediments to getting truth to these individuals. He has a sure fire way of revealing truth.

It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes.

Psalm 119:71

David

David, the writer of this psalm, gratefully acknowledged the instructive nature of pain. Christians know that affliction is profitable, not pleasant. We also know that sin is pleasant, not profitable. Profitability comes when the experience of life becomes a schoolmaster. The school of affliction guides us toward valuing the Word of God.

When David made the claim that it was good, he assures us that it was agreeable that he was afflicted. The agreement was in terms of value, meaning the 'good' would bring excellent results. The affliction was the instrument that drove David to the Word of God. That is where David learned. The Word of God was revealed to David.

When King David had sinned with Bathsheba, he had attempted to keep the affair secret. Psalm 32 indicated the pressure that David felt from the Lord: *"When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer"* (Psalm 32:3, 4).

The longer David ignored the sin and failed to confront the issues that resulted from it, the more pressure God put on him. Then the Lord sent Nathan the prophet to challenge him (2 Samuel 12:1). God rebuked David and revealed that though his actions were done surreptitiously, the consequences would be public and open for all to see. *"For you did it secretly; but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun"* (2 Samuel 12:12).

The Lord sought to reveal to David the moral character that is appropriate for a follower of Jehovah. When David rebelliously ignored the Lord's heavy hand, God upped the ante. The revelation of the righteousness of God can be something that people want to disregard. One might think that if we pretend there are not direct consequences for our behavior, then we might get away with our misbehaving. *"But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the Lord; and be sure your sin will find you out"* (Numbers 32:23). In some way in some manner, the Lord will reveal that which is secret. Count on it.

Job

However, it may also be true that the Lord wishes to give us information to give us greater or deeper truth. In the case of Job, we can see this illustrated.

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1).

It appeared that Job did not have a sin issue, yet he encountered extraordinary devastation. Job was the “*greatest of all the men of the east*,” (1:3), and had unsurpassed wealth. He was extraordinarily wealthy. He lost all his earthly possessions in one fell swoop, and his ten children died suddenly and tragically.

“Then Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshipped...the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord. In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job 1:20-22, ASV).

Job maintained a correct perspective about the character and nature of God. He did not sin. Yet, he needed deeper truth.

He was subject to more misery.

“So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord, and afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (Job 2:7).

Job was given gruesome physical discomfort. In this particular case, Satan was the one behind this cruelty.

Job’s response? Speaking to his distraught wife, he says, *“What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God and not receive evil?” In all this Job did not sin with his lips*” (Job 2:10). We groan at the immense pain that he endured while admiring his noble character. It is also at this point that most would believe a Hollywood sort of ending is in sight. We can hope for a righting of all the wrong done to Job, a neat ending. We desire a simplified understanding of why this happened and who is to blame.

But God does not act in this way. The Lord has deeper motives for longer lasting reasons. *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord”* (Isaiah 55:8).

Job had his theology correct. He was a perceptive, godly man. In Job 19:25, he understood the present reality of God’s existence, as well as the prophetic future: *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth.”* Yet this was not all the Lord wanted Job to know about deep spiritual truths. The Lord revealed himself further to Job in more of a direct and special way: *“I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee”* (Job 42:5).

Previously, Job had information about the Lord. Not until pain and tragedy had run its course did he come to encounter the living God. Job had to go beyond the intellectual into the experiential. Job went from religious education and the instructions of spiritual principles to intimately knowing the Lord. For the first time, Job gained a true perspective of the sovereign God.

Stephen

God can also grant revelation for the means of comfort. Consider the situation of Stephen when he was martyred. *“Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people”* (Acts 6:8, KJV). He was a mature believer who influenced people for the gospel. He was so effective that the learned men of

the day “*could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke*” (Acts 6:10). Accordingly, in Acts 7:1-55, Stephen gave a sermon before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court. He was bold, witnessing to the progress of God’s program and attesting that the blessings of God were not limited just to the Jewish people. In addition, he spoke of Israel’s history evidenced a pattern of opposition to God’s plans.

The response of these religious authorities to Stephen’s message was not repentance or remorse, rather, their response was rage. They were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. “*Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth against him*” (Acts 7:54). Their ferocity turned to frenzy, and they sought an outlet for their wounded pride. As they turned on Stephen, God graciously revealed to him a profound reality: “*But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God’*” (Act 7:55, 56).

In the midst of a vicious crowd who sought his hurt, God comforted Stephen with added revelation. It seems that the crowd did not witness this since they “stopped their ears” (7:57). They would not listen to his vision, thus it is apparent that they did not see what he saw. This revelation was for Stephen alone, to comfort only him in a horrible time.

The crowd charged Stephen, dragged him outside of the city, and stoned him. He was cruelly manhandled and then smashed with rocks thrown by enraged, hateful men. Yet in the pain and suffering, the Lord, at Stephen’s most vulnerable time, brought him comfort in the midst of the experience. It was a heavenly revelation that was unique to Stephen and transcended the extreme hate and hurt he experienced.

Often, the Lord uses tragedy as the doorway to revelation. God brings deep truths that we could not learn in any other way, than by pain. Revelation surpasses the natural trauma to reveal supernatural truth for various reasons. In David’s case, it was to acquaint him with his sin and convince him of righteous living. In Job’s case, it was to let him experience the living Lord. In Stephen’s case, God revealed deep truth to comfort him at a critical time.

Deliverance

Failure is usually the line of least persistence.

Wilfred Beaver, *Link*, Nov. 1971, p. 39

At times it may seem that God has disappeared. The experience of life can suddenly turn and deal us a severe blow. Then we wonder what happened to God? We assume God is all powerful, yet we are bombarded by heartache and tragedy. The question might occur to many about the necessity to go through the initial step of pain, if God is going to deliver us anyway.

“Thou hast made thy people suffer hard things...that thy beloved may be delivered” (Psalm 60:3, 5).

The perplexing thing about the Sixtieth Psalm is its irony. The Lord brings failure so that he can deliver. This again is one of those jarring ideas that the Bible sets on our philosophical plate.

The setting for this psalm is quite unique. David had just replaced Saul as king of Israel. David finds that his position as king was not a great privilege, but it was a great challenge. His kingdom was under attack, both from within and without. There was a twin assault of an internal societal collapse and an external attacking enemy army.

Israel was weakened by tremendous blows and was on the brink of succumbing because of its feebleness. David was studying reports from the battlefield and was stunned by the amount of casualties from the attacking force of the Edomite-Syrian alliance. The nation's defenses were mangled, and the nation was at risk. David saw the situation and surmised that the Lord was allowing the destruction and problems.

The population was sagging emotionally from the ordeal. It was as if the country had been torn by an enormous earthquake. The economic, political, and military foundations of the nation had crumbled, leaving Israel vulnerable to a voracious enemy.

David brought this calamity to the Lord, understanding the source of the problem. He complained to God. David knew that Israel's defeat was from the Lord (verses 1-4). Conversely, he knew that Israel's hope was in the Lord (verse 5). He also believed that future victory was promised by the Lord (verses 6-8) while also attesting to the fact of Israel's need for the Lord (verses 9-11). Finally, he affirmed that Israel's confidence was in the Lord (verse 12).

David's prayer (verses 1-4) went up to the Lord out of the ashes of humiliating defeat. He pleaded the Israel's with the Lord because he understood invading armies were wreaking the havoc. It was the Lord's hand that had directed the whole affair.

David also understood why the Lord did all this—for deliverance (verse 5). It was an opportunity for the Lord to do a marvelous work of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat and then turning the entire affair into a victory celebration.

The entire psalm was a military chant. It was to be sung while troops were practicing with their weaponry. It was a war song so that in future battles the troops would be encouraged and to fight with an infectious courage.

The news of Israel military success spread throughout the entire world. The reputation of the God of Israel would grow. Defeat came to Israel when there was spiritual apathy, but victory came when Israel diligently sought the Lord.

“That thy beloved may be delivered” (verse 5). The beloved of the Lord will be delivered. God’s eye is on his children, his beloved ones. Though he allowed turmoil and trouble, God promised that he would care for and protect the ones he loved. Jesus went through horrible circumstances of pain and suffering, and though he died, there was victory, redemption and deliverance was the outcome.

David’s prayer was based on the Lord’s promise of faithfulness. God had been faithful throughout history and is faithful today. God will not abandon his loved ones. *“It is the Lord who goes before you; he will be with you, he will not fail you or forsake you; do not fear or be dismayed”* (Deuteronomy 31:8). The promise of deliverance is not a promise of freedom from suffering. It is a promise of hope beyond the suffering.

The initial victory of Israel provided conditions of relative safety and domestic tranquility to David’s realm. The story of David’s prayer and the Lord’s faithfulness has been a mainstay of encouragement for believers for centuries. No matter the culture, the era, the circumstances, believers in the Lord have been buoyed by the promise of deliverance. Millions of people over centuries have had their courage strengthened, their perspective lengthened because of David’s subsequent victory and deliverance.

“Through God we shall do valiantly; For he it is that will tread down our adversaries” (Psalm 60:12, ASV).

This verse has been a slogan, a mantra, a song for countless people in dire conditions. In their troublesome experience, people have found solace that God is aware and he is faithful and that he does bring deliverance according to his timing.

Consequently, our trouble and perseverance to victory may be a witness to someone else that the Lord can be counted on. We may be going through overwhelming circumstances that seem meaningless; we may feel that God is not caring or not knowing. David felt the same way. Yet, in the end, others benefited by that situation. We can be blessed in our lives, three thousand years removed from David’s turmoil, because of the deliverance by the Lord in his life.

How often we look upon God as our last and feeblest resource. We go to Him because we have nowhere else to go. And then we learn that the storms of life have driven us, not upon the rocks, but into the desired haven.

George MacDonald, *Christian Herald*, July 1975, p.26

Abraham Lincoln

Perhaps the Lord will use our pain to minister to others now or in the future. One can look at other examples in history and see how the Lord has been faithful in delivering them. Take for instance Abraham Lincoln, who, in spite of setback after setback, was given victory. He became a blessing for millions in his life and also changed the course of history. Look at his chronology of pain.

1831: failed in business

1832: defeated for state legislature

1833: failed in business again

1835: sweetheart died

1836: had nervous breakdown

1838: defeated for speaker

1840: defeated for elector

1843: defeated for Congress

1848: defeated for Congress

1855: defeated for Senate

1856: defeated for vice president

1858: defeated for Senate

1860: elected president of the United States of America

Lincoln faced extraordinary failure, yet he continued on in the face of defeat. "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom, and that of all about me, seemed insufficient for the day,"

Abraham Lincoln said. *Pentecostal Evangelism*, Jan. 4, 1976, p.2

I have but to say, the Bible is the best gift God has given to man. All the good Savior gave to the world was communicated through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it.

Abraham Lincoln, *Christianity Today*, July 2, 1976, p. 10

The Lord knows when were in trying time. He is not surprised by circumstances. In fact, he may be the prime mover behind them. But remember, *“This I know, that God is for me”* (Psalm 56:9b). Deliverance will come in some manner. The deliverance will not only be for you and your present circumstances, it may have a legacy. The deliverance that comes to you might impact generations of people coming after you.

“Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all” (Psalm 34:19).

“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them”

(Psalm 34:7).

Deliverance brings trust in the Lord. The short-term benefits are the relief from the trouble. In the believer’s life, a long-term benefit is dependency on the availability and the trustworthiness of God. Transcending the believer’s life is the legacy to others concerning the testimony of the faithfulness of God, cf. Abraham Lincoln. The eternal benefit is that God is ever faithful to keep his promises to those who are his beloved.

“When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles” (Psalm 34:17).

Comforting One Another

Pity weeps and runs away; compassion comes to help and stay.

Janet Curtis O'Leary, *Christian Herald*, Oct. 1978, p. 46.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Corinthians 1:3, 4

Earlier, we looked at the process of softening, whereby the Lord ministers to us and changes our nature from hard-charging go-getters into more thoughtful, sympathetic people. That was to change us. In this chapter we will see that our pain and suffering can change others.

The Corinthians

According to Greek legend, Sisyphus was a king of Corinth. He defied the gods with disrespectful humor and was punished by having to push a huge stone up a hill. At the summit, the rock would roll back to the bottom. He was doomed with the eternal drudgery of pushing the rock back up the hill.

The Corinthians mirrored the attitude of their legendary king. They were arrogant and self-centered. This worldview of sufficiency in their culture came because Corinth was the finest city in Greece. It was a dynamic, cosmopolitan city of about 250,000 in Paul's day. It was a port city, controlling trade routes between northern Greece and the Peloponnese. Corinth was very prosperous. In spite of its affluence, there were dark clouds on the horizon of their view of life.

Hellenistic culture was based on a theology of gods and fates. They believed their gods to be disinterested in humanity, and mankind was often at the mercy of fate. Fate was capricious. Fate was the notion that each individual was assigned a sphere that he was obliged to acknowledge and observe. Thus, Hellenists viewed their gods as distant, preoccupied with their own existence, not concerned with mankind. Life became purposeless and absurd for most people.

Within this cultural milieu, the Corinthian church was filled with disputes and problems. Paul had to write the church letters, to deal with one issue after another. In the second Epistle to Corinthians there was core hostility to Paul, something he addressed. This was the context of the letters to Corinth.

Into this volatile mix of the cultural sense of despair and the pettiness of church problems, Paul dropped a philosophical bomb. Jehovah God cares! In our secular society, this hardly causes a ripple in the Western

mind-set. However, in ancient Greece this was a most astonishing and a profoundly radical claim. One can almost see the Corinthians' eyes narrowing with distrust and cynicism. Life was hard and cruel, and when someone promised that God deeply cared about them personally, they were skeptical.

It is the same in modernity. Go to former atheistic countries and try and convince them of God's existence, and the goodness of God. Their skepticism is well learned. Their worldview of naturalism forbids the supernatural. Thus God is the thing of myth and legend. Moreover, the character of nature is cruel, only the strong survive. Skeptics cannot perceive of a good God when there is external conflict and strife.

God is on a mission to get the attention of hard-hearted, tough nuts, who have no interest in the claims of a loving, supernatural Creator. Thus the Lord will show his love through his church. God would put compassion on display for the entire world to witness sacrificial love. All will know that love is real and functional. Here's the caveat: To show compassion, there must be someone who is experiencing difficulty.

A Public Display of Compassion

Here's the principle: Jesus outlined the behavior of believers operating in unity. There is a cohesiveness of the family of faith in love for a specific reason: *"that they [believers] may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me"* (John 17:21).

When the unbelieving world sees the loving kindness of the church for its own, it will be the evidence that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus confirmed this when he prayed, *"I in them and thou in me, that they [believers] may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me"* (John 17:23).

Jesus uses the unity and community of the church to be a testimony to the unbelieving world that he is the Promised One who will redeem them to himself in love. Love can break the skeptic's heart. Skeptics will be the observers while believers will be the actors on the stage of life. This will not be sweet, adorable fairy tales, it will be real and gritty.

So when Paul wrote to the Corinthians and said, *"The Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God"* (2 Corinthians 1:3b-4). Paul focused on the community of believers and how they ministered one to another. The church is like a spiritual hospital where we can go after we are traumatized.

Believers are like spiritual nurses who minister to the emotional and spiritual wounds of their believing brothers and sisters. Christians are able to console because they already know the therapeutic power of this spiritual hospital since they received comforting care in their time of need.

To continue our analogy, believers may receive comfort directly from the chief doctor, the Lord, *"so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too"* (2 Corinthians 1:5b). The Lord may directly minister life and health to us. He knows the remedy. He knows the therapy and administers it directly. Or a doctor will direct

the medical staff, nurses, and assistants to administer the treatment. Christians are the nursing staff. *"Bear one another's burdens"* (Galatians 6:2).

The concept of bearing a burden is one who lends a helping hand with a heavy load. When believers are experiencing heavy and oppressive weight, the place for care is a community of other believers. There are no Lone Rangers in the Christian faith. *"And Jehovah God said, It is not good that the man should be alone"* (Genesis 2:18)

Paul goes on to point out his own experience. *"For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself"* (2 Corinthians 1:8). Paul, the great visionary and courageous missionary, was in despair. Paul said he was utterly destitute. He explained the reason for this overwhelming condition *"that we should not trust in ourselves"* (2 Corinthians 1:9). No one is an island, not even the great Paul.

He went on to point out that the Lord has a plan in all this. Paul was not left destitute. *"[God] delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again"* (2 Corinthians 1:10). All three aspects of time are taken care of—past, present, and future.

In Paul's circumstance we notice he was pressed for the purpose that he should not trust in himself. God would use Corinthian believers to help him. *"You also helping us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us in answer to many prayers"* (2 Corinthians 1:11). The Christians at Corinth ministered to Paul.

If Paul needed spiritual therapy, we will need it also. The body of Christ, the church, is the spiritual hospital. *"So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another"* (Romans 12:5). Since we are to help other believers, we should not use criticism, antagonism, or contention. The therapy is one of compassion and comfort. *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience"* (Colossians 3:12).

Why do Christians minister to one another? First, to treat the pain, and second, to show the unbelieving world that there is a God who genuinely cares. Christians get to be recipients of the pain and the remedy for a greater good.

Find out how much God has given you and from it take what you need; the remainder which you do not require is needed by others.

Augustine, *Christian Herald*, Nov. 1975, p. 24

Compelling Action

Put a world in my heart, Lord Jesus,

Give me eyes to see it with care.

Give me hands that will offer the fruit of my work,

Give me feet that will go anywhere.

Robin McGregor, *Evangelism*, May, 1977, p. 27

When I was a youngster, a prevailing genre of television programming was the Western. I can remember watching as the cowboy hero jumped off his horse and slapped his mount on the rump, compelling his faithful horse to scamper away. I also remember when our cowboy hero was being chased by Indians, he had to slap his horse with the reins to make it run fast to escape the danger they were in.

The horse had done nothing wrong. It had not disobeyed, but our intrepid champion needed to send a clear message: get going, and get going now! Action was necessary!

Reluctance and passivity may not be character qualities that the Lord wants exhibited in his people. At times, God may want us to be hard-charging, adrenaline-pumping, focused-on-our-goal Christians. If the Lord has revealed a path or charted a course or given a mission for us to pursue, we need to be purposed in fulfilling our mandate. However, one hundred percent commitment is often hard to come by on the part of people. So the Lord might implement a process to have his plan completed, he might slap us on the proverbial rump.

Sometimes the Lord can get us moving with a gentle nudge, but if that will not work, he will use more compelling measures. The TV cowboy in time of trouble did not try and reason with his horse, he influenced the horse with immediate, imposing demands. God will use whatever measures are necessary for the completion of his plan.

Yet mankind can be quite stubborn when confronted with difficult circumstances, refusing to be compelled to act.

In Germany they came first for the Communists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.^[10]

Martin Niemoller

Moses

When the Lord revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), God unveiled a marvelous plan of salvation for the Hebrew slaves. Jehovah noted how he had seen the Jews' suffering and heard their cries and was going to deliver them from Egyptian bondage and take them into a promised land (3:7, 8). This was a wonderful plan, one that Moses tried to implement forty years earlier when he had killed an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave (2:11, 12). Moses tried to use a program to release Jews by murder. That was not a great plan.

God had a different plan; he was going to make Moses their leader. The Lord told Moses, *"Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt"* (Exodus 3:10).

One can imagine Moses' response to this directive. One might think that Moses would be happy that his people would be emancipated and experience freedom from the terrible oppression that they were suffering. An even greater delight was that he would be the instrument that God would use to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt.

Moses' response to this great news? *"But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?'"* (3:11). Moses showed reluctance. He didn't focus on the greatness of the plan but his lack as a person. The Lord was patient with his reluctance and told Moses that, *"Certainly I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you"* (3:12). The personal presence of the God of the universe, would be an assurance to him.

Moses responded to the Lord by asking, *"What's your name?"* (3:13). It seemed Moses changed the topic. Jehovah God reveals his name, his character and his plan in short order (3:15-22). It was a glorious plan of redemption for the Hebrew slaves. Surely Moses would buy into this and would want to be part of this great mission.

Stubbornly, Moses resisted. He finds excuses. *"Then Moses answered, 'But behold, they will not believe me or listen to my voice, for they will say, 'The Lord did not appear to you'"* (4:1). The Lord again patiently overcomes his reluctance, assuring Moses that he will perform signs for him, and the signs will be so effective that *"If they will not believe you, God said, 'or heed the first sign, they may believe the latter sign'"* (4:8). In other words, the Lord is saying to Moses, it isn't about you; it is about me.

"Okay, okay," one can imagine Moses finally agreeing. Was that his response? His stubbornness reappears, *"But Moses said to the Lord, 'Oh, my Lord, I am not eloquent, either heretofore or since thou hast spoken to thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of tongue'"* (4:10). Moses had not spoken Egyptian in forty years, and he knew he was rusty in his hieroglyphics. Maybe this was enough to convince God that he is not the right man for the job. Maybe Moses' protest was enough to let the Lord understand that he had it all wrong.

As Moses was insistent, the Lord was persistent. In fact, the Lord became more and more forceful. *“Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak”* (4:12). There was passion in the verse and God emphasized that Moses should get a move on it!

Well, that’s it. Surely Moses will listen. He’d run out of excuses and was presently going to be obedient to the calling of the Lord. Moses can’t be reluctant anymore. The Lord answered all his questions. Let’s see. *“But he said, ‘Oh, my Lord, send, I pray, some other person’* (4:13). Moses flat-out refused! I imagine that there must have been an uncomfortable silence.

The Lord’s response was very instructive. *“Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses”* (4:14). One waits for a large explosion. Moses will be vaporized, and there will be just a whiff of smoke rising from where he had been standing. The word *kindled* means to be hot, to burn, like kindling in a fire. Moses and the Lord were squaring off, and we all know who the winner is going to be. It’s at this point that you and I want to whisper in Moses’ ear and tell him that he’s making poor choices.

Keep in mind the analogy of the cowboy slapping the flank of the horse to send it scampering. The Lord, the cowboy, has repeatedly whapped Moses to get going, and instead of acting like a faithful steed, Moses was acting like a mule, rock solid and unmovable. One can imagine the cowboy reaching for his six-shooter to take care of his mule-headed charge.

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 103:8).

Moses has made the Lord angry. Don’t ever think that God is a pushover. The Lord will not tolerate defiance of his will. He is not a passive God, but a God of holiness and righteousness who hates sin. He absolutely abhors iniquity, and he will not stand for its presence. *“God is a righteous judge, and a God who has indignation every day”* (Psalms 7:11). God’s holiness defines how he expresses his love.

The story of Moses does not finish with the Lord being angry at him. God still showed his mercy and provided a solution by commissioning Moses’ brother Aaron to be his companion and spokesman (4:14-16). However, this was not the end of the matter. There was a stubborn nature to Moses’ rebellion.

Ironically, Moses was to deliver a message of obedience to the Pharaoh of Egypt, asking him to allow the Jews leave (4:21-22). Later in further irony, Moses failed to circumcise his own son, in an act of obedience to God, and *“At a lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to kill him”* (4:24). The Lord was going to kill Moses! It is very clear that the Lord is serious about obedience

Moses was spared because his wife, Zipporah, angrily circumcised their son and secured Moses’ release from the wrath of God (4:25-26). Moses had committed a capital sin since circumcision was the sign of a covenant relationship with the Lord (Genesis 17:10-14). The application for us is clear, obedience to the Lord’s revealed will for our lives is not up for negotiation. Moses was going to die for being disobedient.

The Lord, though loving and kind, is also serious. We need to keep a balanced view of him. The cowboy had his six-shooter out ready to plug his mount.

This situation gave Moses the wherewithal to resist an inclination to be disobedient as a leader, since later God would use him powerfully.

Hard Lessons

After Passover the Hebrew people were on their journey from Egypt. Moses was leading them, but they had not yet put enough distance between themselves and Pharaoh's evil intention for them. Pharaoh changed his mind and decided to go after his slaves, his labor force. *"The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea"* (Exodus 14:9).

It is here that the Lord uses the tools of potential pain and suffering to force the Hebrews to follow his plan. The Israelites became fearful when they saw the Egyptian army. Their mission of following the Moses into the promised land was not very appealing. *"When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were in great fear. And the people of Israel cried out to the Lord"* (14:10).

In fact, the Hebrews got downright indignant about this endeavor and began to whine and complain to Moses. *"And they said to Moses, 'Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt?'"* (14:11). Remember Moses trying to get out of fulfilling the Lord's plan? The Lord had two million whining Jews on his hands.

Additionally, the people decided that this plan of going to the promised land was a bad idea. *"Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness"* (14:12). Their conclusion was that this whole idea stunk.

Moses, having learned his lesson about disobedience, warned the people, *"Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again"* (14:13). In fact, Moses got a little testy with these people and told them, *"The Lord shall fight for you, and you shall hold your peace"* (14:14). Essentially, Moses tells them to shut up and watch!

Moses seemed to be getting upset with their reluctance the same way the Lord was with him. At this point, Moses thinks it's a good time for a prayer meeting. He wanted to seek the Lord and get more revelation from him about what they should do.

God responded, *"The Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward'"* (14:15). In other words, quit praying, get going! The Lord was whapping Moses and the people on the flank to move. Forget the prayer meeting, get going!

The Lord brought overwhelming force to bear against the Israelites. They would not move though their conditions in Egypt were atrocious. They were reluctant and petulant, and God had to bring tremendous pressure so they would be compelled to do what they were supposed to do. The threat of death at the hands of the Egyptian army was hardly enough to move them. Moses was at risk of dying before he was fully compliant

to the will of God, just as the Israelites had to be on the verge of annihilation before they were willing to do what the difficult things in fulfilling the will of God.

The same might be true for us if we are reluctant followers of God's leading. The Lord might bring tremendous pressure to bear to compel us to act. Our reluctance might increase the Lord's willingness to cause us to obey. Our excuses won't deter him. Our whining won't make him change his will and plan.

Jonah

Jonah's story is a classic. Here is a prophet of God who, like Moses, tried to get away from the will of God. Jonah was an Israelite patriot. He had the privilege of predicting the military success won by Jeroboam II and the impressive prosperity of his era (2 Kings 14:25). But when the Lord called Jonah to preach in Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, Jonah balked and took off in the opposite direction.

Jonah was an Israeli patriot, he did not want to preach a call of repentance to the wicked Ninevites, because he knew God's mercy would follow. The Ninevites were enemies of Israel, and if they didn't repent, the Lord's judgment would fall on them and Israel would be safe. Jonah even said as much, fearing that Nineveh would repent and the Lord would relent (Jonah 4:2).

Jonah, the man of God, became willfully disobedient and took off for Tarshish, the opposite direction of Nineveh. Forget the reluctance to follow God's leading, Jonah was essentially saying, "I won't go." Jonah's outright rebellion, he thought, was based on good motives. Moses tried to get out of following the Lord's direction, Jonah was deliberately and willfully defiant.

The story of Jonah and the big fish are familiar to all of us. The Lord brought a huge storm, and Jonah's boat was in danger of being capsized and sinking. The other men in the ship were beside themselves and wanted to know what to do. *"Jonah said to them, 'Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you'"* (Jonah 1:12). Jonah was willing to die rather than to obey!

The Lord brought a huge storm to impact him. Due to Jonah's stubbornness, the Lord let Jonah be thrown into the midst of a raging sea. God also prepared something so overwhelming and unique that would most assuredly get Jonah's attention. A great fish swallowed him. God is willing to get the attention of his followers, and he's very creative in matching anyone's obstinacy.

It is sometimes in great trouble, in life-threatening times, that we finally get our perspective straight. Jonah, in the belly of the great fish, prayed (2:1). *"Saying, 'I called to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and thou didst hear my voice'"* (Jonah 2:2). God is never out of earshot. He is always able to hear the call of his children.

Even though Jonah had tried to run, the Lord put him in conditions that allowed him to reflect so that he could repent. The Lord didn't change, Jonah did.

Jonah's rebelliousness was abandoned. *"But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to thee; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!"* (2:9).

The consequences of disobedience might still remain, though there is forgiveness. *"And the Lord spoke to the fish, and it vomited out Jonah upon the dry land"* (2:10). Jonah was slimed by his episode in the fish's belly, emerging out of the stench and disgorge of the fish. That is where sin takes us, to a place of repulsiveness. The Lord delivers us from the place of sin after we repent, but Jonah had still been slimed. No shower or change of clothes.

Jonah was again commanded to complete the mission, and preach to the Ninevites. The Lord recommissioned him and put him back into ministry. Interestingly, the Ninevites worshiped the fish god Dagon, therefore Jonah's experience impacted them in a profound way, since Jehovah delivered Jonah from their 'god'. Jonah's message was short. *"Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he cried, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'"* (Jonah 3:4). He didn't sermon didn't have much content, but his message sure had an effect. There was tremendous repentance in the city, and the city was saved from the judgment of God (3:10).

Here are some principles we can learn from Jonah's experience, and apply them into our lives. In terms of a believer's reluctance to follow the plan of God: (1) It is impossible to run away from God and his will for your life; (2) God will do whatever it takes to get your attention; (3) Failure does not disqualify a believer from serving the Lord; (4) Disobedience to God creates turmoil in a believer's life; (5) Letting globalism, nationalism, patriotism, or any other "ism" come before God's divine will leads to potential disaster; (6) God brings results through his faithful servants; (7) God is in the business of allowing and even causing us to experience the truth; (8) The consequences of disobedience (distrust) are always worse than the consequences of obedience.

By looking at Moses and Jonah and their reluctance to be obedient to the Lord, we might assume that the Lord only compels us to action when there is disobedience. Note: Both obedience and disobedience included discomfort.

God can turn stubborn rebels into obedient followers, he will also use pain on compliant followers to further their effectiveness.

Difficult Truth

One of the great truths in history is illustrated this way: The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Here we look at one of the truly hard questions of why a loving God would or could allow such horrific and terrible circumstances happen to his followers.

When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.

John the Baptist was beheaded. Jesus Christ the Lord was tortured and then crucified. All Christ's disciples except John had violent deaths. The incredible number of persecutions and Christian deaths through all time has become well known. In AD 108, Pliny the Second wrote to the Roman emperor Trajan, certifying that thousands of Christians were being put to death daily. He wrote that the Christians "bind themselves by an obligation—not indeed to commit wickedness; but, on the contrary—never to commit theft, robbery, or adultery, never to falsify their word, never to defraud any man."^[11]

It is evident from history that as Christ was despised and rejected and his disciples and future followers were also. This ill treatment, hateful persecution and shameful deaths by the hands of Jews, Romans, Greeks, and modern peoples alike bear witness that Christians who seek to bring blessing were themselves cursed. Where Christians sought to free men from bondage, they themselves were enslaved. When they tried to encourage and edify mankind, they themselves were humiliated and killed. Why would a good God allow this?

"As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20).

"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" (Romans 8:28, KJV).

The wisdom of the ages has been inadequate to fully answer this question of why God allows such terrible suffering to come to his own. We must come away with a simple principle: good comes from pain and suffering.

The Bible presents certitude about the future. If we doubt it, that is not the Bible's fault, rather it demonstrates our limitations.

For illustration, imagine that you are naked and lying flat on a table. A man approaches you wearing a mask with a knife in his hand. He is moving toward you as if to cut you. Fear might be the prevailing emotion.

But if you know that this man is a surgeon who is going to take cancer from you and preserve health, your perspective changes and you understand that this situation is good, not evil. When the situation is in perspective, it makes sense.

The Bible does that with pain and suffering. The Bible puts it into perspective for us. When we witness terrible events, we can be assured that God will bring some good. The benefits may be far in the future and never seen, yet we need to be fair and understand that we might never know the outcome.

Testimony

Steve and Brandy are a young married couple, and they have struggled with infertility. One of their great desires was to have children, but they could not. They prayed and pleaded with God and tried to understand why the Lord wouldn't allow them their deep desire. The stigma and loss was a bitter heartache for them.

They suffered through years of tests, surgeries, medications, and even a tubal pregnancy. Finally, God surprised them with a pregnancy even before the doctors were sure all systems were go. The pregnancy resulted in a healthy boy, and they were ecstatic! Their heartache was turned to joy.

However, they still felt the call of God to add to their family, and explored the possibility of another pregnancy. In terms of health and cost, it did not make sense, so they investigated adoption. They found that the opportunities for adopting a baby from China were abundant. Also, they were motivated by the abhorrent practice of abortion due to the quota system of only one child per family. Steve and Brandy chose to adopt a baby girl from China. The potential pain of pregnancy forced them into considering adoption.

This journey of bringing a child into their family was arduous and costly. After months of anxious waiting a beautiful baby girl was added to their family. Their love and affection for this little child was as great as for their biological son. I remember being in a prayer gathering with them and listening to Brandy pray about the entire parenting experience of infertility, pregnancy, and adoption. I listened intently as she thanked the Lord for the pain and trouble of it, because they now understood what great blessing came from the entire journey.

The value that Steve and Brandy place on their experience translated into their appreciation of their children and their call to be parents. Their experience added a dimension of understanding that would have been absent without their emotional, physical, and monetary cost. Remember our simple principle, good comes from pain and suffering.

You or I may not accept this principle, we can doubt it or deny it. However, Steve and Brandy understood it because by experience they have confirmed it. Experiential knowledge supersedes intellectual knowledge in this case. For those of us who doubt or deny this principle, the future still holds opportunity to comprehend it. The Lord will prompt and prod us if we are reluctant or if we need to follow a different direction that he has chosen for us.

The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church

After Christ's resurrection and the birth of the fledgling Christian community, there came great persecution upon these followers of what was known as the Way. Centuries of martyrdom followed, tens of thousands were killed. This holocaust even carries on to this day. In fact, there were more Christians killed for the cause of Christ in the twentieth century than the previous nineteen centuries combined.

One of the great chronicles of this history was written by John Fox, called *Fox's Book of Martyrs*. This historical narrative tells of various tales of gruesome murders of many Christians throughout the ages. Fox published his work in the mid 1500s, and it became a best seller of its day. It was such a thoroughly accepted book that the bishops ordered it to be placed in every cathedral in England and was often found chained, along with the Bible, to the lectern for access by the people. Queen Elizabeth held Mr. Fox in high regard and referred to him as "Our Father Fox."

Fox's Book of Martyrs was published in the early years of Elizabeth's reign. Her father, King Henry VIII is credited with letting the Bible being available to the common man. The Bible and the book of martyrs, sparked the growth of a spiritual desire in the nation of England. The living force of the Protestant revolution was fueled by these writings. The Bible was affirmed by martyrs demonstrating the courage of the life given over to God. Spiritual energy pulsed into the nation and transformed England into a national debating society focused on spiritual matters.

The Bible became the source of moral authority, replacing any religious edicts from Rome or any political edicts from the Crown. Every pub became a place of debate over religious life. Even the illiterate were awakened to new intellectual endeavors since the Bible made the astonishing claim that they could be co-heirs of spiritual life. Every one became eagerly engaged in this great awakening, and England became one of the headwaters for the continued Reformation.

The Reformation and the Renaissance led to the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, leading to the Industrial Revolution and our modern era. The spread of Christianity became a dominant force in Western culture.

The Puritans, fleeing persecution in England and Europe, fled to the Americas, establishing the foundation of the United States of America. America's influence for good in the world has been soundly established in its 250-plus years of its existence. The United States has generally benefited the world. The world has benefited from the existence of America, and America was established by the escapees from religious persecution. Good can come from evil.

Fox's Book of Martyrs influenced England. Puritanism was influenced by the book to be courageous, seeking spiritual freedom. The Puritans' exodus to America influenced the establishment of the United States. The modern missionary movement was birthed in America, and Christianity moved into the far reaches of the world, bringing the gospel to unreached people groups. And as the old saying goes, the rest is history.

This is a big bite of condensed history, but it is for the illustration of our principle: God brings good out of bad. God prompted godly people through extraordinary means to do extreme missions. God uses whatever means that will motivate his people to complete his will. He even uses martyrdom. He is willing to use pain and suffering because good comes from it.

If you are a reluctant believer like Moses or Jonah, he will not be intimidated by your disobedience. He can overcome reluctance. Or we might be like Jim Elliot, who was a missionary to the Auca Indians of Ecuador and died a martyr's death. He accepted the risks of the mission field and died, in 1956. On January 8, 1956, five men were speared and hacked to death by warriors from the Auca tribe. Consequently, the entire Auca tribe was affected by his death at their hands, and they ultimately turned to Christianity because of the great sacrifice of Jim Elliot. *Life Magazine* featured a ten-page article on their mission and death.

His martyrdom at age twenty-eight and subsequent books about his life authored by his widow, Elisabeth Elliot, have been the catalyst for sending thousands into the mission fields and stoking the fires of a heart for

God. Because of these missionaries who went to the mission field, tens of thousands have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

Jim Elliot and his comrades learned about the Aucas, and knowing they had killed all strangers for centuries, still committed themselves to reaching them for Christ.

The article explained, "Other Indians fear them but the missionaries were determined to reach them. Said Elliot, 'Our orders are: the Gospel to every creature.'"

Elliot only wanted God's will. It ended in his death, but it was a death whose seed still brings forth fruit for the gospel's sake.

He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Jim Elliot 1927-1956, not original to Elliot. Earliest citation is to the English nonconformist clergyman Philip Henry (1631-1696) as "He is no fool who parts with that which he cannot keep, when he is sure to be recompensed with that which he cannot lose", cited in *The life of the Rev. Philip Henry, A.M.*, Matthew Henry, J. B. Williams, pub. W. Ball, 1839

Drawing

Left to ourselves we are at the mercy of our passions and fears.

William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible*, John, p.45

Mankind, at times, has a tendency to believe in its own sufficiency, and in doing so we can become our own worst enemy. The Lord will often thwart this perception of self-sufficiency when it challenges his divine will. If our attitudes and behavior bump up against his plan, he is likely to get our attention and allow us to refocus on his perfect way.

The Lord uses unique approaches to particular individuals for specific reasons, and he can be very effective in his calls to these individuals. God can use dramatic approaches and very special persuasive circumstances to get a clear, unambiguous message to people. He may use tender appeals or powerful inducements, including pain to secure our attention. Remember, God is on our side. He is not trying to win an argument with us, he is moving us to a place of blessing because he loves us.

In fact, the Lord is faithful to his purposes, and anyone who tries to oppose it will not affect a correction. *“For the Lord of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?”* (Isaiah 14:27). Further, mankind will bend or break, not the Lord. He will make things happen according to his will. *“The anger of the Lord will not turn back until he has executed and accomplished the intents of his mind. In the latter days you will understand it clearly”* (Jeremiah 23:20). We might not understand the purpose and his means presently, however, at some time in the future, it will make sense to us.

It is clear throughout history that the Lord is willing to use strong means to draw us closer to himself. When his chosen people Israel strayed from him, he used powerful methods to draw them back to him. Remember, he is the epicenter of hope and love.

The Lord has sworn, *“As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand”* (Isaiah 14:24).

Israel

When Israel was forced into the wilderness in their Exodus wanderings, there was a point at which they were not thankful or grateful. They were, of course, God’s chosen people, the focus of his salvation and blessing. Israel, though, did not like God’s plan or Moses’ leadership and acted like petulant children. They pouted and whined and rejected the blessings that God brought to them.

Rebellion can have a high cost. Psalm 78 is an account of Israel and their early travels through the wilderness after being liberated from bondage in Egypt. It reveals the marvelous and miraculous way in which the Lord graciously ministered to them. Yet in spite of his generosity and evidence of his great love, Israel *“sinned still more against him, rebelling against the Most High in the desert”* (78:17). The Jews compounded their impudence and *“tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved”* (78:18).

I once served as a chaplain in a school for delinquent youth. These young men ranged from thirteen to eighteen years old and were incarcerated for property crimes. They attempted to act like tough thugs, but they were really boys trying to act like men. They thought they knew what life was all about, but they got a rude awakening after they were arrested. Before they got in trouble, they assumed they could do things that brought them excitement and attention. They tested society in their impudence and found out that they didn't have all the answers. They got busted, and their acting out was not fun anymore.

Like these young men, Israel in the wilderness was insolent. They demanded things from God, treating the Lord as if he were their servant. *"They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness?'"* (78:19). When I was a chaplain in the boys' home, these young men would often come sauntering into chapel. Their body language spoke of disinterest, but chapel got them out of lock-up, so they wandered in for a break. They would slump in their chairs, acting rebellious. I would look them in the eye and assure them if they were disruptive, I would have them removed and put back into lock-up.

Israel sauntered around the wilderness uninterested in what God had prepared for them. *"Because they had no faith in God, and did not trust his saving power"* (78:22). Remember, God is for us, and in Israel's case, he was more than patient and caring. Israel did not trust him to have their best interest in sight.

He continued to minister to them in their need; however, there is a limit to his kindness in the face of their overt contempt. In Psalm 78:23-30, the Lord fed and cared for Israel, however, their hostility toward the Lord completed itself and *"the anger of God rose against them and he slew the strongest of them, and laid low the picked men of Israel"* (78:31).

The Lord was fully justified in his response, but he was not merely impacting Israel just for discipline or justice. Earlier we saw that the Lord will punish disobedience. However, in this instance, there was a more profound purpose for God's imposition of severe consequences. He turned up the proverbial heat. *"When he slew [killed] them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly"* (78:34).

This is a sobering verse. The implications call for careful pondering. Sharp conditions awoke the Israelites to the call on their lives. Reflection followed infliction. The blessings and goodness of God did not draw them to him, but pain did. The Lord brought them to the end of their ability to find good their own way. Pain blocked all alternative routes around God. The condition of their hearts was hard, and it was only death that could move them.

This concept might deal heavy body blows to your perception of God. The moral outrage at God might be rising in some minds since he used death to affect a change in their attitudes.

Remember two things. First, *"This I know, that God is for me"* (Psalm 56:9). Second, our proposition that if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the pain in question produces a benefit for the sufferer or the observer, a benefit that God would not be provided without the suffering. Through the experience of Israel's wilderness wandering, the Lord's goodness provided for their needs, but that did not compel them to draw

closer to him (1 Corinthians 10:1-12). The suffering they endured was the component that drew them near to the Lord.

“When he slew them, they sought for him; they repented and sought God earnestly” (Psalm 78:34).

Note: The ones he killed did not turn to him. They died, but the inference of the verse hints that the remnant got the message.

The word *sought* means to seek with care and to seek with prayer. Generally, Israel was not seeking the Lord in terms of relationship. To them, he was a heavenly vending machine, a way in which to get their needs met. His provision was adequate, even nice, but they wanted T-bone steaks. They demanded more stuff, not more God. *“Their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things”* (Philippians. 3:19).

Keep in mind that the Lord wants interaction with us. He is our Father and we his children. In Genesis 3, the Lord was seeking out Adam and Eve to connect and share with them (3:8), as he does today. He desires to be close with us: *“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you”* (James 4:8).

Israel went from rebellion to repentance, then to their rock. *“They remembered that God was their rock, the Most High God their redeemer”* (Psalm 78:35). The symbolic nature of a rock in this passage is a huge immovable boulder. When one encounters this rock, the rock dictates. One cannot pick up the rock and move it, one moves around or on the rock. It is like encountering the Rock of Gibraltar, a mighty and awesome, even majestic piece of real estate. One does not move the Rock of Gibraltar. It is 2.5 miles long and 1,400 feet high. Nor does one move him who is the Creator of the Rock of Gibraltar. However, the rock can become an impregnable fortress, a place of refuge, a place of security. One does not move the rock, one depends on the rock.

Israel learned the lesson the hard way. Israel had a penchant for repenting of their behavior, then slowly succumbing to their passions or to other philosophies. They forgot their lesson and repeated their intransigence, giving themselves over to their own desires, not God’s leading. Their rock would either be a sanctuary or a stumbling stone. *“And he will become a sanctuary, and a stone of offense, and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem”* (Isaiah 8:14).

For us today, Israel’s demise is a somber example. The Lord will not take second place to anyone or anything. It may be that God is in the process of drawing us near to him and has been using gracious means to minister to us. If his grace seems to be lacking, then we should reconsider our attitude before we get to the same consequences as Israel.

Or take another example of Israel’s lack of sincerity toward the Lord and his subsequent desire to draw them back to himself: *“And the people spoke against God and against Moses, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food’”* (Numbers 21:5).

One wants to go back in history and tap the people of Israel on the shoulder and whisper in their ears about their poor attitude. One wants to warn them because you know that a tsunami is coming to give them an attitude change. You cringe when you read the next verse, you had seen it coming.

“Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died” (21:6).

History can be a great teacher so that we do not repeat damaging choices. Israel’s reluctance to appreciate God’s grace was not a productive way to get close to the Lord. God used a very surefire way to draw Israel into relationship with him: suffering. The solution was short and bittersweet.

“And the people came to Moses, and said, ‘We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people” (21:7).

The Jews went from rebellion to recompense to repentance in three verses. They learned the hard way, but they learned quickly. The lesson of pain is quickly learned and applied if we are looking for the answer. The people wanted their relationship to the Lord to be back on the front burners of their hearts. He had effectively drawn them closer after they had rejected his grace.

The Lord will do the same with us. Israel, later in their nationhood, was again rebellious and had left their relationship with the Lord. So God used his formula for drawing them back to himself. Read this verse and ponder.

“I [God] will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face: in their affliction they will seek me earnestly” (Hosea 5:15, ASV).

It is safe to assume that the Lord is patient and uses all available means to draw us to himself. If we put distance between him and ourselves, he will pursue us with an everlasting love. However, he will also use the most productive means to draw us back to himself. If we reject his mercy, he knows we probably will not reject him when we are in pain. In fact, we tend to yearn for him in a passionate way when things are very stressful.

Unbelievers

We noted how the Lord was willing to use very significant pain to draw his chosen people back to himself. He is also willing to use the same formula for getting the attention of unbelievers so he can draw them to himself. It is one of the great truths of the Bible that God is on a mission to bring his enemies to himself. After all, we were all his enemies at one time, and if we are Christians, it is because of his efforts, not ours. The Lord’s desire is that none should perish and that all come to faith: *“The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).*

However, mankind does have a rebellious heart and often will not come to the Lord even though he is kind to them. There is a depraved rebelliousness within the heart of mankind that resists God's goodness and kindness. The Lord is able to get mankind's attention.

In Psalm 83, the psalmist recognizes that Israel was in a dangerous situation. There is a confederation of nations that gathered themselves together to attack Israel. They have a common mission: "*They say, 'Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more!'*" (Psalm 83:4).

This is a situation that the nation of Israel has faced many times in the past, even in very recent history.

On May 28, 1967, Gamal Abdel Nasser, President of the United Arab Republic, said, "We plan to open a general assault on Israel. This will be total war. Our basic aim is the destruction of Israel." When war broke out on June 5, the United Arab Republic was joined by Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Sudan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco. The attempt of this confederacy to drive Israel into the sea was unsuccessful. In six days the war was over. Israel was the undisputed victor.^[12]

The same sort of scenario transpired in May of 1948 when Israel was ratified for statehood by the United Nations. Israel was attacked by a coalition of Arab armies that sought to annihilate the new nation, killing every Jew and claiming the land of Palestine as an Arab domain. The scenario played out again in 1973 in the Yom Kippur War when Israel was attacked and invaded by their enemies.

Psalm 83 is a timely scripture for the nation of Israel. Throughout recent and ancient history, the enemies of Israel have said, "*Let us take possession for ourselves of the pastures of God*" (Psalm 83:12). These coalitions of nations have wanted Israel's land for personal gain. Consequently, the writer of Psalm 83, Asaph, was well aware of the serious situation that the people of Israel found themselves. The entire psalm is a prayer that Asaph directs to the Lord for the security and salvation of the nation.

The risk and danger was high, yet that was not Asaph's entire perspective. He has a hope for Israel's enemies, a hope that was focused on their eternal benefit. Asaph was not seeking revenge for his enemies, he was hoping for their reward.

Asaph's prayer toward Israel's enemies sounds like justice. He began, "*So pursue them with thy tempest, And terrify them with thy storm*" (83:15, ASV). This sounds like a proper prayer of deliverance. Make our enemies pay for their terrible destructive choices. Justice is a moral motive. One would not fault Asaph for his desire to see these attackers get their just reward for bringing pain and havoc to innocent people. Their malicious campaign, fueled by their greed, should be met with righteous indignation. Their coldblooded treachery to bring harm to Israel should be met with fierce resolve on behalf of the Lord. Israel is the apple of his eye: "*For thus said the Lord of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you, for he who touches you touches the apple of his eye*" (Zechariah 2:8).

Asaph continued with his prayer concerning Israel's attacking enemies: "*Fill their faces with shame*" (Psalm 83:16). Asaph prayed that their endeavor would bring them disgrace. There are few things that bring greater

disaster than shame. It is the ultimate in defeat. One might appreciate total destruction in the pursuit of a just cause. However, shame puts a layer of disgust and loathing, illustrating what was pursued was a worthless cause, a shameful cause. It carries a sense of perversity, where one is red-faced or embarrassed over the attempt.

Why does Asaph want them to endure this sort of humiliating experience? Asaph answers this question in the second half of the verse: *“That they may seek thy name, O Lord.”*

Crickets. It is here that one should hear a pin drop.

Asaph wanted Israel's enemies to experience the most devastating shame because that shame will be an impetus that will drive them to seek to know Jehovah. Asaph did not want them destroyed, he wanted them to be blessed. Asaph wanted his enemies to know the redemptive quality of life in the Lord. This is an astonishing perspective.

Shame is about one's own deficiencies, and brings those defects to the public domain. When dark, sordid behavior is hidden, there seems little shame. But when it is revealed and open, reaction from the public puts their values against their behavior, and there can be public disgust.

Asaph desired what the Lord desires—that all would find themselves approaching Jehovah in sincerity, with an honest wish to worship him. If shame can be a catalyst, then so be it. Even the enemies of the Lord can experience his marvelous promises of new life in him. God will use the most destructive of human emotions—shame to bring to his enemies qualitatively shame-free living.

But Asaph did not stop there in his prayer. He added, *“Let them be put to shame and dismayed for ever; let them perish in disgrace”* (83:17). If there is a refusal to repent and accept the grace of God, then their destruction is in order. They act in hazard to their own self-interest. To defiantly reject a gracious offer is going to be met with severity. However, in a rebel's rejection, there can be a silver lining, not for the rebel, but for the rest of mankind. What may be the result for an enemy of God who obstinately dismisses his grace?

“That they [mankind] may know that thou alone, whose name is Jehovah, Art the Most High over all the earth” (Psalm 83:18).

Mankind will come to know that the destruction of the enemy of God was done by none other than the God of the universe, Jehovah. Destruction can lead to revelation. The revelation is about the name of God, and names reveal the character of the person.

Jehovah is not only Lord over Israel, but over the entire earth. He is sovereign over all and is above all gods and all kings, and he will not pretend otherwise. He will proclaim to all for the benefit of all that he has good in store for those who desire him, and ruin for those who oppose him and his plan.

Asaph prayed that the destruction of some will lead to the conviction of others. In an eternal perspective, that is commendable and beneficial. Though the ruin comes to some, it is by their own defiance that it is visited on them. Ultimately, good comes from the rebellion of the defiant, because their consequences are witnessed

by others. The shame and contempt that comes from so foolish a choice will bring many to contemplate the goodness and justice of the Lord and in the final analysis turn to him in faith.

Dependence

God sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves.

Dwight L. Moody, *Christian Herald*, July, 1983, p.57

And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 8:3

Ambition to succeed and making a name for oneself, or providing for the needs of one's family, or doing something great for mankind can be very noble.

The desire to prosper and to do the best one can is part of the fabric of Western culture. Charting a course for success in one's career or in educational pursuit or any endeavor is an admirable goal, if it is the will of God.

Often, one pursues career or relationships or wealth or notoriety because these things bring self-satisfaction, but these may not be the things the Lord is charting for your life and legacy. Sometimes we value people's admiration more than the Lord's inspiration, and we settle for short-term gratification. We yearn to minister to our pride and ambitions rather than pursuing the Lord's desire for our good. He has our best interests at heart, but often we yearn for short-term gratification which is a kind of salve for a long-term itch.

The Lord has a cure for the itch of gratification. He has a formula for interceding into our lives and overcoming our independent will and pursuit of success. He can take headstrong, driven people and change them into pliable, compliant-to-his-will people.

If there is any atom of self-esteem in you that has grown into a molecule of self-focus, you might want to pay attention. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, six years before the Nazi's Gestapo imprisoned and executed him, wrote, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Most of us think that Bonhoeffer's statement is very admirable, but we hope that it will not be true for us. Our dreams are too important; our plans are too consequential for them to be sacrificed for a noble but futile endeavor. We value an uncomplicated life that is full of comforts and blessings. However, in the spiritual realm this often leads to spiritual flabbiness. Comfort can lead to complacency, and complacency can lead to apathy.

The Christian faith has not been tried and found wanting.

It has been found difficult and left untried.

G. K. Chesterton, *Christian Reader*, Feb./March 1974, p.44

God is serious about moving believers to a place of complete dependence on him since it is then that our lives will be full and a blessing for others. Once a person comes to the decision to make Jesus Christ the Lord of one's life, Jesus comes into that person's life, not to be a guest, but to be Lord. Jesus Christ is wholly in charge and will work in partnership with us to bring in spiritual maturity.

The irony is when we act in dependence on him, we become free. When the Lord directs our lives, we have tapped into the greatest creative force in the universe, and we can have guidance and direction. The key to getting this guidance is dependence. The Twenty-third Psalm is a classic expression of this truth.

Read these verses and notice God's understanding of our needs and his delight to meet those needs. It is of paramount importance to remember that humans are born to know and to be known. The Lord has designed us to be his friend and friends with his friends. He is absolutely committed to ministering to us in ways that will meet our needs so that we will be healthy and whole.

"The Lord is my shepherd." (Psalm 23:1a). The shepherd is not only the master, but also our servant. He serves and provides for the flock. He guides and leads believers to places that are healthy and safe.

"I shall not want." (23:1b). There might be many good things that we lack, but there is not a lack for a good thing we need. We have everything that is necessary. We will have an eternity of having the most opulent of dwellings in heaven, but here on earth, for our lifetime, we have exactly what we need.

"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters." (23:2). The nature of God's shepherding is gentle. He shows his goodness not by driving us, but by leading us to quiet and safe and pleasant places that will meet our emotional as well as physical needs.

"He restores my soul." (23:3a). Our soul is equivalent to our inner being. It is the core of our personhood, where our appetites, minds, desires, emotions, and interests are harbored. Periodically, we get wounded or hurt, and the Lord can restore our inner self. We cannot restore our souls. We might learn coping skills and adjust to difficult circumstances, but only the Lord can restore our souls to health.

"He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (23:3b). Our inner health leads to outward behavior, and our behavior enhances or detracts from his reputation. He will lead us to opportunities for healthy choices, but our choices are our own, whether we wish to be tools of righteousness or not.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me." (23:4a). The strength and security of the Lord is with us even in the midst of trouble. The Lord proves faithful in the believer's weakness.

"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." (23:4b). The sense of comfort consoles. He's moved by pity, to have compassion. What troubles us is of concern to him.

“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” (23:5a). God does not depend on evil men to take care of his beloved, rather the Lord sets a banquet table and then serves his followers. He is, in effect, the servant in a majestic, sumptuous banquet. Not only is he concerned about our internal needs of nourishment but also our outward condition.

“Thou anointest my head with oil.” (23:5b). God, with great respect, since we are his distinguished guests, pours precious ointment on us. Of course, this is in a figurative sense, he ministers to us. This is an enhancement of perfume, so that touch and fragrance are a blessing to us. We are the objects of great care.

“My cup overflows.” (23:5c). Not only are we sumptuously fed, but also we have an overabundance of beverage. This is a metaphor for significant, continued blessing.

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” (23:6a). We cannot escape God’s goodness. The imagery of this phrase is of two things pursuing us on a path. Goodness and mercy are in hot pursuit of us, and they will catch us.

“And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” (23:6b). Believers will be in the eternal community and fellowship with a loving, kind Father, who is wealthy beyond imagination. This is our heritage.

The quick review of this psalm assures us that the Lord desires to minister to us and to have fellowship with us. It is beneficial for us to partner with him and to be dependent on him. He is super reliable! He is abundantly faithful and wants to be available for us.

Thus the Lord will move us to a place to depend on him. He may do this through difficulty so that we are forced to be dependent on him. The Lord must bring us to an end of ourselves so that we have no other resource but him.

God may put us in a situation where all our abilities and resources are insufficient to meet the need. He desires to prove himself faithful to his people. He did this with the nation of Israel after their bondage in Egypt. He delivered them from their servitude and then sent them into the wilderness where there were no resources available. He cared for their physical and spiritual needs for forty years! He forced Israel to be dependent upon him.

Here is the principle in two parts: (1) Trusting in the Lord brings us benefit. (2) He will compel us to trust him.

Part one: *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths”* (Proverbs 3:5, 6).

However, there is a warning with this imperative, and this involves our desire to do things on our own. The next verse, verse 7, says, *“Be not wise in your own eyes.”* The Lord knows our tendency to want to take charge, to try and manage our situation. We simply believe that we are pretty sharp. Our own self-reliance becomes a barrier to the best possible outcomes.

We receive a tremendous blessing when we depend on God. *“It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones”* (3:8). That sounds pretty good.

So why the reluctance to trust on the Lord? We simply do not believe that he is trustworthy. This is caused by the deceitfulness of our sin.

Why don't we believe that he is trustworthy? We do not trust because we have experienced bad things happening to us and have seen suffering happen to others. We have witnessed evil ruling the day in the world and in our lives. Charles Darwin could not believe in God because of the reality of evil.

Here is a puzzle: If we have learned not to trust because of the experience of pain, we can assume that pain is a great catalyst for learning, since it even trumps biblical mandates. We believe pain more than we believe the Bible. Conversely, it is also true the Lord can use suffering to convince us to trust him, since it is such an effective tool.

Jesus: An Example

Jesus, the Son of God, understood the concept of dependence. He relied on the leading and guidance of his heavenly Father. In Matthew 3, Jesus was baptized by John, then two things happened. First, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus (3:16); second, God the Father proclaimed delight in his Son, *“and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’”* (3:17).

Jesus had divine credentials and an impressive inheritance. He was wealthy and powerful beyond imagination and had legitimate rights to heavenly glories. Before his earthly life, Jesus was in the heavenly realm, possessing ultimate rights and privileges. *“And now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made”* (John 17:5).

Jesus was then *“led up by the Spirit into the wilderness”* (Matthew 4:1a). In Mark 1:12, the idea was expanded: *“The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness.”* Jesus was forced, or compelled, to go to the place of privation and need.

Though Jesus was a person of universal power and privilege, he became subject to control for a greater purpose. *“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered”* (Hebrews 5:8). Jesus, the Son of God, learned obedience.

What an astonishing concept! Jesus with all the authority and power that comes with the inheritance as ruler of the universe, still needed to learn. In his humanity, Jesus had to learn the lesson of submissive dependence to another, his heavenly Father. Jesus learned in the most challenging of circumstances by the most effective means: suffering.

There are great mysteries in this verse. For the Son of God to need knowledge brings one to thoughtful pause. In his incarnation as a man, to completely aligned himself with our human condition. Suffering became the means by which he could be sympathetic with our experience.

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52). Jesus ‘increased’ his human nature could be increased, though he was fully divine. As a youngster, he was submissive to his earthly parents *“and was obedient to them”* (Luke 2:51). He was a polite and respectful young man.

I was watching a sports channel on television, and there was a unique show that portrayed sports figures that had emotional meltdowns in their respective athletic contests. One figure was John McEnroe, the very accomplished, world-famous tennis star. McEnroe had been raised with wealth and privilege and was well trained in the basics of tennis. He became the winner of many international tennis championships. What this television program focused on for a brief period of time was his malicious temper when he felt the tennis judges made a mistake or missed a call.

McEnroe was a brute with his words, publicly humiliating and chastising the perceived offenders. He was arrogant and beastly, uncaring about people’s feelings or opinions, and he was absolutely convinced of his position. He excused his behavior and justified his outbursts. He demonstrated that he had not yet emotionally matured.

Jesus was not like that. He maintained dignity and control, not flying off the handle in a state of pique. At times, he exhibited righteous indignation, i.e., when he cleansed the temple (John 2:13-17), but Jesus was not a malicious brute because of a perceived wrong when someone made a mistake.

Jesus obediently took this humble task so that he would be superbly equipped to fulfill the role of interceding on behalf of mankind. Jesus was willingly dependent on his heavenly Father.

“Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matthew 4:1). Here comes the first test of Jesus’ resolve, whether he will submit to his Father’s direction or submit to his own will.

The first challenge was to be led into the wilderness. The Holy Spirit did not lead him to palatial comfort or to abundant resource. Jesus was led into privation, into want and need. He was destitute. Was he willing to be submissive to this? Did he trust his heavenly Father’s character and ability to be content in this condition? The Father did not give him any shortcuts.

Forty days Jesus fasted, and he was in a most vulnerable condition (4:2). At this point, Satan approached with an appealing suggestion. *“And the tempter came and said to him, ‘If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread’”* (4:3).

Satan appealed to Jesus’ condition of hunger and proposed that Jesus’ first miracle should be to feed himself—self-fulfillment. Satan began the temptation with ‘if’ (4:3), the ‘if’ is not doubt, rather the devil knew it to be true. In 3:17, both he and Jesus understood Jesus’ sonship. Satan was not trying to have Jesus doubt his sonship but rather to act independently of his Father. Acting independently from God is actually trying to take power for oneself.

Jesus also understood this temptation. His response was, *“It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’”* (4:4). ‘Alone’ is an important word. Man will not live by

bread only, but in accord with the will of God. Man is to walk in dependence on God. Jesus stands on the security and the surety that his heavenly Father will provide whatever is needed, even in the midst of dire conditions.

Satan's next temptation was a suggestion to force God to meet one's needs. This was designed to make God dependent on man. The appeal is that God was under authority to respond to mankind's needs. *"If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone'"* (4:6).

Satan knows scripture and is able to use it in compelling ways. However, the idea that God is a cosmic genie who is reacting to demands placed upon him by a situation is not an idea that Jesus accepts. Jesus attests to the fact of God's sovereignty and correctly quotes scripture to give an accurate portrait of the heavenly Father. *"Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God'"* (4:7).

Satan did not give up. He tried again. He showed Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and made the suggestion that if he would only worship Satan, the kingdoms of the world would be given to Jesus. This sounds like a good plan for Jesus. He could sidestep the Cross with all its pain and humiliation, and he could get his earthly domain just by worshiping Satan. Pain-free accumulation is a very attractive offer.

"And he said to him, 'All these [kingdoms] I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Be gone, Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve'" (4:9-10).

Everyone has to serve someone. For believers, there is only one to serve: the Lord. Jesus does not concede to the suggestion of going around the Cross to get what is rightfully his.

In these temptations Jesus does not deny his condition. First, Jesus did not deny that he was hungry and can make bread. Second, he did not deny that he was under special protection because he is the Son of God. Third, he did not deny that all dominion shall be his. But Jesus does reject the way in which these things are to be obtained.

Jesus maintained complete trust and dependence upon his heavenly Father. Though he could have side-stepped pain, sorrow, and humiliation, he chose to endure through them to accomplish the Father's will.

Furthermore, it is also true that Jesus went through much discomfort in order to be tested. He went forty days without food and shelter and endured the most influential manipulator in the universe.

The ending to the episode, of course, shows that the Father is faithful, and Jesus waited in dependence for it to happen. *"Then the devil left him, and behold, angels came and ministered to him"* (4:11). Jesus could have acted independently in any of these temptations and accomplished short-term results but with long-term consequences.

The same might be true for us. We might be able to do some significant things through our own sufficiency. However, God will do greater things through us when we depend entirely on him. Jesus showed the way and was adamant about following hard after his Father's will. *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?*" (Luke 24:26).

The Lord took Israel through the wilderness, making them dependent on him. He used difficult times and severe challenges to make them recognize that they were powerless without him, thus making them dependent on him.

Jesus was taken into the wilderness, submitting himself to the leading of the Lord. He met the challenges and difficulties by depending solely on the character of his heavenly Father. Our heavenly Father might allow difficulties to move us to a place to show how he is faithful and reliable to meet our every need. He might take us into the wilderness to prove himself dependable.

"Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Corinthians 1:9).

Separation

Everything that is right or natural pleads for separation.

The blood of the slain, the weeping voice of nature cries, 'tis time to part.

Thomas Paine

“Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you” (2 Corinthians 6:17).

When my children were young, I had the responsibility as a parent to help choose their playmates. There were some friends that were poor influences on them, and I encouraged them not to play with them. There were even times that I told them they could not interact with certain children because I knew that those youngsters caused trouble.

As my children grew into teenagers and young adults, they valued my input about their friends less and less. In the mind of my kids, I became dumber rather than wiser. My children, dismissed my lack of expertise in recognizing sterling character, and chose their friends. They, of course, learned an uneasy lesson, sometimes dad can recognize moral idiocy in their acquaintances. I as a parent wanted my children to separate themselves from poor influences and so too the Lord. He wants us to separate ourselves from those who can do us harm, even when we think our acquaintances are benign.

Naturally, when the children realize the problem of unsavory relationships that their parents warned them about, much pain may have already been experienced. Sadly, children who ignore sound advice are not rare, either in the natural realm or the spiritual realm. When I as an earthly father tried to exert influence on my children about their poor choices for companions, I had little recourse as they got older. But God, our heavenly Father, is not limited, and he can insert his desire into situations when individuals need direction.

Abraham and Lot

When the Lord called Abraham in Genesis 12, he gave a directive to him. *“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’*” (12:1). Abram (Abraham) was to separate himself from three things: (1) From his country, (2) From his relatives, (3) From close/direct family. We can assume the Lord probably had a good reason for suggesting these separations.

Well, when the God of the universe calls and directs us to do something, it is beneficial to follow those directions to the letter. *“So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him”* (12:4). Groan. Abram went; that’s good. But who is Lot? *“And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son”* (12:5). Lot was not suppose to be with him.

Abram was being disobedient. We know that this was not Abram's best idea and that there will be consequences. When my kids made compromises concerning their friends, I knew hard times would follow. The same would be true for Abram.

"So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negev" (Genesis 13:1). They had gone to Egypt for a short time (chapter 12), where Abram had managed to get in trouble with Pharaoh. Abram lied to him. This is not the best way for believers to manage their affairs. Then Abram went to the land God had originally told him to go (12:1), the land of promise and blessing.

It seemed that Abram had rounded the edges of obedience.

Abram had still not separated himself from Lot. That obedience thing was still an issue.

But Abram did get some spiritual issues prioritized. He went to the Promised land, *"To the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord"* (13:4). Abram came back to his spiritual roots and decided that calling on the Lord was the appropriate thing to do. He'd gone to Egypt, the power center of the area, and had not found peace. Then Abram sought God, and not a place.

However, there was still the problem of Lot. *"And Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks, and herds, and tents"* (13:5). Lot knew a good thing when he had it. Abram was a great meal ticket. Lot had gotten rich hanging out with him. They have done very well financially. In fact, *"so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together"* (13:6). Being too wealthy, sounds like a problem we would all like to have!

But then came the consequences for Abram's original disobedience. *"And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land"* (13:7). There was an eruption of contention and quarrelsome disputes between Abram and Lot's clans. This led to an ugly, tension-filled situation of bickering and verbal sparring. Both sides believed their rights had been violated. Sounds like modernity.

It is important to remember that God did not cause this. Abram's disobedience provided the opportunity for the situation to escalate to bitter disputes. The irony was that other people, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, lived there and seemed to get along, but God's people were fighting and arguing. This is not the sort of impression that the Lord wants to give the world.

Eventually, Lot clan and Abram's people reconcile and separate. Lot headed off toward the best land, he chose selfishly but not well. He headed toward Sodom and Gomorrah, those glittering urban centers. There, he got caught up in the profligacy and his family was compromised. Furthermore, Lot had to flee when God destroyed the cities. His wife died during this incident (19:26). Afterward, Lot impregnated his own daughters! What a sordid tale. Ultimately, the offspring of his daughters, became enemies of Israel. Misery and failure became part of Lot's legacy.

All this might have been avoided if Abram had only obeyed God's call for him to separate from his immediate family. Partial compliance to God's direction, even in cases where he commands separation from relatives, can be uncomfortable, but it is for a greater good. The bitter quarreling and distressful fighting finally brought the desired separation that the Lord had directed in the beginning.

Schism is splitting, putting apart that which belongs together. It is to divide where God does not divide...But it is no less wicked to run together that which in the mind of God is diverse.

Leonard Verduin, *Banner*, May 2, 1975, p.3

Ishmael and Isaac

Abraham did not learn his lesson of separation well. It seemed he needed to learn the same hard lesson again. He was a wealthy and accomplished man, who had been called by God for special service, but Abraham, like us, was a sinner.

The Lord had promised Abram [Abraham] and Sarai his wife that they would be blessed with a child. However, after some time, the promise had not come to pass, and Abram questioned the Lord. The Lord responded:

And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, "This man [Eliazer of Damascus] shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

Genesis 15:4, 5

What a fabulous promise of blessing! Super abundant blessing! But time was not on Abram and Sarai's side. They were getting old. However, when God's timing does not match our expectations, impatience can creep into our thinking. Sarai apparently thought that the Lord needed some help, so she devised a scheme to help facilitate God's plan. *"And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai"* (Genesis 16:2).

From our context in modern twenty-first century, this may seem a poor scheme. But in the culture of Abram and Sarai, this was an acceptable arrangement. This was a marriage practice in which an infertile wife procured a surrogate wife for the sake of having offspring. Sarai's options were limited. She could choose to remain in her barren condition and wait for the Lord to miraculously change the situation. Or she had the acceptable cultural option of short-circuiting her perceived infertility and find a solution. She chose an option that seemed to satisfy the demands of the situation. Sarai gave Abram the choice of sexual intimacy with Hagar, to help God out. Abram foolishly accepted Sarai's plan.

This seemed practical and even thoughtful. Nonetheless, this scheme had disastrous results. Eventually, Hagar birthed Ishmael, the son, who became the progenitor of many Arab peoples. History has confirmed the animosity spawned over time between these people groups, Hebrews and Arabs.

Maybe Sarai didn't have such a good idea. Her idea seemed noble to her. She was going to help God. The long-term consequences we know, but there were short-term consequences also. Later, tension and conflict arose, this time between Sarai and Hagar. *"And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress"* (16:4).

Sarai, a believer in the Lord, without regard or permission, had imposed change to Hagar's life. Sarai was not respectful of Hagar's personhood or the consequences of becoming emotionally and physically intimate with Abram. However, Hagar responded with her own emotional weaponry and was contemptuous of Sarai. These were two emotional heavyweight fighters, throwing heavy-handed knockout punches at each other. The abuse by these women toward each other was so damaging that today in classical psychology it is understood to be cause of great emotional pain. This in turn generates sorrow and rage. Sorrow and rage can cause unrealistic hopefulness or cynicism or the acting out in violence.

The situation got complex, and problematic. Then Sarai and Abram attempted to bring resolution. They were idea persons, the visionaries. *"And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me'"* (16:5).

Here is a conundrum: Sarai abused Hagar (verses 2-4), and Sarai perceives that Hagar despised her (verse 5). Whether Sarai is misrepresenting Hagar's position, we are unsure, but she demands that Abram get in between and settle the matter! I know the man's perspective in this situation, and a man would rather crawl naked over a mile of broken glass than get in between two irritated women.

Sarai had come up with a scheme to help God, and her plan did not work. Then she came up with another plan. Abram, you fix it! Sarai wanted someone else to lead. Her leadership created turmoil.

Abram, the noble, fearless hero, responded. *"But Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please'"* (16:6).

Abram refused to lead and take charge of this toxic situation. He punted the proverbial ball back into Sarai's lap. One can hear Abram's sigh of relief as he separated himself from the problem. He crosses his legs and goes back to reading his newspaper. "Not my problem," he must have muttered.

What was Sarai's solution to solving this problem? *"Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her"* (16:6). *Harshly* carries the sense of humiliation, of putting down, or being mishandled. Hagar was being emotionally abused again! Sarai, a believer in the living Lord, used heavy emotional weaponry when she dealt with Hagar. Sarai was malicious. Neither Abram nor Sarai were admirable people in this situation.

Ultimately, there comes an uneasy compatibility between Sarai and Hagar. Several chapters later, perhaps thirteen years, Sarai, who had a name change to Sarah, got pregnant. There was great joy and celebration because Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah over ninety! *“And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; every one who hears will laugh over me’”* (Genesis 21:6). There was to be complete, wholehearted rejoicing over this spectacular event.

Not everyone was so happy. When Isaac, Sarah’s and Abraham’s son, became three years old, they made a great feast for him. Weaning was an occasion that was a cultural milestone (21:8).

“And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne unto Abraham, mocking” (21:9, ASV).

Ishmael now thirteen, exhibited some heartless behavior. He mocked and laughed at Isaac in a derogatory way. Ishmael had learned well from this family’s culture. Heavy-handed emotional abuse was the norm, so he bullied his younger half-brother. He was malicious. The idea of the verse indicates that Ishmael used constant and ongoing mocking. Imagine the young teenager overwhelming the helpless three-year-old Isaac.

Like any mother, Sarah came to the defense of her vulnerable son Isaac and demanded Abraham finally take charge. In Genesis chapter 14, Abraham had been a fearless warrior defeating a large enemy force. However, he had been reluctant to get in between two women. In fact, *“the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight on account of his son”* (21:11). Abraham was distraught over the entire affair.

However, unlike the previous poor choices that he made, he finally listened to the Lord. This time the Lord gave Sarah proper insight and wisdom. *“And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy handmaid. In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice. For in Isaac shall thy seed be called”* (21:12, ASV).

Now, the great Abraham, the father of nations, the warrior, the wealthy businessman, had God’s permission to allow separation. It is an appropriate thing to separate disputing, disgruntled antagonists. This was how the Lord handled the situation. God often separates those who cannot reconcile for the greater benefit of posterity.

“So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba” (21:14). Abraham, following the direction of the Lord, sent Hagar and Ishmael away. God promised to care for them (21:13), thus Abraham had to be determined to expel them. This seems harsh and maybe even cruel, but it was necessary.

At times there are no easy solutions. One could wish for harmonious reconciliation, but in some situations, this cannot be the case. The Lord allowed this situation to be a catalyst for emancipation of people locked in a terrible clash of worldviews. Separation brought a new start for Hagar and Ishmael and for Abraham and Sarah and Isaac.

There are other situations in the Bible where separation was a benefit but came with significant suffering. King Saul and David come to mind. Saul became jealous and irrational about his young charge and took upon himself to try to kill David on many occasions. David fled even though Saul made an oath not to harm David (1 Samuel 19:6). Saul betrayed that oath and went on missions to locate David and to kill him.

In the New Testament, Paul and Barnabas were friends and partners in ministry. In the book of Acts chapters 13-15, great strides in ministry were made by these men, and their exploits were dramatic. However, at the end of Acts 15, they had differing points of view that could not be reconciled. Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them on their missionary journey. Paul did not want John Mark since he had abandoned them once before.

“And there arose a sharp contention, so that they parted asunder one from the other, and Barnabas took Mark with him, and sailed away unto Cyprus” (Acts 15:39, ASV).

Here is a problem. Two of the great Christian leaders are unable to reconcile and come to a harmonious decision. The ‘sharp contention’ is a double emphasis of the same Greek word. In other words, it was a hotly argued point and neither was able to give way because they both felt it was a point of principle.

We are never told whether the Lord condoned their decision, nor whether their behavior was appropriate. Both were probably right about Mark. Barnabas certainly saw good raw material in his ability, and Paul recognized that it was too soon for Mark to venture out without some solid seasoning in ministry. The separation served both of them well. Paul and his new partner, Silas, were highly effective, and Barnabas and Mark were also. In fact, later Paul requested to have Mark join him. *“Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me”* (2 Timothy 4:11).

Mark later became the writer of the Gospel of Mark, probably the very first of the four written gospels and which the other three checked for information. So we see that Barnabas was influential in bringing the writing of the New Testament by his willingness to separate from Paul and disciple John Mark.

Returning Home

Or consider Jesus when he visited his hometown of Nazareth and presented himself. In Luke 4:16ff, he read Scriptures in the synagogue and preached thoughtful words, so that: *“And all spoke well of him, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth; and they said, ‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”* (4:22).

Shortly though, he got on the bad side of these religious men by stating some biblical truths, then their demeanor changed. *“When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with wrath”* (4:28). They were not just irritated, they went ballistic. *“And they rose up and put him out of the city, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw him down headlong”* (4:29). They were pushing and shoving Jesus, grabbing him, leading him away to throw him off a cliff and kill him. This was an angry, violent mob bent on murdering Jesus.

Jesus had a solution for this problem. He had several options to choose from. He could fight and scatter them like he did at the Temple (John 2:13-17). Or Jesus could call down angels to help him (Matthew 26:53). Or Jesus could call down fire from heaven to destroy them (2 Kings 2:10ff).

“But passing through the midst of them he went away” (4:30).

Separation. He did not fight; he did not quarrel. Jesus separated himself from them. This was his hometown, his former neighbors and friends and playmates. Bitter hatred came against him, and he did not seek to reconcile the differences, but rather, he separated himself from them.

At times, God will require separation, and rarely is this done without some upset. Though the Lord has the long view in mind, it is difficult for us to understand the benefit that comes with a God-ordained separation. It is necessary, then, that we have a correct understanding of the Lord’s character, rather than a full understanding of the situation.

In all these cases, the circumstances involved deep emotional trauma. There was significant emotional pain and sorrow and loss. Sometimes the people who perpetrated the problem were believers in Jehovah. In these examples, the solution was for separation of the parties involved. Ultimately, the separation benefited the individuals.

A Caveat

A word of caution about making this concept of separation a principle that is applicable in all cases. Separation can be an easy way to get away from a complex and difficult situation and should not be used in every circumstance. Legitimate cases of threat and danger should incorporate the option of separation, and it might be preferable if people are at risk.

People who want a convenient excuse for abandonment should not fool themselves with this concept. Reconciliation is a biblical mandate if there can be compromise and understanding in good faith. *“If possible, so far as it depends upon you, live peaceably with all”* (Romans 12:18). One should not hold compromise hostage just to secure one’s own selfish desire.

“Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14). Pursuit of peace is not a suggestion, but an imperative. Yet, if only one party is seeking reconciliation, or if danger or violence is possible, one should not be naive about agreement. Sometimes agreement is not possible.

A Conclusion

The Lord and Satan agreed to fight rather than make peace (Genesis 3:15; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8). There was and is no reconciliation between them, only deadly conflict. Additionally, in the future, their differences will not be resolved, but separation will be their eternal condition (Revelation 20:10).

Manifestation of God's Glory

Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

Psalm 50:15

God delights to deliver those who are in trouble. However his deliverance is not always expedient according to our timing. We have to be in trouble first before he can deliver. Sometimes he sends us in harm's way. Sometimes, by disobedience, we manage to get ourselves into trouble. At other times, we are targets because of enemies. In these circumstances the Lord stands ready to deliver us – so we can glorify him.

This chapter might sound familiar to the chapters on deliverance or dependence. However, the difference lies in the focus of the benefit. In the previous chapters mankind was the benefactor. In this chapter we explain how God gets something that is far overdue—acknowledgment. In others words, the Lord gets adored and worshiped, and with that, we receive benefit.

Too often the Lord is viewed as a cosmic genie, the one who is subject to making our life nice and meaningful, granting our whims and desires. Even believers use God like a sublime servant, accepting blessing from his hand but not thinking adversity comes as part of our commitment to him. Believers praise God for his goodness but often are disappointed in him because of adversity.

We treat the Lord as if he is our employee, commanding or expecting him to do as we wish. When God is safe, nice, and cuddly, then we're happy and sometimes even thankful. However, when he uses pain and suffering for higher purposes, we blame or think him cruel. We even question his motives and become disturbed with him when hardship comes into our lives.

We might think that if it is necessary to praise and glorify the Lord that he is somehow needy, desiring positive feedback from his followers so that he can feel okay about himself. The idea that our heavenly Father needs an “atta boy” to keep him going is a disrespectful thought.

If our thinking is along these lines, it is an indication of how little we know about the personality and character of our Lord. When we do not appreciate God, it is the ultimate affront to him. If we do not humbly adore the Lord or do not honor him, we do him a grave disservice. We should be ascribing to the Lord his worth and affirming his supreme value. It is absolutely correct to honor him for who he is.

Complimenting people is appropriate when it is not gratuitous. Complimenting God for his supreme character qualities is reasonable, for it accurately portrays his worth. It is an ideal way to express love and gratitude for the one whom we adore. We don't praise the Lord because he needs it. We praise him because it is beneficial for us to honor him. It gives us the opportunity to express in a meaningful way our love and appreciation of him. It is to our benefit when we honor him this way.

When my children were little and were unable to care for themselves, we as parents were willing to meet their needs. In their pre-verbal stage, they were unable to thank us for our service to them. However, as they matured and were able to understand service to them and were able to say thank you. This fostered in them an attitude of appreciation rather than acceptance. Appreciation became an attitude that enhanced their personhood, making them well rounded persons. It deepened their approval of others and it helped them to be willing to serve others since they received approval in return.

We encouraged our children to recognize and be grateful for the service extended to them by others. Their attitude of thankfulness was a joy to us as their parents. Thankfulness and joyfulness go together. God encourages us to be grateful because it makes us healthier spiritual beings.

God is already sufficiently pleased in his own nature. He does not need to people to inform him of his characteristics. From all eternity God has been supremely happy in his character and nature as a Trinity. He has an inexhaustible reservoir of joy in his own magnificent glory, from his sovereign power to his everlasting love. Our humble utterances do not come near the grandeur of who he truly is.

Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

Psalm 50:15

The Lord allows the day of trouble so he can deliver you, so you can be grateful.

God withholds from them that ask not, lest he should give to them that desire not.

Augustine, unsourced

Gratitude is a joyful expression. It sincerely reflects appreciation for what has been done for another. It is like a mountain spring that bubbles up, and then with vitality enhances the surroundings with its energy. Worship is natural and bursts forth in sincerity. It is unfailing good.

Jesus pointed this out when he was with the Samaritan woman in John 4:23. *“But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.”* A true or genuine worshiper will honor the heavenly Father with authentic gratefulness. Also, Jesus said that the Father seeks bona fide worshipers. God is on a mission, searching for those who will honestly be grateful to him, not just giving him lip service.

Furthermore, Jesus pointed out that this genuine worship is mandatory. *“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”* (4:24). There are no shortcuts, one must worship in spirit and truth. *Must* sends the impression that it is a necessity, there are no other options. This sounds like a contradiction. Genuine, authentic worship is a necessity? Should not gratefulness be spontaneous without demand?

Jesus was noting that the identifying mark of a true believer was one who is grateful. He was not commanding one to be grateful. The believer is naturally grateful. If I were a member of a political party, I would generally

agree with that party's political platform, then I would support that platform. I would not merely pay lip service to the ideals but would have a degree of passion for the implementation of the planks of the platform into civil life.

The point is this: pretense is not worship. Outward expression is not necessarily the true communication of the heart. Hypocrisy does not pass for worship, and one should not fool oneself into thinking that singing songs or saying religious creeds or doing religious rites is necessarily a sign of genuine gratefulness to the Lord. God abhors shallow display.

An example of this is a church in Laodicea. It was a very prosperous church in the first century A.D. Laodicea was under Roman rule and had become a wealthy cosmopolitan center because of production of wool cloth. It's economic sufficiency lulled the church into a spiritual slumber. Spiritual issues became frosting on the cake of life, not the nitty-gritty of existence. Church became a plaything, not an essential spiritual component.

The Lord gave a scathing rebuke of this church. "*So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth*" (Revelation 3:16). The Lord called these believers lukewarm, or tepid. The church was not spiritually ice cold, lacking in spiritual energy. Nor was it in a state of fervent spiritual ardor and passion. The church was pathetic. There was mild interest in the things of the Lord, and they compromised to a state of tolerance and moderation, even compromising with the nonspiritual.

This condition was so repulsive to the Lord that it made him want to vomit. The Lord vomits up lukewarmness. It is obnoxious, and he directly stated that he wished they had spiritual extremes, genuine response to his call on their lives. However, indifference is lack of conviction and is disgusting to the Lord. This results in 'churchianity,' membership in an organization without vibrant worship. This is an anathema to the Lord.

Remember God is after relationship. If a worshiper is merely attending church because of external tradition, this is not pleasing to the Lord. It is pretense. Attending speaks nothing of a person's passion for pursuing him. The Lord wants genuine believers who seek him. Attending a function out of duty, rather than affection, sends a message. This is not what the Lord desires with us.

An example of genuine gratefulness is in Acts 16. Paul and Silas were in the city of Philippi. It was a city in Macedonia that was named after Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon. When Rome took control of the area, it became a Roman colony because of an influx of Roman citizens after some famous battles. Thus the Philippians had the privileges of Roman citizenship.

While Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they were charged with being a disruption and were accused of advocating customs unlawful for Romans to accept or practice. They were preaching the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Subsequently, they were arrested, stripped and beaten, severely flogged, then thrown into prison. All this was illegal. They had been railroaded.

One might imagine their outrage about being so mistreated and illegally thrown into prison for no real offense. In modern America, the legal defense would have been immediate and forceful, but in the Roman world, things were different. They would have legal recourse if they petitioned Roman authorities since Paul was a Roman citizen.

Paul and Silas had many options they could pursue to correct the situation. They could appeal to the authorities. They could plot legal argument and calculate defense strategies, since their moral outrage could present an impassioned argument in a Roman court. They could appeal to a Roman legal proceeding for a thoughtful, legal ruling.

Here was their response to their situation. *“But about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them”* (Acts 16:25). What?

Paul and Silas were not just acting to get sympathy. What we see is sincere joy in spite of the circumstances.

“Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me” (Psalm 50:15).

Paul and Silas singing in a dungeon, gives us a glimpse into what true worship is. Their feet were put into stocks (Acts 16:24), which, in Roman prisons, was meant to enhance punishment. Stocks were an instrument of torture and stretched the feet to produce further misery. They were not sitting in a snug, warm cell. Their bruises were throbbing, their cuts were untreated, their feet were in painful iron fetters, and they were praying and singing! From head to toe they were experiencing discomfort, and they had no medical treatment, yet they were singing!

Those who are not true believers in Christ might think this smacks of fanaticism. They see wild-eyed religious zealots doing bizarre behaviors to get mystical results. Is it merely a religious fervor that gets one through challenging circumstances? Does God expect this kind of excessive enthusiasm?

We need to be careful in expecting expressions of gratefulness to be the norm. We have to make a distinction between an inward attitude and an outward expression. Are we supposed to sing hymns when we're in trouble, just like Paul and Silas? Probably not. I don't often sing hymns when I'm in challenging situations, but I do pray. The biblical ideal is not the form of outward expression, but the inward attitude of gratefulness. True thankfulness transcends the situation. True worship of the glory and majesty of the Lord does not depend on circumstances.

“At midnight I rise to praise thee, because of thy righteous ordinance” (Psalm 119:62). The psalmist noted that at inconvenient times, not merely difficult times, he praises the Lord. He praises the Lord not because of deliverance nor for abundance or for blessings, but because of God's Word. He honors and blesses the Lord because he appreciates the Word of God.

Take the example of Peter and some apostles when they were brought before the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel. The Sanhedrin *“when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name”* (Acts 5:40, 41). Peter and the other apostles rejoiced and were exceedingly glad that they had just got beaten.

The reason they were delighted is that suffering dishonor for the name of Christ was not a negative. They showed their love for the Lord by bearing disgrace for his name. They honored the Lord. They exhibited to the world in the most extreme of circumstances, that the Lord meant more to them than their humiliation. They received the opportunity to express love for the Lord, and this instilled in them renewed zeal and persistence.

The beating was senseless and illegal and unreasonable. Bigoted men tried to intimidate and harm Peter and the others, but they succeeded only in producing what they intended to stop. Unbelievers outwitted themselves because believers worshiped and honored the Lord.

Later, Peter added some more perspective about pain. *“But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed”* (1 Peter 4:13). Sometimes believers encounter pain, suffering, or sorrow so that the Lord receives adoration and worship, and with that we receive benefit.

Fearing God

Fear is absolutely necessary. Without it, I'd be scared to death.

Floyd Patterson, former heavyweight boxing champion

When Job questioned God about his terrible predicament, there was a long silence. Job did not hear a peep from the Lord. Finally, God broke into Job's tirades and got into Job's face, so to speak. "*Gird up your loins like a man, I will question you, and you shall declare to me*" (Job 38:3). One can imagine Job, who had been pounding on the gates of heaven to get a hearing, then Job got an earful. The God of the universe was calling Job on the carpet, and he wanted some answers. Job must have been swallowing hard. Job had questions and demanded that the Lord answer them. Now the situation was reversed, and God had a few questions of his own for Job.

God began a series of sixty-four questions. "*Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding*" (Job 38:4).

Job was a successful and intelligent man while being spiritually mature. He was a talented man, after all, "*this man was the greatest of all the people of the east*" (Job 1:3). Job would be mankind's champion to interact with God. Yet Job was stumped. The lump in his throat gave way to thoughtful scratching of his head.

"*Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it?*" (Job 38:5). Job might be looking at the floor, searching for a clue to this question. The questions kept coming, and Job was unable to answer and had no hint to the answers. He was out of his realm.

Mankind is limited and cannot know all things. It is appropriate to acknowledge this fact. Job had a fair shot at having access to God, and he never answered one of God's sixty-four questions.

Before this encounter, Job was certain he had an understanding about life and how things worked. And by golly, God was not living up to Job's understanding of life. Job, like us, had limitations. We are impoverished in our breadth and depth of understanding. We cannot know everything.

But God, the Creator, knows it all, and he is good. He is good, and he is powerful. We are audacious to think otherwise. Mankind tends to think it is sophisticated, having knowledge that the rest of the organic world does not possess or cannot access. We are convinced of our worldly expertise. That is a dangerous conclusion.

To assume that the Lord has to act or react in the way we perceive reality works is a preposterous conclusion. The Bible has a way of stating this concept. The Lord said, "*For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*" (Isaiah 55:9). It is thoroughly appropriate to admit that we cannot always know what the Lord knows or pretend that our conclusions accurately define reality.

There is a measure of mystery that we are not privy to. Rather than let this be a thorn, it should be a comfort. The majesty and immensity of God is so overwhelming. We have very little sense about his grandeur. God embarks on a mission to acquaint us with his nature, to give us a glimpse into his magnificent character. He wants us to become aware of a small measure of who he is. So he implements a learning experience for his children. He does not necessarily call us on the carpet like he did with Job; however, he does get rather pointed with the learning process.

Educating His Followers

Ponder this verse: *“I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for their own good and the good of their children after them”* (Jeremiah 32:39).

The context of this chapter tells of the Babylonian army besieging Jerusalem, and the Jews were about to be conquered and occupied by them (32:1-7). At this point, the Lord instructed Jeremiah to purchase a field in territory occupied by the enemy army. Jeremiah was puzzled by this and asked why buy a field in a land soon to be overrun by the enemy (verses 16-25). God responded indicating he was about to hand over Judah to their enemies as a punishment. But there would be a remnant who would be restored and blessed with great prosperity (verses 36-44). Jeremiah’s purchase symbolized God’s intention to restore his people to their promised land.

Though this text was about Judah, one cannot escape that these verses are meant for believers in Christ. When Jeremiah spoke of an everlasting covenant in 32:40, he means the new covenant with the house of Israel (31:31-34). This new covenant is the covenant Jesus sealed with his blood. At the Last Supper, he stated, *“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”* (1 Corinthians 11:25; Mark 14:24; Hebrews 8:6-13). So the benefits of this covenant reach down in time and impact believers in Jesus Christ.

So in the midst of great turmoil and threat, God sends a message to his distressed people. *“I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for their own good”* (Jeremiah 32:39). Don’t let your eyes glaze, thinking this is some rhetoric to make one feel good when things are really out of control.

This is a mystery. *“They may fear me for ever, for their own good.”*

In the ancient world, the meaning of the fear of the Lord was the idea of reverence rather than a dread of God. This fear of the Lord embodied an element of friendship and trust, and it carried the idea of companionship and partnership. In other words, the Lord was not some malicious terrorist who is trying to get you to obey him or else he’s going to hurt you. Rather, he is on a mission to bring you closer to him in relationship.

Additionally, this fear, has a unique strain of submission in accord with humility all mixed together with a trustful interaction. It is a friendship with God. *“The scripture was fulfilled which says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’; and he was called the friend of God”* (James 2:23).

It is a friendship based upon a deep respect and an awe of being with one so majestic and grand. *“Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him”* (Genesis 5:24). Enoch had a close walk with the Lord and he

was taken because God was pleased with him. *“By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God”* (Hebrews 11:5). God and Enoch’s relationship was so close, and the Lord delighted in him so much that God brought him directly to heaven.

Fear

Consider the following. At Mount Sinai, after the Israelites were released from their bondage in Egypt, they were in the midst of receiving the law from God. *“Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off”* (Exodus 20:18).

The people were terrified, shaking in their proverbial boots. The word *trembled* means to quiver, or to shake. God does not want you to be a quivering bowl of Jell-O when you encounter him, rather he expects something else.

My wife and I have pet dogs, and there have been times when the dogs have misbehaved. When I have noticed their misconduct, my body language or tone of voice alerted them that master was not pleased. Then they become wary or even apologetic and cower before me. Their manner seemed to express that they are very sorry for displeasing me. They hung their heads and even rolled on their backs, exposing their vulnerable belly, an expression of submission. God does not expect us to react to him in this way. He desires a loving interaction.

“And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin’” (20:20).

What you have read is not schizophrenic. Don’t fear so that you can learn to fear? This is the kind of statement that might cause many to throw up your hands and walk away thinking that the Bible is a confusing compilation of contradictions.

Here is the message God wanted the Israelites to learn. The first type of fear referred to, is a dread of God. He is mighty and powerful and can create things like the Universe. However, the Lord does not want you to be terrified of him. He does not desire to be malicious and hurtful to you.

For example, when the prophet Elijah was contesting with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). The contest was a challenge to see which God, Jehovah or Baal, could call fire down from heaven and consume their sacrifice. The prophets of Baal failed, then Elijah’s turn came. *“And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near”* (18:36). Elijah came near to the place where God was going to deliver fire from heaven. He trusted God to be on target. If the Lord missed the mark, Elijah could be...vaporized. Elijah was not only confident in the power of God but also in his aim. He did not fear Jehovah, he profoundly trusted him.

However, in Exodus 20:20, the second fear mentioned refers to reverence: *“That the fear of Him may be before your eyes.”* This fear carries the sense of respect with deep regard for piety. This fear senses that God is not go-

ing to be trifled with. He is not going to be swayed by your cleverness, and truth will prevail in his sight. You come with no manipulative agenda but with warts and all before him. He already knows all about you, even your deepest thoughts, as dark as they may be. Thus one comes into his presence with a sense of vulnerability, knowing that God has ultimate control. There is not going to be any cool reserve on your part. He will not allow you to maintain an attitude of neutrality or indifference in his presence.

Learning to Fear

This sort of fear is one which needs to be learned. This fear comes from an understanding of the holiness and majesty of Jehovah. The first fear was a fear of personal safety. The second fear is appreciation of majestic greatness. In fact, this fear of reverence for God will test so that you do 'fear', or reverence him. This is something so important that the Lord will make sure that this element is not missing from your character. This virtue of fear of him is so important, he is not only going to command it, but then he is going to prove or test you to see if that character trait is in you. If there is not this reverential awe in one's life, then something replaces it.

"Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes" (Psalm 36:1). This verse indicates that transgression is communicating to the wicked. There is always information being relayed. The metaphor of transgression carries a message, and whatever the message is, it outweighs and supersedes the fear of the Lord.

Ignorance is Not an Excuse

During the days of the Vietnam conflict, the motorcycle gang Hell's Angels wanted to send a number of its members to Vietnam to fight. These were brawny guys and they had earned a reputation of being rugged, brutal fighters. However, they did not know military combat. Though they were confident in their fighting skills, they had little understanding that in a military combat setting, they would soon be overwhelmed and thoroughly defeated and annihilated.

"Turn those bad boys loose!" someone begged.

They did not know what I knew about our enemy. Our enemy was a dangerous and accomplished soldier who could release deadly havoc on those who were unfamiliar with his tactics and strategy. The Hell's Angels had not learned to fear our enemy, someone who it would behoove them to fear. The motorcycle gang knew how to use knives and chains and shotguns to overcome their foes. But they would not have performed well against our Communist rival. They did not have the virtue of fearing their enemy and would have been at risk in facing them. The Hell's Angels would have suffered, though they were tough, mean fighters. They believed themselves to be competent but they did not know enough to respect the capability of our adversary.

Primer on Fear

The Ten Commandments that God gave in Exodus 20 are a summary of expectations by God. The first four commandments outline offenses against God and are represented by swearing falsely in God's name (20:7).

It is serious business when dealing with the character and nature of the Lord. One is to correctly represent God's attributes, not fallacious impressions. The next six commandments were offenses against others and are represented by stealing (20:15). If one does not regard and value God, it is unlikely that there will be high regard for one's fellow man.

Thus when Israel was in the wilderness, in exile, it seemed God intent was to purge misunderstandings about Jehovah and to produce a purified people. This purging and producing depended upon the premise of fearing the Lord. One must have a deep respect and piety toward him. To take him lightly or with little regard is a serious error. He will not tolerate indifference to him or his agenda, and he will not pretend otherwise.

"I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for ever, for their own good and the good of their children after them" (Jeremiah 32:39). In the midst of turmoil and trouble, the Babylonian army attacking Jerusalem, Israel had not changed their ways. They were afraid of the enemy and were not respecting God.

"For the sons of Israel and the sons of Judah have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; the sons of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands, says the Lord" (32:30). It was apparent that Israel did not fear the Lord. The Lord will not remedy the situation by being sweet and gentle. Rather, God will be forceful and direct to teach them to fear.

"I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me" (32:40). So Israel in the wilderness and Israel being attacked by a superior enemy were ways in which the Lord would teach his people fear. He will not use convenient shortcuts to put this fear into his people. The Lord's goal was "doing good to them."

The formula seems wrong. The Lord was allowing the Babylonian army to conquer Judah, his people, to fear him.

When things are going bad, it does not mean that God does not do good. It means he is preparing circumstances to get them in place for more good. In preparing the circumstances, he moves his people to a condition of fearing him because, *"I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul"* (Jeremiah 32:41).

Land on these promises and ponder them. The Lord has three promises in Jeremiah 32:41. First, God rejoices in doing you good if you are his. He is not capricious, sometimes doing good and sometimes not. He continues to do good always, no matter the circumstances. He will change the circumstances, he will not change his intention. Remember Psalm 23:6? *"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."*

Goodness and mercy, in this figurative language, are pursuing you down a path, and it is a certainty that they will catch you, and settle down on you, forever. God continues his pursuit of you to do you good.

Second, he rejoices to do you good. First, he is faithful to do you good, and second, it delights him to no end to do you good. He gets joy in doing you good. *"The Lord will again take delight in prospering you"* (Deuteron-

omy 30:9). He loves to bless you since it gives him joy. He is not stingy, nor grumpy. *“Great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare of his servant!”* (Psalm 35:27).

Thirdly, God promises good *“with all my heart and all my soul”* (Jeremiah 32:41). God will not be reluctant; he will not hesitate. The Lord does not do things half-heartedly but with full-bore enthusiasm. He does not assign himself responsibility and then carry through his assignment with only grim determination. Every last fiber of his being is focused in fulfilling his promises with passion.

Pete Rose, the famous baseball player’s nickname was “Charlie Hustle.” If Pete Rose was batting and he got a walk, four balls from the pitcher, unlike most players who trotted to first base, Pete sprinted. Pete was a hard-driving, hard-charging man on the baseball field. He was driven by a passion for baseball and his excellence in the game. The Lord has the same kind of passion toward you!

These three promises sound glorious and grand. God is intending to do good with passion forever. The basis for these items to be implemented is *“that they may fear me forever”* (Jeremiah 32:39). This fear, or respect, is the foundation for relationship. If you do not have respect for another in a relationship, you cannot have meaningful interaction. God wants to have a relationship with us that is based on healthy principles of mutual appreciation of one another. This is wise and ensures a robust and dynamic companionship.

All loving relationships are based on mutual respect. In my marriage, I respect and appreciate the character qualities of my wife, and she regards me in the same way. It is the basis a healthy partnership in marriage.

In Israel’s case in Jeremiah 32, they had lost their desire for interacting with the Lord in a respectful, meaningful way. Remember, they *“have done nothing but evil in my sight from their youth; the sons of Israel have done nothing but provoke me to anger by the work of their hands”* (32:30). The Lord was going to be faithful in reestablishing the basis for healthy relationship with Israel: respect. They had been disrespectful and had treated the Lord like their errand boy. In effect, Israel had been saying to God, “Get me this. Do that. Hurry up!” They had faith in his power but little respect for his character.

We as individuals do not value being treated like that and often will not stand for being manipulated in that manner. Neither will the Lord. Yet, as we mentioned, the Lord desires to do us good forever. God will move Israel to establish a respectful relationship, where they would honor and fear him.

God will create the circumstances so that there can be the opportunity for fearing him. In Israel’s case, he used a difficult situation. *“For thus says the Lord: Just as I have brought all this great evil upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them”* (Jeremiah 32:42).

Diplomacy

In the domain of international relations, nations interacting with nations, the basis for achieving thoughtful and productive relations is based upon respect. Nations that are despised or disdained are treated in dismissive ways, whereas the opposite is also true. Nations that are respectful and that demand respect usually re-

ceive a high degree of regard. Sometimes in international interaction, countries need to exert pressure to receive the consideration that will be productive.

Teddy Roosevelt coined a phrase for this kind of pressure: “Speak softly, but carry a big stick.” It is also often true that countries disregard the cultural values of one nation will regard that other nation’s military strength. Totalitarian regimes tend to respect or value strong nations while despising weak or timid countries. It is the respect that grants a productive relationship even when there is a disparity of cultural perspective.

It is up to each nation to establish their presence within the international community. The old axiom in interpersonal relationships is also true among nations: you teach others how to treat you. In the diplomatic realm this principle holds and is applicable in the spiritual realm. God teaches us how to treat him.

With regard to Jeremiah 32:42 *“For thus says the Lord: Just as I have brought all this great evil upon this people, so I will bring upon them all the good that I promise them,”* God is willing to let difficult circumstances come to his chosen people so that they will fear him. He does not want them dreading him. Rather, he wants them to revere and hold him with esteem. This is a proper balance in a relationship. Consequently, the Lord allows stress, anxiety, tension, difficulties, and pain into our lives so that we have a barometer to measure the good that comes to us and in addition so that we come to appreciate and fear him.

To take the Lord for granted, to think that one will use him for whatever benefit will come from him, is an out-of-balance approach to having a significant and valuable interaction with him. He will not be our meal ticket to get whatever things we want. Rather, he is precious to us for who he is. David sang in one of his songs: *“I will be glad and exult in thee”* (Psalm 9:2). The Lord is a delight to us for who he is, not for what he does to benefit us.

I love my wife, not from what I receive from her, but for who she is as a person. I respect and regard her, and that should be a reflection of the healthy relationship that I have with the Lord. I serve and honor the Lord because I value and revere him.

Understanding the Paradox

Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; his going forth is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.

Hosea 6:1-3

One needs to understand the full scope of the majesty of the Lord. If we do not fully comprehend the way and manner in which the Lord moves in our lives, then it is conceivable that we could have wrong conclusions about him. This passage in Hosea clearly is troubling if we don’t have a correct perspective of how God is willing to work in the natural realm.

Notice these polar opposites: (1) He has torn, that he may heal. (2) He has stricken, and he will bind us up. Are these the plans of a kind and good God? If we come to a wrong conclusion on this question, then we might have a jaundiced view of the Lord.

The word *torn* is a severe word. It means to be torn in pieces, like a ravenous beast mangling another for food. The word *stricken* means being beaten and killed; another harsh concept. Can this really be indicative of a loving and kind God?

If God was malicious and seeking revenge for a perceived wrong, then we could say that he was not caring or loving. However, if he used tearing and striking as tools for a greater good, then we might pause and give some more consideration to his character. If he is willing to use harsh tools because he loves us, then we can move with a bit more care in our thoughts concerning him.

These verses in Hosea go on to state that God will revive and raise us up. These are positives that hold glorious promises. *Revive* means to have life, and to be restored to life or health. *Raise up* gives the idea to stand, to becoming powerful, and maintaining oneself. It seems God is in the empowering and enabling business. Understanding these concepts now gives us a broader idea of the character of the Lord.

The Lord is in the business of reviving and raising us up. "*Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord*" (6:3). Hosea is alerting us that the catalyst for getting us to know the Lord is the process of tearing and striking, so we can be revived and raised up. The jarring concept of God's using strong tools to move us to empowerment is the formula to get us to know the Lord. God's primary objective is getting us to know him.

It seems mankind has to be motivated to know the Lord. God is willing to use compelling means so that mankind will want to pursue knowing him. Hosea was encouraging and advocating intensity toward this end. "*Let us press on to know the Lord.*" This phrase gives the idea of passionately chasing knowledge.

Are you passionately and intensely pursuing the Lord? The concept of knowing God does not just mean knowing him with objective intellectualism; rather, it's knowing him experientially. This means I should perceive and know God by understanding him in the same way that I know my wife as a person. To *know* something biblically is to experience the reality in our heart and soul accessorized by the mind.

Passionate Knowledge

What is this passion for knowing the Lord? Remember, the Lord is moving us to a place to fear him. Furthermore, we must learn this respect and awe of him.

The apostle Paul in the New Testament had been a great advocate for revealing information about the person and work of Jesus Christ. He'd been a world traveler evangelizing people who had not heard of Jesus. He spent his entire ministry life in teaching and preaching about the Lord. He knew all about theology. He understood difficult spiritual concepts and effectively taught these to many who desired to know God. However, near the end of his life, he made an unusual statement: "*That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death*" (Philippians 3:10).

Obviously, knowing the Lord is not just information gathering. Paul's previous decades had been in pursuit of understanding the character and nature of Jesus Christ, coming to a correct perception and appreciation of the person of Jesus. Despite this understanding, it appears that Paul wanted more than information about Christ. Paul sought a practical day-by-day acquaintance with him in ever-increasing intimacy. To know him is more than merely knowing biblical doctrines about him; it is to experience the reality of Jesus in the here and now.

So Hosea and Paul wanted a deep and significant understanding as well as interactive relationship with the Lord. It is by this sense of knowing the Lord that we come to fear or revere him.

Thus, to move us to a place of knowing him, the Lord may allow circumstances to impact us. God does not promise carefree living, rather victory living. Coming to know the Lord in a deep and significant way, to respect and to admire him, is an end in itself. What we do in natural relationships we should do in supernatural relationships.

At times, the Lord will motivate us to fear him by difficult means. When we actually come to the place where we respect the Lord and deeply reverence him, then that becomes the basis of being intimately connected with him. When we are connected with him, we trust him, no matter the circumstances.

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever.

Psalm 19:9

Men who fear God face life fearlessly.

Men who do not fear God end up fearing everything.

Richard Halvorson, *Herald of Holiness*, Oct. 15, 1969, p.11

God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him.

Psalm 89:7, KJV

When he calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him.

Psalm 91:15 ESV

Humility

How to Be Humble and Proud of It

Imaginary book

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted

Matthew 23:12

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

Matthew 11:29

If anyone would like to acquire humility,

I can, I think, tell him the first step.

The first step is to realize that one is proud.

C.S. Lewis, *Christian Century*, Dec. 1, 1982, p.1230

It is difficult to define humility, but most people recognize it when they see it. The same is true for pride. It is easy to recognize in others but not in ourselves. Someone has said pride is like bad breath: everyone knows you have it except for you.

Humility is an attitude of willingness to subordinate oneself to others. The Bible makes it mandatory for significance, and Jesus noted this virtue and ranked it highly. It is ironic that he made clear his own approach to this quality. He identified it and said he himself was meek and lowly (Matthew 11:29). Only Jesus could do this without the appearance of pride. If people attempt to identify their own humility, it hints of pride.

Jesus' teaching deplored self-importance, while he encouraged humility (Luke 14:7-11). In answer to the question, "*Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" Jesus set a child before his disciples as an example of humility (Matthew 18:1ff.).

So how does one become humble? Where does this virtue of personal ethic come from? Are we just born with humility? Most consider them self humble, though many think they may have a little stubborn streak, and being stubborn is just a sign of confident individuality.

Humble Beginning of Humility

In the Bible, the verb *to be humble* carries the idea *to subdue*. That means humility is an attribute that has been instituted by the exertion of an outside force. Something compels or forces someone to be subdued. 'Subdue'

is the Hebrew word *kana* and first appears in Deuteronomy 9:3: “*Know therefore this day that he who goes over before you as a devouring fire is the Lord your God; he will destroy them and subdue them before you.*” The word *humble* is the phrase *subdue them*.

In this case, it is God who compels humility. There are other cases in the Scripture that humility, or being subdued, is brought upon men by their social group and in many times it is closely connected with affliction.

When something is mentioned initially in scripture, there is a principle of first mention, which indicates that when a subject is mentioned the truth of that stands connected in the mind of God. Thus in our investigation of humility, we see from Deuteronomy 9:3 that it is closely connected at its root with affliction.

Going to the Dogs

Often when training dogs, it is important to reinforce the pack mentality. Dogs instinctively respond the way in which they would naturally behave within a pack. A trainer will firmly place a dog on his back and hold him in this vulnerable position so he will be subdued and compliant. The exposure of the dog’s belly makes it vulnerable and sends the message of submitting to another’s authority. This gives the understanding to the dog of his position in the pack.

He learns he is not the leader, but part of the pack.

Putting a dog on his back can be very forceful. If he has a strong, independent character, he resists. Thus the trainer must be firm and continue to overcome his rebelliousness. The short-term implementation of overwhelming techniques will bear positive long-term results.

Failure to teach the dog will result in the dog assuming leadership and instituting his will on his pack. Thus an alpha male dog will believe that he is a pack leader even within a human family. He will be dominant and controlling, exhibiting uncooperative and resistant behaviors to humans who do not manage their pack. The lack of confident leadership by humans will signal the dog that he is to lead, and often he naturally will.

Someone who is not aware of the training technique of making dogs submit might construe the action as insensitive. Actually, it is for the dog’s benefit, and to exclude it from the dog’s learning process might subject him to needless tension and anxiety he need not experience. It is healthy to let him experience proper relational training so that the entire pack has a positive experience.

The Human Pack

Imagine humans trying to wrest control of life from the leadership of God and attempting to implement their headship into areas of responsibility that are his. Since we train dogs to behave in healthy productive ways, it is conceivable the Lord will do the same with regard to his domain. It might be proper for God to subdue us, or others, for a greater good. Otherwise, people will tend to naturally control their situation, culture, and even others.

It is appropriate to make a distinction between humility and humiliation. Humility includes a lack of rebellion and lack of self-exaltation, a self-awareness that does not overvalue one's attributes but rather has an accurate assessment of one's nature.

Humiliation is abuse. To humiliate someone is to overemphasize a characteristic and to hurt an individual. It causes shame that is not commensurate with the shortcoming. God does not humiliate, though he will humble someone.

Let's look at two examples where the Lord imposes his will on others so they are humbled.

Nebuchadnezzar

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was one of history's great monarchs. He reigned in ancient Babylon from 605 -562 BC. He was an accomplished military strategist. Nebuchadnezzar also was a master builder, embellishing the renowned capital city of Babylon. Some of his architectural works were recognized among the seven wonders of the ancient world.

He was also a religious man. He rebuilt the temples of Marduk and Nabu and many other shrines and provided regular offerings and even garments for divine statues. He was wealthy, famous, powerful, and respected, and he was even mildly mindful of spiritual matters.

The religious system of Babylon offered the opportunity for people to petition gods and, in a way, bribe these gods to bestow blessings on them. If the gods did not respond the way the offerer believed was commensurate with his offering, he sought another god. This was a sophisticated religious barter and bribery system. If the gods did not respond, an individual shopped for more responsive gods. Nebuchadnezzar was not a fervent follower of any god, though he made token gestures of religious duties.

Nebuchadnezzar had accomplished much and was not particularly sensitive to giving credit for his successes to others outside of himself. He was even warned about his penchant for self-congratulation and self-focus. In the book of Daniel, there was an entire chapter devoted to the story of Nebuchadnezzar going through the humbling process.

Originally, the warning came to him in a dream. This dream was about a tree that was robust and flourishing, providing sustenance for many (Daniel 4:12). The tree, however, was to be cut down by order of an angelic being and only the stump was to be left (4:13, 14). The focus of the chapter is 4:17 explaining that this process of cutting down the tree was *"to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will."*

Daniel gave the interpretation of the dream, identifying the tree as symbolic of Nebuchadnezzar. The reason he would be cut down?

That you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field; you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven times shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will.

Daniel 4:25

The process of humility is for the purpose of teaching Nebuchadnezzar an important concept—God rules. Daniel 4:26 adds, *“And as it was commanded to leave the stump of the roots of the tree, your kingdom shall be sure for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules.”* In other words, the Lord is sovereign, he is the boss, he is the pack leader, and Nebuchadnezzar, if you do not understand this, God will make you learn it. He will subdue you.

There was a warning in the dream, and he was given the opportunity to humble himself. Daniel exhorted him, *“Therefore, O king, let my counsel be acceptable to you; break off your sins by practicing righteousness, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the oppressed, that there may perhaps be a lengthening of your tranquility”* (4:27). In other words, Nebuchadnezzar, if you live by faith in the God of glory, your behavior will exhibit these attributes. Daniel did not merely tell him to act correctly. Rather, he urged him to let actions reflect your understanding. In short, behavior is the evidence of belief. If one believes in Jehovah, then the evidence of an attitude of humility is repentance to God and mercy to others.

Learning to be Humble

Nebuchadnezzar had twelve months to contemplate this warning and to heed wise counsel (4:29). God can be very patient, but he also has limits. Remember, Matthew 23:12: *“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”* The Lord is straightforward and will not let a member of his pack assume authority.

Nebuchadnezzar’s decision was at hand. He’s had an entire year to consider his option of humility or narcissism. The consequences had been laid out before him. It was not be a hard choice. He was walking on his palace walls looking at the city of Babylon (4:29).

“The king said, ‘Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?’” (4:30).

This was cringe worthy since God was patient and had warned him. He had given special revelation and a prophetic insight. The Lord says what he means and means what he says. Nebuchadnezzar had free choice and could respond to the two options, but he chose poorly.

The Lord responded to him. *“Immediately the word was fulfilled upon Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws”* (4:33).

Nebuchadnezzar was afflicted with the disease called boanthropy. It is an affliction where someone believes they are an animal. Nebuchadnezzar believed he was an ox. Though rare, this disease was not unknown and thoroughly unpleasant.

God will often use natural means to generate spiritual understanding. He's willing to use severe methods to initiate the change necessary for an individual to be conformed to his perfect will. Nebuchadnezzar ultimately got the message and understood this subduing process, but it took seven long years.

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives for ever; for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation.

Daniel 4:34

The king went on to point out that his hard lesson should be instruction for all. *“Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven; for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to abase”* (4:37).

The Lord used natural means to impact an attitudinal change. Pride puts us in competition with God, and the Lord does not allow it within his pack.

If a person thinks that his intelligence, foresight, physical attributes, education, group identification, racial background, or any other characteristic is worthy of self-exaltation, they should be careful. God is the giver of circumstance, and he is to receive the honor for your condition, not you.

God used extremely difficult circumstances to humble Nebuchadnezzar. He was one of the most powerful and influential men in the entire world, and the Lord did not give him a pass. The Lord will not overlook our arrogance either.

Nebuchadnezzar had a grandson, Belshazzar. He was arrogant. God did not turn a blind eye to his pride. In Nebuchadnezzar's case, humility brought blessing. Belshazzar's arrogance would bring a different ending.

Impudent Arrogance

Nebuchadnezzar's situation was well known, and it was understood among the palace residents. It was public knowledge and a good object lesson to those who were familiar with the situation. In fact, Daniel confronted Nebuchadnezzar's grandson, Belshazzar, and rebuked him for being so arrogant as to forget the lesson of his grandfather's humility.

“O king [Belshazzar], the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father [grandfather] kingship and greatness and glory and majesty” (Daniel 5:18).

Daniel remembered the conditions then the consequences. *“But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly, he was deposed from his kingly throne, and his glory was taken from him”* (5:20).

Then Daniel told the outcome:

He was driven from among men, and his mind was made like that of a beast, and his dwelling was with the wild asses; he was fed grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, until he knew that the Most High God rules the kingdom of men, and sets over it whom he will.

Daniel 5:21

Daniel reviewed history, then rebuked Belshazzar about his arrogance. *“And you his son [grandson], Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, though you knew all this, but you have lifted up yourself against the Lord of heaven”* (5:22, 23a).

There was a difference in the warning Nebuchadnezzar received in his dream and his delayed obedience, versus and the direct impudent rebellion of Belshazzar. Belshazzar already had been warned by his grandfather’s seven years living as an animal.

In spite of knowing God’s character, Belshazzar chose to elevate himself above the Lord by demeaning God. Belshazzar chose poorly.

Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Israel and had taken the golden utensils from the temple. He’d brought them into the treasury in Babylon. Belshazzar purposely desecrated these vessels from the temple in Jerusalem and profaned them. It was an in-your-face, put-down of Jehovah by taking these temple items and using them not for worship but for having a raucous drinking party. The temple artifacts were only to be used in religious service to portray the grandeur and holiness of Jehovah in the temple. Belshazzar’s purposeful desecration was to prove that he was unafraid of Jehovah and could pollute the worship of God. Belshazzar ignorantly was trying to impress everyone in his party, that he was not in awe of the God of Israel.

This was not just a poor choice; it was a very bad choice.

Maybe he was showing misguided confidence in his own religious system, for his name means *Bel has protected the king*. He seemed to be trusting in the god Bel for protection from Jehovah. Another really bad choice. *“He [Jehovah] does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand”* (Daniel 4:35).

God had responded to Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar would also get a response from heaven.

“That very night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain” (5:30). There was not twelve months to think about it. He already had years to consider it, and he chose to act contrary to the warning of his grandfather’s life’s lesson.

The Lord cannot, nor will he, allow someone else to receive the glory that is his. Belshazzar attempted to take the Lord's glory by demeaning him. These two examples make clear that God is serious about being the pack leader since it places himself in his rightful position and enhances the quality of life for all. Pride is an attempt to overthrow God's rightful position of leadership, then replacing him with yourself.

You and I are not even captains of our own souls. We can choose to be obedient or disobedient. However, the Lord can bring conditions to bear that will give us the opportunity to submit to his headship.

Humility is like underwear—essential, but indecent if it shows.

Helen Nielson, *Pentecostal Evangelism*, Feb. 26, 1978, p.2

High Pride

Lucifer, was he most glorious of all the Lord's creative order. He let pride overwhelm him, and then refused to submit to God's leading. He wanted to usurp the leadership position from the Lord. Can we learn from his arrogance?

How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High."

Isaiah 14:12-14

Note the "I wills" in these verses. Satan, the deceiver even, deceived himself by believing that he could replace God. What a profound irony! Pride does not protect us, rather, it makes us vulnerable to the deception of our own competence. Pride hinders a correct and healthy view of life. We all understand this, yet we still succumb to our own arrogance.

The Lord brought consequences to Satan for his impudence for his decision to foment rebellion within the pack. "*Yet thou shalt be brought down to Sheol, to the uttermost parts of the pit*" (14:15). Whereas the position of Lucifer had been the highest, he was brought to the lowest, all because of pride. If honest humility had been his attitude, he would have enjoyed the majestic privilege of being in the Lord's presence, receiving the blessings of fellowship with him. However, for all eternity, Satan's insolence will bring him a detestable condition.

It is difficult to convince anyone about a lack of humility. Pride often prevents reflection. Egoism is easy to identify in others but not in ourselves. Nevertheless, the Lord is surely able to put his finger on it. When he touches an area of pride within us, it can be like receiving a cosmic electrical jolt. It is extremely disconcerting. Arrogance is toxic and will bring unhealthy conditions to the pack as well as the individual. Rebellion and self-focus do not enhance community and fellowship, rather it has a degrading effect. Therefore, God will not allow the pack to suffer irreparable damage, and he will institute measures to insure stability.

The measures that the Lord institutes to subdue a person are compelling. These measures are designed to benefit. Yes, he will subdue an individual through strong means if warnings are not heeded. Remember, *“Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted”* (Matthew 23:12). End of story.

God does not have an expectation of mankind concerning humility that he does not exhibit himself. The entire scope of history and the manifestation of himself to mankind is dependent on God humbling himself. Men cannot exalt themselves to the Lord’s level to have an interaction with him. God must come to us to reveal himself.

The Humility of God

Here is an astonishing thought – God humbles himself.

“Who is like unto Jehovah our God, That hath his seat on high, That humbleth himself to behold (The things that are) in heaven and in the earth?” (Psalm 113:5, 6, ASV). God brings himself low; he abases himself from the glory of his place and position to act in the realm of humankind. God is humble.

If God subdues himself for the benefit of the pack, it is not unreasonable to assume that he will subdue others for the good of all. It is a necessary fact. Parents humble themselves for the sake of their children, military commanders for the sake of their troops, prime ministers for the sake of their constituents (prime = first; minister = server; PM = first server). God will exhort all to humility; however, if there is resistance, he is able to move circumstances in such a way to subdue those who are a menace to themselves and the pack.

The Messenger and the Message

Don't kill the messenger!

It was the custom in Ancient Greece and later in Rome to employ messengers to carry the news throughout the city, state, and empire. This news was not always to the liking of the recipients, but the laws decreed that these messengers were to pass unharmed from place to place and city to city to deliver whatever message they were commanded to spread to the population.

Often, in times of stress and highly charged dramatic intensity, a person might be called on to deliver poor or even bad news. Sometimes, when a ruler was presented this news, they killed the messenger. In their strange logic this killing would somehow cancel the bad message and mitigate the fear or pain that was induced by the message.

A Recent Example

Georges Sada was an Iraqi air force general under the Saddam Hussein regime. General Sada was called before Saddam in November of 1990. He was told by Saddam that when the Coalition Forces were going to attack Iraq for invading Kuwait, then the Iraqi air force would immediately attack Israel.

Saddam asked his first question of General Sada. He said, "Georges, who's stronger, Israel or Iraq?" The general knew some things about Saddam. He knew that many good men had died for speaking words of truth to Saddam. Saddam had personally shot and killed high-ranking officers on the spot, and he had ordered men to be executed for thoughts or actions he only imagined.^[13]

The general thoughtfully and truthfully told Saddam that the Iraqi air force could not effectively attack Israel and survive. Israel's technology was too sophisticated. Saddam listened, and General Sada said that was a miracle in itself. "He never listened to anyone. He had his own ideas and he never wanted to be confronted by the facts if they would prevent him from doing whatever he had already decided to do."^[14]

The cost of being a messenger could be very high if one is sent to a hostile audience. General Sada, a Christian, was put into a very dangerous position, and his honest testimony put him at risk, but his bravery prevented a bloodbath for the Iraqi people and for the Israelis.

The Lord might call you to be a messenger. You might not be called to the Saddam Hussein's of the world, devilishly evil men, but you might be called to give information to your family, neighbors, co-workers, or friends. And they might not like what you have to say.

The Truth is Risky

Think of Elijah who was called to go before King Ahab in 1 Kings 17. Elijah proclaimed a drought on the land (1 Kings 17:1), and was then commanded by the Lord to hide himself in the wilderness (17:3). There he experienced privation fed only by ravens.

Consider Jonah who was to go to Israel's mortal enemy, the Ninevites, and preach a message of judgment. He was sent forcibly to Nineveh by a very uncomfortable delivery system, in the belly of a great fish.

Consider Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego, who defied Nebuchadnezzar with a provocative message and were promptly thrown into a fiery furnace (Daniel 3). Jesus was killed for being a messenger of divine truth.

If you have a message of truth, you might think of being silent, trying not to offend others. This might not be a good strategy. The aforementioned Jonah tried this, and the Lord would have none of his reluctance.

King David had attempted this and found this to be a poor choice. David pointed out how he tried the silent approach. *"I said, 'I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will bridle my mouth, so long as the wicked are in my presence'"* (Psalm 39:1).

David was going to be politically correct and not offend anyone, even those who were most needing truth. He was admirable in not wanting to sin by saying inappropriate things or needlessly hurtful things. David had a determination to avoid letting his mouth be an instrument of sin, so he tried to be quiet about the situation.

"I was dumb with silence, I held my peace, even from good; And my sorrow was stirred" (39:2, ASV). The word *sorrow* indicates emotional grief or anguish. When coupled with the word *stirred*, it indicates trouble and calamity. The internal workings of his emotions began a drumbeat. The silent treatment didn't work so well for David. There was not an external hubbub that was assaulting him, rather there was an internal disruption within David's own psyche, and the emotional turmoil increased.

"My heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue" (39:3). David indicates the psychological effects by using three intense words: *hot*, *fire*, and *burned*. It was as if there was friction of inward thoughts that produced an emotional cauldron. His emotional state was being fired up and it seemed to be producing pressure. His internal turmoil was like a volcano, and his resistance collapsed. His self-confined tongue was given liberty, the gag was taken off his own mouth, and he released the message.

"Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is!" (39:4).

His first words were a prayer, directed Godward and not toward offenders. He knew his heart had to speak. It was bursting and needed expression.

Silence before men should never lead to silence with the Lord. David was troubled and needed some perspective. He wanted understanding about the fleeting experiences of life and time.

David's emotional angst was real and produced a high degree of discomfort. His emotional distress was the result of self-imposed silence, when he had a message of truth to tell.

Consequences of Not Stating the Message

There is ample evidence from the field of psychology to prove that suppression of conflict leads to depression. Subclinical depression can evidence itself physically in backaches, headaches, and often persistent sadness. Furthermore, depression interferes with the function of the immune system, which may lead to other infections and even cancers can result.

Thus suppression of truth by one who has the message can cause a myriad of emotional and physical problems. This can lead to a pessimistic expectation of God and of life. If one avoids the discomfort of telling the truth, it can lead to having a combination of high-impact emotional and physical concerns. In other words, there can be consequences for not telling the message.

If one is experiencing pain or sorrow, there is the possibility there was or is a suppression of a message of truth at some time. However, one must be very careful; one must be thoughtful about identifying real suppression. Not everything needs to be stated. It is wise to practice discretion under certain circumstance and to choose words carefully.

In addition, if one does speak the truth, it should be with a thoughtfulness that protects the receiver's character. *"Rather, speaking the truth in love"* (Ephesians 4:15). One should not hurt others with words nor bring confusing or contradictory messages. When embarking in truth telling, there should be no erroneous schemes, just sincerity.

The Messenger Becomes the Message

My father was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home. Judaism was the life that he knew and was acquainted with. To the slurs of *kike* and *Christ killer*, he would respond to his antagonists with equal disdain. He had no affinity to religious life, or to spiritual matters, and he became a profane young man. Then in the 1930s, he heard the gospel from a Jewish evangelist. He could not escape the compelling draw on his life, and he converted to Christianity. His choice was genuine and with joy. However, he knew must tell his family about this decision and he called his family to a meeting.

My father was from a large family. Many of his siblings had come from Russian-controlled Eastern Europe and had been subject to Russian pogroms. They had experienced heavy-handed abuse from so-called Christians.

In the old country, my father's family had been the brunt of Christian hooliganism. In the Russian Orthodox churches, the priests had preached sermons of hatred for the Jews, and the congregants would leave, get drunk, and then go on rampages against the 'Christ-hating, Christ-killing Jews.' Crowds of angry, drunken Christians would roam the streets looking for Jews, and when they found these 'sinful' Jews, they would beat or even kill them.

My father's family's home was broken into by these drunken thugs, forcing them to hide, even hanging from rafters three stories high, to escape. The hoodlums went through their home, breaking and destroying furni-

ture and keepsakes, expressing their rage at Jews while his family hung suspended in terror. This was the so-called Christianity that my father's family knew.

Consequently, when my father faced his family, he knew they would be antagonistic toward his new faith and very antagonistic to him. Once they had gathered my father expressed his testimony. He was not greeted by "attaboys," and "good for you." On the contrary, there was stony, cold-hearted animosity. Some of his brothers even wanted to kill him. Though they did not harm him, they did ostracize him. They actually held a funeral for him, symbolically telling him that he was dead to them. He was no longer a part of the family. They alienated him, his wife and children, making known in stark terms that his actions were unacceptable to them. He became a pariah.

Their perception of authentic Christianity was skewed by their horrid experience at the hands of people who attended religious services but were not genuine believers in Jesus Christ. The Lord used my father to convey the reality of the gospel to a hostile family. My father's life would be the evidence of the truth of the goods news of salvation in the Messiah, Jesus.

His family knew the story of Jesus, even experienced the effects of his storied life and death. However, knowing about Jesus was not enough. My father's family needed to have a different kind of understanding than the improper one they had known. My father became the message, a living billboard of the reality of the Christian experience. His family needed to see the message lived out. They required revelation, not more information. Dad would embody the truth of the gospel by living it. He became the message.

Becoming a Message

God is in the business of revealing himself. It is his ultimate purpose. He desires for us to know his being, not just to know about him, but to be acquainted intimately with him. The Lord's desire is to reveal deeper and higher truths about his nature. He's not satisfied with cursory information concerning his will and plan. Truth will continue to be revealed for the benefit of all mankind. Mankind has the responsibility to receive and ponder the truth.

Man does not know God and cannot arrive at deep understanding about him if there is no one to reveal this deep wisdom. There must be a tangible vehicle that brings this knowledge, and God uses flesh and blood people to fuse the idea of spiritual truth.

"But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification" (1 Corinthians 2:7). Hidden wisdom is like a treasure waiting to be discovered. However, spiritual truths are in plain view, waiting for anyone to unwrap them. Man's responsibility is to unwrap these truths the Lord offers. However, the Lord does not force-feed them if these truths are not desired. In this verse, Paul indicates that he is the vehicle for imparting deep truths. This process of revelation is not about unfolding mankind's traditions, rather revealing God's wisdom that was ignored by man himself.

God's Ultimate Purpose

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, according to the working of his great might.

Ephesians 1:17-19

Here is the ultimate purpose of God. He reveals knowledge of himself and giving enlightenment so that mankind can have hope. Hope is not false expectation but is anticipation of real prospects. The Lord is eager to let us know what awaits us. God anticipates that mankind has a need to know. After all, he created us that way.

Where there is spiritual light, there will be life, and in a spiritual sense, mankind will yearn for spiritual food since it sustains life. In the ancient world, the heart was the wellspring of thoughts. It included the mind and the attitude, or desire, to learn. The eye was an inward vision. The eye received and then contemplated the light.

God will influence people to consider their need for spiritual food. My dad's family did not desire the deep truths of God; they believed they understood. Yet they did not really know the sincere heart and mind of God. Therefore, God was going to send a message in the form of a person—my father—to reveal deeper truths.

Jeremiah

The Old Testament prophet Jeremiah experienced anxiety, reproach and persecution. He suffered for the Lord's sake, and he prayed to God for help. Jeremiah indicated that he received the Lord's revelation, and it was delightful to him: *"Thy words were found, and I ate them, and thy words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart"* (Jeremiah 15:16). The figurative expression of eating the words is a common literary tool of possessing and incorporating the Word of God. Furthermore, the Word of God was a joy and delight. However, his inner satisfaction did not translate into external circumstantial bliss.

Jeremiah experienced trouble and turmoil. He endured attacks and harassment. *"Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me"* (15:10). He was the object of deep sorrow, and he petitioned the Lord for relief from the suffering. The moral corruption of his attackers and their despicable behavior brought Jeremiah profound sadness and deep grief. He was unjustly hated and had done nothing to warrant such treatment.

The Lord was letting Jeremiah experience these things, not because he could not help, rather he had a greater mission, other than Jeremiah's personal comfort. The Lord gave Jeremiah joy through his Word, but not comfort in his life.

The Lord informed his plan for Jeremiah and for future people. *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations”* (1:5). Before Jeremiah was even physically conceived, the Lord had a plan, and he set Jeremiah aside as a messenger. God even knew that turmoil and trouble would come to Jeremiah: *“Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord”* (1:8).

When God told Jeremiah to not be afraid and promised deliverance, the assumption was that Jeremiah would experience distress. *“But you, gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them”* (1:17). The Lord was emphatic about Jeremiah having courage and not shirking trouble. The Lord assured him, *“I am with you”* (1:8). God knew Jeremiah would experience heartache, but there was a greater need: revelation must be given to the people.

The messenger would be equipped with the presence of the Lord. The power and protection and provision of God are a reservoir in times of trouble. *“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble”* (Psalm 46:1).

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to become a message. In Jeremiah 13:1-4, God commanded Jeremiah to purchase a particular garment, wear it, then bury the garment by the Euphrates River. Later he had to retrieve the garment. The garment was decayed and soiled, good for nothing.

This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own heart and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this garment, which is good for nothing. For as the waistcloth clings to the loins of a man, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says the Lord, that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory, but they would not listen.

Jeremiah 13:10, 11

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to perform this symbolic action to express an outward reality. Jeremiah was tasked to go to the Euphrates river. The emblematic performance of the purchase, the travel and the burial, illustrated to the Jews, the kind of effort the Lord put forth toward his people. However, the effort went to waste since Israel became unresponsive to the Lord's call.

Thus, Jeremiah's actions, the spoiled garment, all done before the eyes of the people, became the message. God expressed a clear statement by Jeremiah becoming not only the messenger but also the message.

Ezekiel's Peculiar Call

A contemporary of Jeremiah was the prophet Ezekiel. The Lord prepared Ezekiel to carry a message and also to be the message. Ezekiel would be called by the Lord then shaped and molded by God to be the sum and substance of his message.

The Lord commanded him to do a number of different signs to send his message to his people. In Ezekiel 4, God told Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days, then to switch to his right side for 40 days. This had to be

uncomfortable and humbling for Ezekiel, but it would allow him to feel the weight of the message. Ezekiel's long protracted days of being incapacitated was for people to see and consider what was the Lord was communicating.

God then commanded him to shave his head and divide the hair into three portions (Ezekiel 5). One portion he was to throw into a fire and be burned, a second portion was to be cut into small pieces, and the third was to be scattered to the wind. He was also to take a small amount of each of the three portions and tie this remnant to the hem of his garment. This action was to reveal that Israel would suffer judgment and experience death, defeat, and deportation. Why couldn't God just use words? He would not use more words because Israel had become deaf to the truth.

God also directed Ezekiel to take an iron pan and carry it in front of his face (4:3). This was to represent that a siege like iron was closing in around Jerusalem. The people who observed these examples would understand the meaning. *"Know that I, the Lord, have spoken"* (5:13).

Then the Lord commanded Ezekiel to dig a hole in a wall of his home in the night and take a bag of paltry rations (Ezekiel 12). He then was to sling the bag over his shoulder and squeeze through the hole in the wall, as if making an escape. When your neighbors ask, *"...what you are doing defacing your won property,"* tell him that at an inconvenient hour, *"...they will be dragged away and only able to take a few belongings."* Six times in chapter 12, Ezekiel would have to make sure that he was seen by his neighbors (verses 3 [twice], 4, 5, 6, 7). Why? *"For I have made you a sign for the house of Israel"* (12:6). Ezekiel was to be the message.

A Costly Example

Then God called Ezekiel to very deep challenges. The depth of God's love for Israel will be lived out in the prophet's own life.

"Son of man, behold, I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke" (Ezekiel 24:16).

One can imagine that Ezekiel must have taken a deep breath. Read the words again: *"I am about to take the delight of your eyes away from you at a stroke."* The Lord decided to take Ezekiel's wife away through death!

What a sobering thought.

Ezekiel, and his wife had been obedient servants to the Lord. Why would God be so unreasonable?

God would use Ezekiel as an object lesson to Israel. His wife, who was the delight of his eyes and the one whom he adored was going to die. Ezekiel would lose his cherished wife, as the Lord had lost his cherished Israel. God wanted Israel to identify with his loss by using Ezekiel as an example.

Such loss results in great sorrow and our nature recoils at a seemingly unreasonable action imposed by the Lord. The imposition became even more grievous.

God directed Ezekiel to do something very peculiar. In Ezekiel 24:16, God said, *“Yet you shall not mourn or weep nor shall your tears run down.”*

God’s command seems irrational and hardhearted! If we let our emotions run with the narrative we could think poorly of the Lord. It seemed that the Lord was unreasonable, unkind, malicious, and any other kind of description that our irritated attitude might have with him.

Wait a Moment

We need to hit the pause button and remember the character of God. Our proposition is: if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that God would not be provided without the suffering. What God is doing in Ezekiel’s life will bring a benefit, not necessarily to Ezekiel, but to others. *“We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him”* (Romans 8:28).

In Ezekiel 24:16, God was not forbidding Ezekiel to mourn. Rather, he was prohibiting loud display of grief. One can see that Ezekiel had a tender heart, so Ezekiel was not a cold-hearted, wild-eyed fanatic. Wailing and beating one’s chest, or other expressions, were to be subordinated, so people would observe and note that this was something symbolic.

The result of Ezekiel’s unusual behavior was going to compel people who observed him to ask, *“Will you not tell us what these things mean for us, that you are acting thus?”* (24:19). Observers had keen enough discernment to understand that this was not normal communication but something unique that needed clarifying.

God was using the uncommon nature of Ezekiel’s behavior to raise questions in people’s minds, and it prompted them to ask why. People had carelessly dismissed earlier speeches and messages, disregarding the imploring announcements from the Lord. This time, God was going to get their attention.

The message that the Lord wanted to send was so important and necessary that it transcended the loss of Ezekiel’s wife and his need for grieving. God emphasized this by noting, *“Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign; according to all that he has done you shall do. When this comes, then you will know that I am the Lord God”* (24:24). Ezekiel would be the message.

Listen!

What was God trying to convey? He was sending his beloved Israel, the message that they were on the verge of losing their existence. They were in dire risk! But they refused to listen. The Lord warned them that *“the desire of their eyes”* was going to be lost (24:21, 25). Ezekiel lost the desire of his eyes, his wife, and Israel was at risk of losing theirs (24:16).

God reiterates that Ezekiel would be a sign. *“So you will be a sign to them; and they will know that I am the Lord”* (24:27). The Lord wanted Israel to get the message by observing Ezekiel, so they would *“know that I am the Lord God.”* The message was so important that it took extraordinary measures to get people to be aware to

their need. Words were just not enough. Israel was impervious to words. They needed an object lesson to jar their minds.

The Lord might make us a message if he needs us.

I am as a wonder [a special display of God's power] *unto many; But thou art my strong refuge* (Psalm 71:7).

Rebellion

If we assume that we are 100% correct and others are clearly and completely wrong, it is either abysmal arrogance or colossal arrogance—or perhaps a little of each.

Kenneth J. Weller, *Church Herald*, Sept. 2, 1977, p.5

Obstinate, willful, stubborn people can be irritating. They often refuse to listen to truth or to wise counsel because they are certain of their perspective. They are confident that they have the answers, and will not entertain the idea they may be mistaken. I could be one of these people.

The issue of course, is what will God do with rebellious people? If arrogant, self-willed people disturb me, what must God think of them? If they refuse to listen or obey the wisest individual in the entire universe, in fact, the one who made the universe, what will the Lord do with them?

In a previous chapter, we discussed discipline, in which God imposed disciplinary action to improve a person's behavior or attitude. We noted the word *discipline* carried the idea of instruction or teaching. In addition, discipline is for the sake of success. It seeks one's highest good and will not settle for less. Discipline will train one to avoid problems and pitfalls that will only bring more pain and more loss.

The Lord will not shirk from confronting an obstinate, willful person. If someone is not willing to comply with his authoritative instructions, God will not give in to them.

If a person refuses the advances of the Lord and turns his back to the invitation of God, there remains one option. In modern parlance, we might say consequences. Biblical language uses terms like *judgment* or *wrath*. Often the Lord deals with rebellion in very stark ways.

An example is in Psalm 52. David was singing a song about an arrogant individual named Doeg, who boasted about doing malicious and evil things. Doeg wanted to be in the good graces of King Saul, so he went to Saul and told him that David was hiding in the house of Ahimelech.

Later, Doeg boasted about causing a number of defenseless priests and other innocent people to be murdered. Doeg was pleased with himself.

Consequently, David listed Doeg's character traits in verse 1- 4. He was not a person of sterling character. To the choirmaster. A Maskil of David, when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul, "David has come to the house of Ahimelech." *Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man? The steadfast love of God endures all the day.* (Ps. 52:1 ESV). The word *boast* meant to glory or to shine. Subsequently, in 52:2, not only did Doeg boast in evil, *you are plotting destruction*. Also, the manner in which Doeg plotted: *your tongue is like a sharp razor, you worker of treachery*.

The graphic illustration of a razor making incisions to wreak havoc makes Doeg seem ruthless. *“You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking the truth”* (52:3). Doeg got satisfaction in causing affliction. He did not simply take satisfaction in an occasional incident of malevolence, rather, it was his passion to perpetrate his lies and to bring harm to others. *“You love all words that devour”* (52:4). He delighted in the trouble and pain that he caused.

The Lord confronted Doeg. Warning! The next few words might challenge a conception of a syrupy and sweet God who understands when people do mischievous things. If that is your perception of the Lord, be careful!

“But God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent; he will uproot you from the land of the living” (52:5).

Doeg will be broken, not just figuratively, but destroyed in every part of his being. It will not be temporary but eternal. He will be smashed. He'll be like a weed that is grabbed, ripped—roots and all—from the ground, and dragged away. The way Doeg planned and delighted in the deaths of innocent priests will be the measure in which he will be treated.

Divine justice will be certain and it will be swift and it will be commensurate with the manner in which the person acted toward others. This justice will be overwhelming and merciless. This justice is justified.

“He who mocks the poor insults his Maker; he who is glad at calamity will not go unpunished” (Proverbs 17:5).

“If a man returns evil for good, evil will not depart from his house” (Proverbs 17:13).

The Wrath of God

Many will balk at divine retribution and think it's beneath the dignity of so great a being as God. Many are uncomfortable with a concept of the Lord who absolutely detests sin and is at war with it and will annihilate it. Jehovah God will not compromise with sin, nor will he take a casual approach with it. He will destroy sin and even those who, through overt, deliberate rebelliousness, embrace it.

While it is true that God is full of mercy and is willing to be extravagant with grace, the complete picture of the Lord is that he is willing to tackle moral outrage in his universe. He is the Creator, and it is not a moral blemish if he is duty bound to fix a detestable evil within his creation.

God is displeased and has indignation against all evil. His reaction to evil is not malicious retaliation against those who have injured him. The Lord is not vindictive. Rather, he has just cause to respond against individuals who rebel against his authority, against his holiness. The nature of the Lord delights in purity. How could he not loathe that which is vile?

The Lord makes no attempt to conceal the facts concerning his wrath. He is not ashamed to reveal that he is adamant about dealing with sin within his universe. There are more references in the Bible to the anger and fury of God than there are to his love and tenderness. Since he is holy, he hates sin, and he will deal with it.

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him” (John 3:36).

What About God’s Love?

In modern culture, there is widespread agreement to the idea that God’s fury against a sinner is primitive. Retribution seems like a mark of cruelty, as opposed to the dignity of a patient and loving God. Judgment seems trivial for a God of love.

The idea of judgment should not be seen as petty revenge by God. Rather, a correct understanding is that God is rightfully obtaining and administering justice. The Lord’s concern is to bring righteousness to the forefront. If he punishes offenders, it is appropriate. This is loving action for the rest who are not offenders. After all, in our societies today we punish criminal offenses. This is viewed as acceptable, and even noble, particularly for offenses that are truly heinous.

“Men will say, ‘Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth’” (Psalm 58:11).

Failure on the Lord’s part to deal with sin, leaves others to experience the effects of the sinner’s choices. Not only does sin impact a person individually, making them insensitive to others and bringing self-centeredness. Sin also breeds competition, an inability to empathize, a rejection of authority, and an inability to love.

If the Lord does not deal with sin within his universe, he could be accused of being unjust. If God were so kind that he excused sin, he would not be loving.

When my children were young and one was mean to another, causing alarming physical or emotional pain to a sibling, and I, knowing this, did nothing to protect the victim, that would not be loving on my part. If I allowed malicious behavior in my children, I would not be a loving parent. The same is true for the Lord.

The Lord will not only deal with the sin of unbelievers, he’ll be just as forceful with overt rebelliousness among believers. Remember, the Lord does not punish for the sake of revenge, but responds when the act is shameful and merits consequences. He does not respond with a knee-jerk reaction to perceived wrongs, rather there is a slow-settled aversion to that which is offensive to his nature and to his creation.

Wrath Revealed

What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction.

God, desiring to show his wrath... Hmmm. The idea of this clause, God is determined to show his absolute hatred and resistance to sin. He is resolved to have an expression of his outrage to wickedness. It is not a peevishness that the Lord is revealing. Rather, he wants to reveal a sovereign right to deal with rebelliousness.

This is not a popular view of God.

Moderns tend not to like a God of justice. A preferred view of God is one of sage wisdom, who with patience brings people to understand their shortcomings through reason. This view is true in some respects but is not complete.

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness” (Romans 1:18). The Lord’s wrath is expressed and open. He does not hide it. It is not a character flaw which only intimate family members know about. He wants everyone to know. Remember Noah’s flood (Genesis 6-8)? The whole world knew the outcome of his wrath. In Exodus 7-12 God instituted the plagues upon Egypt for their refusal to let his people go free. In his wrath, consequences were swift and brought certain death to those who defied him.

God’s Pledge

“Wherefore I swear in my wrath, that they should not enter into my rest” (Psalm 95:11, ASV). There are two occasions of God’s swearing, or making an oath: first in making promises and the second in pronouncing judgments. In this passage, he affirmed something by his wrath. In other words, he appeals to the perfect characteristic of his anger, just as in other times he swore by his holiness. He was making an oath, and this oath reflects his righteous indignation.

Every word of God is truthful, but the ratification by an oath is truth that, in a sense, is signed, irrevocable, and absolute. The oath fixes the Word of God and affirms it. The Lord swearing in his wrath carries the sense of certainty and the assurance of his blistering vengeance.

There is a hard and terrifying side of God which is as much part of the Bible as his gentleness and kindness. We dare not neglect it because we can’t fit it into our theology. Above all we dare not misrepresent the character of God to those who must one day meet him face to face.

Monty Ledford, *Mennonite*, March 25, 1986, p.127

Exhibition of God’s Wrath

Nadab and Abihu

Nadab and Abihu were sons of Moses’ brother, Aaron. They were privileged to be priests and had intimate access to the presence of the Lord. The name *Nadab* meant generous or noble. *Abihu* means “he is my father,” meaning the Lord was his spiritual father. Both these men had positions of privilege and were at the epicenter of spiritual life in ancient Israel.

Nadab and Abihu were invited to be present with the Lord. *“And he said to Moses, ‘Come up to the Lord, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship afar off’”* (Exodus 24:1). They had a special invitation to serve as priests, to minister for the population before the Lord. *“Then bring near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the people of Israel, to serve me as priests—Aaron and Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar”* (28:1).

With great privilege comes great responsibility. Nadab and Abihu failed at one thing: they trivialized the holiness of God. They had received instructions on how to minister on behalf of the people, however they did not follow directions carefully. They were careless with the Lord’s nature. It seemed they did not value his directions or his character.

Being invited to the Oval Office at the President of the United States invitation carries with it a set of protocols. One must have a sense of the privilege and the respect for this office which includes proper attire and behaviors. There is an expectation that one values the office of the President.

More respect is due when approaching the Lord. One ought not approach the presence of the Lord without the proper decorum since he is the holy sovereign of the Universe. Remember Jesus’ instruction to his disciples when they asked him how to pray

“Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name” (Matthew 6:9). *Hallowed* means holy and carries the thought of purity. In other words, God is, in his character and nature, separate from profane things and is absolutely morally perfect. Furthermore, God is determined to preserve the distinction between himself and mankind. He will not pretend otherwise and he has the expectation that we recognize this condition. Thus Jesus, his Son, instructed the disciples in the proper approach.

How Not to Approach a Holy God

Nadab and Abihu did not have care and thoughtfulness in their approach. *“Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them”* (Leviticus 10:1). We do not know precisely what this unholy fire was. However, it appeared that they were acting on their own without seeking the mind of God.

This seems benign enough, and one might think that they approached God with a thoughtless mistake which could be corrected by further instruction.

“And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord” (10:2).

This event sounds radical, ill tempered, or out of perspective. Kill them because they made a mistake? One itchy bitsy mistake and poof?

Remember our subject: the wrath of God. The Lord knew the intent of their hearts. He did not have to guess. God knew they were being irreverent and showed disregard for his character. Nadab and Abihu were just go-

ing through religious motions, external actions that had no personal meaning for them. They were underestimating the transcendent value of God and pretending to worship.

Pretending is for children. Worship of the Holy God is absolutely serious. The Lord makes this point:

Then Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has said, 'I will show myself holy among those who are near me, and before all the people I will be glorified.' And Aaron held his peace."

Leviticus 10:3

The Biblical text hints that Nadab and Abihu were possibly drunk when they went before the Lord. *"And the Lord spoke to Aaron, saying, 'Drink no wine nor strong drink, you nor your sons with you, when you go into the tent of meeting, lest you die; it shall be a statute for ever throughout your generations'"* (10:8, 9).

We would not allow such behavior from a visitor to the Oval Office. God's esteem and value is greater than that of a president, and he will not act as though our attitudes don't matter. He will not tolerate or excuse a sham.

Thus if someone is experiencing pain or suffering, might this be an indication of the wrath of God in their lives? Nadab and Abihu were believers in Jehovah God and that did not prevent their demise:

Yeah, but...

Here is a New Testament example. In Acts 5:1-10, is the account of a man Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who were members of the fledgling Christian community. Ananias and Sapphira sold some property and planned to give the proceeds to the new church. Their contribution to the common fund of the church was a free gift on their part, but they pretended they were generous to a fault.

They lied about the difference between the sale price and their gift, saying they had given all the money when they had actually given only a part of the proceeds. They had a right to keep their money; it was a free-will gift. However, their dishonesty about their contribution was the issue. One can only guess that they wanted to be viewed as thoughtful and generous, not as conniving and deceptive.

When Ananias presented the money, Peter confronted the hypocrisy. *"When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it"* (Acts 5:5). The Lord took Ananias out immediately. There was no appeal, no protest, no chance to confess or to repent, just very swift judgment. Nadab and Abihu ministering in the presence of the Lord had the same sort of experience.

Even Ananias' wife, Sapphira, was judged immediately. Three hours later, she came in, unaware of her husband's death, and Peter confronted her about sale of their property. Peter gave her the chance for an honest confession (5:8). Sadly, Sapphira continued with their deception and lied.

"But Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out'" (5:9).

She did not even get a chance to protest!

“Immediately she fell down at his feet and died” (5:10).

Timing

Goodness, wasn't God a bit quick on the trigger? Does the swiftness seem out of proportion, or is it the finality of the judgment? If God's judgment is the issue in your mind and not the offense, then something might be skewed. The punishment is justified. Remember, *“for the wages of sin is death”* (Romans 6:23).

But they were believers! Doesn't God give believers just a teeny-weeny break? God never took out King David this quickly when he sinned with Bathsheba and then killed her husband Uriah. Actually God could have taken you to task for any one of many sins you have committed. God is not being capricious, at times implementing justice and other times administering grace. There is a reason for his timing.

Why the Difference?

God is involved with mankind and manifests himself in their affairs. At times he shows intimate care, and at others he exhibits determined resolve in confronting sin with judgment. What is the common thread?

It appears that there is a duality in God's purpose. Either it is for mankind's benefit or for God's glory—or both.

The objects of the Lord's intention, whether it is a nation, an institution, or a group, or an individual, have a specific purpose. An example would be the nation of Israel: *“What other nation on earth is like thy people Israel, whom God went to redeem to be his people, making himself a name, and doing for them great and terrible things”* (2 Samuel 7:23). The duality is redemption of his people and having his name and reputation known among all people.

“But for this purpose have I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth” (Exodus 9:16). Paul quoted this verse in Romans 9:17 to prove the sovereignty of God. The Lord's intention is to let people live abundantly, and to have his reputation spread into the public domain so that all people will know his character and nature. See also Isaiah 63:12; Psalm 106:7, 8; 1 Samuel 12:22; Joshua 7:8, 9.

God's wrath when expressed by his fierce anger is to establish his reputation and make it known to all. It is intentional. He is not exhibiting a tantrum. Rather, he is letting the world know of his hatred for sin. *“Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity”* (Hebrews 1:9, ASV). Perfect divine balance.

This is why Nadab, Abihu, Annanias and Sapphira were taken out so quickly. God hates sin, and he wants it known. He wanted to emphasize the point, and he did it dramatically. It would be dangerous to think otherwise.

At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both rider and horse lay stunned. But thou, terrible art thou! Who can stand before thee when once thy anger is roused? From the heavens thou didst utter judgment; the earth feared and was still.

Psalm 76:6-8

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Ephesians 5:6

A Protest

You might concede that at times God is a god of wrath and anger. But the gospel is about a loving Lord who is thoughtful and caring, not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Yes, God is thoughtful and caring. However, he does not excuse evil deeds. Paul sternly warned believers in the aforementioned Ephesians 5:6 that the warning should not be considered as empty words, meaning devoid of content. God's view of sin should be taken seriously. Again, perfect divine balance.

Again you might argue, "But the Lord doesn't take out everyone who sins." Yes, however, remember Noah's flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Goliath?

Or how about the classic illustration of Jesus' holy wrath when he cleansed the temple (John 2:13-17)? This was a very dramatic scene where Jesus purposefully made a whip, then went into the Temple's outer compound—fourteen acres filled with hundreds of people and animals—and he drove them all out! One man against hundreds! Jesus was furious because his heavenly Father was being dishonored.

There might be a secret corner of your mind that is not accepting this because you just cannot bring yourself to believe that God is fearsome. You might not believe that pain and suffering really can be allowed by the Lord who punishes sin. Consider this: "*There is a sin that leads to death*" (1 John 5:16, NIV). In other words, there are evil deeds that the Lord punishes by death. Well, since you are reading this and are not dead, then you might not be sinning. Wait a moment. The Lord has degrees of his wrath; death is the final one.

Degrees of Punishment

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

1 Corinthians 11:27-32

In this passage, Paul was writing to a church in the city of Corinth. They were a spiritually shallow church. They were not fully recognizing the character of the Lord. In fact, they were—whether ignorantly or purposefully—minimizing the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Read again: “*For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died*” (1 Corinthians 11:29, 30).

The people that Paul was writing to were believers. Yet he clearly indicates that they were at risk. Taking the Lord’s Supper thoughtlessly, can lead to serious consequences. Irreverent observance of such an exalted and important ordinance can result in consequences from the mild to severe. Paul noted their lack of soul-searching, introspection and silent confession, and the lack of appreciation of Christ’s sacrifice. This can result in a believer being “weak, ill...death.”

The Corinthians’ church had despised poorer members and having disregard for their needs. They coupled the celebration of the Lord’s Supper with a regular meal and then forbid some poor believers to be involved. This went against the work of unity and reconciliation of Jesus’ sacrifice to make the church a body of like-minded and concerned individuals (1 Corinthians 1:10). Paul pointed out that their behavior of disunity and alienation was an anathema to what the church was to profess.

The formula for prevention of judgment by the Lord for this outrage was to first examine oneself. This meant to test or approve, in order to recognize they lacked God’s approval of their actions. This assumed they would have a genuine scrutiny of their own attitudes and behavior.

If they were not willing to examine and correct their attitudes and behavior, then judgment can result in three categories: “weakness, illness, or death.”

The concept of *weakness* is a state of feebleness, or infirm. It means to be without strength or ability or to impotent. One just cannot get it done, whatever ‘it’ is. It may refer to a physical condition or lack of faith or inability to conquer a besetting condition like an addiction.

You may read the Bible and recognize the promises that God has in store for you emotionally or physically, but they do not translate into meaningful fulfillment in your own life. One may experience marginal improvements physically, emotionally, or spiritually, but not the ‘over-the-top’ conquering the Bible refers to. One might try all the harder with more prayer, effort, scripture memorization, etc., but still, there is little or no power that is moving in compelling ways. This may be the weakness which Paul was referring. This ‘weakness’ results from the lack of appreciation and self-introspection. Then there can be failure to correct and make amends for wrong attitudes and behavior, whether it be confession to a wronged person or to the Lord.

Listed next was *illness*. This meant sick or sickly, which can be in the physical state or emotional condition. The understanding of this word means to lose strength due to disease. Careless participation, thoughtlessness toward others, has a consequence.

Finally, there is *death*. Sometimes the Lord will bring the judgment of death to a believer for unrepentant, belligerent, and rebellious attitudes. This may be hard to accept, however, God deems it so. If a person will not scrutinize their own attitudes in the face of persistent stubbornness, then the Lord will take action. For a believer who might die, it means that you are good enough for heaven but not earth. If the Lord decides that your behavior is so destructive to others, he might call you home.

Caution

We need to be careful about observing conditions in someone's life and attributing God's judgment to their attitudes or behavior. This is only between the Lord and the person. For us to attach significance to an illness or death in another's life, and declare it has occurred because of their rebellion, is a careless conclusion. We do not know unless we have clear, unambiguous indications from the individual's own testimony. The imperative from these verses is for us is to examine ourselves, not others.

Paul was careful to warn in the previous chapter about this outlook: *"Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall"* (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Finally, Peter warned believers that the Lord has a formula for judgment. Before God deals with a culture or society as a whole, he puts his focus on the church. Before unbelievers can be introspective and thoughtful about their life choices, the Lord begins with, believers. Read carefully.

"For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?"

(1 Peter 4:17).

This is sobering, judgment begins with the household of God. The Lord does not necessarily put the cross hairs of his judgment weapons on unbelievers first. This term *judgment* can be a harsh term meaning condemnatory sentence, penal judgment. God is serious about the destructive qualities of sin and will deal with it. If we don't deal with it through introspection, then confession, and repentance, then he will.

Though the focus of this chapter has been on Christians, God does not stop with them. He will reveal his wrath to all of mankind. The somber side of the gospel is judgment. The good news is that one can escape judgment through the acceptance of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. However, if one chooses to ignore the free gift of salvation from judgment, that is one's choice, yet there remain horrible, eternal consequences.

"Your hand will find out all your enemies; your right hand will find out those who hate you. You will make them as a blazing oven when you appear. The Lord will swallow them up in his wrath; and fire will consume them" (Psalm 21:98).

Hypocrisy and deception will have no place before God, whether from believers, or nonbelievers. The difference is that believers are ultimately forgiven. Thus they live twice and die once while unbelievers live once and die twice.

The divine wrath is slow indeed in vengeance,
but makes up for its tardiness by
the severity of the punishment.

Valerius Maximus, *Encyclopedia of Religious Quotations*, 1965, p. 480

Interceding

The American military liberated Kuwait from a vile tyrant, Saddam Hussein. In 1991 in the Gulf War, the United States, in a coalition of the willing, interceded on behalf of oil-rich Kuwait to free it from the illegal invasion by bordering Iraq. America's blood and treasure was spent to free a country that was a victim of an appalling situation. A free and innocent country was wrongfully abused by a petty bully, and many came to the aid of Kuwait.

Most viewed this intercession as a noble cause. Though the price was costly in lives and money, it was regarded as an honorable war. Into the midst of that intractable conflict men were obligated to right a wrong and to prevent further tyranny.

Though this war was on a macro scale, could there ever be a time that God would allow or dictate that we intercede on someone's behalf to bring about a just, noble, or beneficial result? If there was a victim who needed help, would the Lord send us like a missile into the fray to help protect or liberate someone? The answer is of course. Christians are to be particularly sensitive to the plight of the helpless and innocent, using heroic efforts to alleviate critical needs.

Abigail

After David's victory over Goliath and before he became king of Israel, he was a fugitive from King Saul. He was a kind of Robin Hood figure, and a group of disenchanted men sought him out and became part of his troop of fighting men. David was not a villain, and he and his men did not rape and pillage to survive. Rather, they were quite a noble lot, in fact, his company of men provided protection and security for an at-risk population.

When protection was provided, there was an expectation that there would be reciprocity, that is, the protected would show their appreciation by giving David and his men food and items of necessity. There were no signed contracts, just an understanding, and this was honorable for both parties. David was not like a mafia godfather demanding payment for protection.

David's men were not mercenary, and they did not take anything that was not theirs. They treated people with dignity, and for their kindness, they were rewarded. However, these expectations carried great weight. If David's men sacrificed their time and influence, there was an understanding of barter, the recipient was to respond, thoughtfully.

There were plenty of thieves, vagabonds, and utterly ruthless cutthroats that would prey on the helpless. David and his men kept the human debris at bay.

In this mix was a wealthy man named Nabal. Nabal was rich in property but poor in character. He was a man, it seemed, who was prosperous because he was ruthless and cared little for whom he stepped on. The Bible described him as "*churlish and ill behaved*" (1 Samuel 25:3). *Churlish* means he was cruel and obstinate. He

could be insulting and dismissive without any regret. *Ill behaved* carries the idea of being disagreeable and unpleasant. Nabal was a thoroughly unlikable person. His name means *fool*.

David and his men had provided protection for Nabal's operation. One of Nabal's servants described David's men's conduct: "*Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when we were in the fields, as long as we went with them; they were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep*" (1 Samuel 25:15, 16). The cultural norm was for Nabal to show his appreciation by rewarding David's kindness.

David sent ten men to greet Nabal and send his regards and to kindly ask for his favor. Nabal, in accord with his name, was dismissive and insulting. "*And Nabal answered David's servants, 'Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants nowadays who are breaking away from their masters'*" (25:10). We know that this is not a best way to treat one who has treated you well. Nabal went on, "*Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers, and give it to men who come from I do not know where?*" (25:11).

There should have been a chill going up Nabal's spine, some sort of awareness that you don't pull on Superman's cape. Remember, David had a fearsome reputation after he had killed Goliath. He was not one you wanted to make angry. He was honorable and noble, but also just.

David and his men were outraged and strapped on their fighting gear. David was rightly incensed and stated: "*Surely in vain have I guarded all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; and he has returned me evil for good*" (25:21). Four hundred of David's six hundred men took off to wipe out Nabal and his estate. Sparks were flying as these four hundred men were on a mission to confront Nabal. They were as mad as hornets.

Meanwhile, back at Nabal's house, his wife Abigail was going about her day. Her character was the opposite of her husband. She was "*of good understanding and beautiful*" (25:3). In other words, she was wise, and prudent, in addition to being very attractive. One of her servants told her about the situation, and she understood the risk. She was in the midst of a deadly circumstance. She knew David's reputation as a fearsome but godly man. If he was fuming, that was very bad news for her, her family, and her household. It is difficult to steer a man who has righteous indignation.

Common sense would tell her to flee. Get out of there! Grab some valuables and get going. Four hundred, adrenaline pumped, angry fighting men are headed toward her home. She should turn and run for her life.

Abigail was in the midst of turmoil. Her world was in potential catastrophe. She was caught in the middle of a conflict that her foolish husband started, and formidable warriors are coming to destroy her world.

Should she flee or stand her ground? Either way, she was going to lose.

However, Abigail chooses a different option, one that was dangerous and uncomfortable, but a path that had potential success. She was a strong believer and trusted that the Lord was directing her steps to intercede on David's behalf. She went to confront the warrior David.

God sends one woman, Abigail, to prevent a nasty brawl. The numbers seem out of proportion, in fact one should feel sorry for the warriors.

The Lord's Plan

David was at risk. Not from Nabal or Abigail, but from his own action. He was acting too swiftly, and if he carried out the destruction of Nabal, then his reputation will suffer. Abigail was very perceptive since she recognized the hand of the Lord in this.

Abigail rode to intercept David. Her mission was one of respect and regard for David's future. She had his best interests in mind. David was seeking to destroy. While Abigail was preventing David's destruction. They are potential adversaries.

When she met David, she humbly approached him, disarming him with meekness. She expressed regret and remorse over the situation, while noting that though Nabal had acted foolishly, the Lord had better things in store for David than Nabal's punishment. Abigail stated, *"Now then, my lord [David], as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, seeing the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt, and from taking vengeance with your own hand" (25:26)*. Note she said, *"The Lord has restrained you."*

The Lord sent a wise and humble person to defuse an explosive situation. Abigail said much more than we will cover, but she had an understanding of who David was, his destiny, and the need for him to focus on matters that were more worthy of his future than this outrage. Abigail understood the nature of God and how he'd moved her to be put at risk for the welfare of David. She understood that her behavior would be a catalyst for how David would respond. She was very respectful and gracious, using noninflammatory words. She intuitively knew that fierce fighting men would only meet hard, edgy rhetoric with violence.

The Lord restrained David by sending a thoughtful, spiritually sensitive woman to minister to him. The Lord might send you into the midst of a bubbling cauldron of trouble to defuse a potentially harmful situation. The Lord might send you to be a blessing to antagonists, and to bring reconciliation of fighting parties through your mediatorship.

Perhaps a reason for some turmoil in one's life is the call to be in the midst of a conflict as a mediator. You might even be called to be the one who intercedes on behalf of your own antagonist. Abigail understood she and David were in deadly conflict, yet she ministered wisdom to him through the leading of the Lord. Difficult and trying circumstances might compel you to flee, but God just may use you to bring unity and harmony out of tension and upset.

We have looked at portions of the story of Job and the wretched situation that he experienced. The Lord took him to deep spiritual places allowing him profound insight through the things he suffered. Nonetheless, at the end of the book of Job, a startling incident took place. The Lord called Job to act as an intercessor on behalf of his antagonists.

After Job's life had been destroyed, his ten children died, and his vast fortune wiped out, his so-called friends came to grieve with him. However, these men soon presented reasons to Job why he was experiencing such devastation. Their arguments centered on the idea that Job was the reason for his own demise. They believed that Job had some sort of sin or failing, but Job resisted their opinion.

Their debates became heated, so much so that Job was disgusted with these friends. Job even had some interesting evaluations about his good buddies: *"miserable comforters are you all"* (Job 16:2). Job's friends were the kind of people who piled criticism on top of his suffering: *"How long will you torment me, and break me in pieces with words?"* (19:2). These friends caused him added grief!

Then, in spite of his grievous sorrow, the Lord expected Job to minister on behalf of his friends. Job was never asked by God, and Job never offered because he never saw their need. His friends were just an irritation and Job wished they'd disappear. All believers have the ability to minister to and in behalf of others.

After Job had contended with his friends, he and Jehovah had a little meeting of minds. In chapters 38 to 41, God revealed his overwhelming and unmatched might. It was a humbling experience for Job.

Job's answer to the Lord's revelation was repentance. First, Job acknowledged that he understood God's omnipotence and omniscience: *"I know that thou canst do all things, And that no purpose of thine can be restrained"* (Job 42:2. ASV). Then Job claimed his own ignorance: *"Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know"* (42:3).

"I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees thee" (42:5). Job has entered the experiential realm. Job came to a deeper understanding beyond information gathering. He came into intimate contact with the Lord. The result?

"Therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (42:6). Job was appalled by his own sinfulness and came to realize his need for repentance.

At the beginning of the book, Job had the ministry of intercession for his family (1:5). Then the Lord expanded his ministry. God put his sights on Job's friends:

After the Lord had spoken these words to Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite: "My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has."

Job 42:7, 8

Wait a Minute!

These friends had been unkind, even thoughtless. They had been full of answers, pushing Job around with debates and arguments. Now the Lord put his attention on these friends.

This was an interesting situation. The Lord provided an intercessor for these men. They could not come before the Lord because of their folly (42:8). The word *folly* carries the sense of immorality or disgraceful behavior. As a consequence, these men could not come before the Lord because of their shameful actions. They needed someone to intercede on their behalf. The one whom they rejected would become their mediator to the Lord. God would accept his servant, Job's spiritual service in their stead.

This is a picture of the gospel. We modern sinners are just like Eliphaz and his friends, though wellintentioned, immoral. Modern sinners need an intercessor that God would accept. That, of course, is Jesus Christ, whom God the Father accepts his spiritual service on our behalf. We may know a lot of religious information just like Eliphaz and his friends, but the Lord will not accept us unless we have one who intercedes on our behalf.

Job, willingly does spiritual service for his friends. He prays for them. *"And the Lord restored the fortunes of Job, when he had prayed for his friends; and the Lord gave Job twice as much as he had before"* (Job 42:10).

This story of Job's ministry in behalf of his so-called friends could not have happened without the pain and suffering of Job. Job's friends needed spiritual help, and one reason for Job to suffer was to give more profound insight concerning the Lord. This deepened relationship with the Lord then allowed Job to go beyond his pique with his shallow and callous friends. Significant revelation to Job ultimately brought spiritual benefit to his needy friends.

The Lord can and might use you to be an intercessor for people who will mistreat you. When you show thoughtful kindness to antagonists, they might be moved to understand how a loving God can accept them even after being wretched reprobates toward him.

Satan

And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him

Mark 1:26

In our modern world of sophisticated, educated people, there is a penchant for ignoring the nature of malevolent evil. It seems there is a hope in the worldly person that there is no such being as the Satan. There are only bad people who do bad things because they learned bad behaviors.

Here is the bad news: that conclusion is terribly naïve. Sadly, there is a being who is real, and who is able to manifest horrible works of despicable terror. There exists an individual who is absolutely wicked, and he hates you. You are his target.

Men don't believe in the devil now

As their father used to do.

They've opened wide their broadest creeds,

And let his majesty through.

The devil is voted not to be;

So, of course, the devil is gone—

But simple folks would like to know

Who carries his business on.

Christian Standard, August 8, 1982.p.3

To deny Satan's existence is foolish. Viewing Satan as a remnant of medieval superstition or believing the whole matter as an amusing joke, dilutes the reality of his existence. The skeptic often will ignore his presence and claim his effects are a manifestation of sick mankind.

I believe Satan to exist for two reasons:

First, the Bible says so, and second, I've done business with him.

Dwight L. Moody, *Christian Ministry*, Nov. 1974, p.24

Satan has quite a reputation and has significant influence to impact your life in detestable ways. Though he is powerful, he is not omnipotent, and he can be resisted and even defeated.

Our presupposition is that he does exist, and he causes much distress, pain, and sorrow. He has horrid intentions and is not in the least dissuaded by hurting people. Pain and heartache causes him no regret or guilt. In fact, he delights to do you harm. He hates to such an absolute degree that any gracious actions and benevolent deeds are wholly lost to him. He cares to not care.

Yet God, who is good, has allowed Satan to exist and to have an influence on mankind and the world. This is troubling to us. In the final analysis, we do not have the precise reason that the Lord has allowed the devil to have an influence within his creation. We only assume that it is for a compelling reason.

We can speculate that the presence of evil allows mankind to understand the depths of purity and love of a perfect and compassionate God. Or perhaps experiencing evil might allow one to appreciate one's own ability to choose despicable options. Or possibly witnessing evil allows one to understand the very close proximity of both good and evil and a seeming confusion about detecting either. Any one or all of these options might suffice to understand why a good God would allow evil within his domain.

Scientific Enlightenment: Denying Evil

The skeptic might reject the supernatural and deny that the devil and demons are patrolling this space-mass-time continuum, but to do so puts the skeptic at risk. Rejecting the supernatural and assigning unexplained phenomenon to superstition rather than inter-dimensional beings is not rational.

Scholarship and education are limited to the natural realm and natural law. Scientific methods and experimentation and inquiry cannot plumb the depths of the spiritual domain. Supernatural law supersedes natural law. Consequently, the certainty of Satan's existence is found in the Bible, and in the realm of personal experience. He is alive and well and is a menace. It is his nature to be malevolent, and he formed his outlook to be in opposition to God. He has somehow nurtured a coarse loathing toward God and means to bring harm to everything the Lord cherishes. That means God's creation, the natural world, and God's special creation, mankind, is in the cross hairs of the devil's hatred gun.

Satan: It is better to rule in Hell, Then serve in Heaven.

John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

Satan will use whatever abhorrent measure he can to foment harm. He gets a kick out of hurting people and things. Ghoulish and despicable practices by individuals who seem to be demon energized, testify to his nature.

Saddam Hussein's practice of putting living persons into plastic shredding machines for his own perverse pleasure smacks of something so heinous as to be evil incarnate. To take pleasure in the suffering of others in such grotesque ways assures us that there is a gross and disgusting influence that exists in the universe.

Now here is the bad news. Satan hates you and wishes you harm. Whether you are aware of it or not, life without spiritual war is impossible. You will not escape physical, emotional, moral, or spiritual antagonism.

Real Trouble From a Malicious Enemy

You are vulnerable to attack, and Satan is seeking an opportunity to pounce. If you are a Christian, you need to be alert because the devil is actively seeking an opportunity for a vicious assault. If you are not a Christian, you are at more of a risk since you have no heavenly advocate.

“Be self-controlled, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

In the Roman Coliseum at the time of Nero, Christians were persecuted in front of huge crowds by putting them in an arena with lions. The lions would maul and devour their victims. This example is a graphic illustration of this verse. Defenseless individuals were vulnerable when starved lions were released to attack them. The barbarity of this behavior is beyond explanation. This is how the devil eyes us as prey.

Whether Satan uses sadistic voyeurism, as in the Roman Coliseum, or if he uses manipulative and crafty intrigues to sting you, you are in a war with him. You may not have declared war on him, but he certainly has targeted you for harm.

Remember, the devil is an active being who has an intellect and will. His name *Satan* means adversary, one who opposes. It is his nature to come after you. You do not even have to antagonize him. He’s hateful toward you.

Permission Granted

If God is sovereign in this universe, he has ultimate control and destiny over all of nature, as well as the supernatural. Evidently, even Satan has boundaries and must act in accordance with some permissible limits. We might petition the Lord to use a heavy-hand, to pound Satan into a compliant condition, yet the Lord gives Satan limited freedom for the time being. With his limited freedom, he has the ability to attack individuals.

Paul, the Victim

And to keep me from being too elated by the abundance of revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being too elated.

2 Corinthians 12:7

Satan wages warfare. He is a strong adversary and he will assault. If we are aware of his tactics, we can prepare ourselves for the onslaught. *“Put on the whole armour of God that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Ephesians 6:11).* The word *put* has the sense of an eternal, forever, one-time event. This means a believer puts on the armor once, forever. To *stand* is a defensive skill by Roman soldiers fighting back to back, and this carries the idea of being firmly set, and able to carry on into the future.

So when Paul states that he was harassed by a messenger of Satan (2 Corinthians 12:7) we can imagine that it is a battle where Satan had opportunity to inflict some wound. But since Paul was writing, we are assured that he was not annihilated. He was standing, thus fighting.

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12). *Wrestle* is a contest between two, where each competitor endeavors to throw the other and then hold the other down with the hand upon the neck. Paul was in a spiritual battle that spilled over into the natural realm. If Satan cannot defeat someone in the mind, he'll attack in the body.

Peter, the Potential Victim

Jesus at the Last Supper warned Peter about his upcoming failure by denying Jesus three times (Luke 22:34). Jesus knew that Peter would fail in the battle with his own flesh. A few verses earlier, Jesus also warned Peter about another potential battle.

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat” (Luke 22:31). Satan demanded - pretty impudent - and yet he was limited since he had to ask God for permission. What does Satan want with Peter? Satan wanted to sift him, which means to grind Peter into powder.

Peter was a blustering fisherman of no great standing. He was just a common, ordinary, blue-collar working man. Peter would deny Jesus and become fearful and hide after the crucifixion. He was weak and ineffective yet he would be a threat to Satan. Whether he had potential as a great witness for Christ, or was a loser, he was in the cross hairs of Satan, and Satan wanted to grind him into dust. Satan had the intent and the power to make mincemeat out of Peter, for no other reason than hanging out with Jesus.

Jesus had an answer for the Satan problem. He told Peter, *“But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail”* (Luke 22:32). An interesting dynamic, faith would be the factor that could withstand Satan's onslaught. Peter would fail in his own strength, concerning his testimony (denying three times). The prayer of faith could effectively withstand a supernatural attack. Spiritual weaponry is effective.

Job, Another Victim

A classic story of the devil's malicious attack on a person was that of Job. Job was keeping to himself, not bothering anyone. He was a successful businessman, he had three daughters and seven sons, and he faithfully ministered in providing offerings for his children (Job 1:2, 3, 5). He was a respected man. In fact, both the Lord and Satan were aware of him and had a conversation about this man.

The Lord valued Job's character while Satan accused Job of being a Goody Two-shoes because God protected him (1:8, 10). Satan contends that Job would curse the Lord if he lost his wealth and family. Upon the request by Satan the Lord allowed Job to be subject to the devil's devices (1:11, 13-19). The devastation was horrific. Satan's attack was so malicious that all ten of Job's children were killed, and all his vast wealth was wiped out. Though the attack was horrifying, *“in all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong”* (1:22).

Of course, Satan's response to Job's character was to suppose he was selfish (2:4, 5). God allowed Satan to attack Job's person and the physical assault was nasty. *"So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord, and afflicted Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head"* (2:7). The reasons behind this will be explored later, but for our purposes at this point, it is sufficient to note that Satan has a malevolent hatred for the Lord's servants (1:8).

Satan's attack was without provocation and was meant to cause maximum emotional and physical destruction. He was hateful and spiteful, and his cruelty was not justified. Job did nothing to instigate the attack. His quality of life and his godly character were above reproach, yet Satan was a ghastly deviant opponent.

Jesus, the Perfect Victim

Jesus was without sin, having done nothing to merit death or vicious attack, yet as a man, he was subject to pointed attacks by Satan. Satan is audacious, and his character is so twisted that he is willing to even attack the most glorious person in the entire universe! His perverseness even prompted him to try and bring pain and suffering to Jesus Christ. This is colossal stupidity, since Jesus is the one who will judge him. But the blindness by corrupt depravity caused Satan to embark on this cause. Audacity can work if there is a hope for victory, but if there is no chance for victory, it is foolish. Why provoke your judge?

Note Jesus' position and power: *"For in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities — all things were created through him and for him"* (Colossians 1:16). For Satan to pointedly and repeatedly provoke Jesus is perverted. Yet that is what he did!

"And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). This verse clearly indicates that Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness and then came back at him "at an opportune time." At the Last Supper, Satan was present and was working. *"Then after the morsel, Satan entered into him [Judas]. Jesus said to him, 'What you are going to do, do quickly'"* (John 13:27). Satan set up the betrayal of Jesus by Judas!

It is apparent that Satan, is a dreadful opponent. No one is immune from his attacks, including you. However, we need not be overwhelmed by him since believers are the winners: *"in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you"* (Luke 4:13). In addition, *"He [Jesus] disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him"* (Colossians 2:15).

Furthermore, Satan's defeat is assured: *"For the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil"* (1 John 3:8). *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil"* (Hebrews 2:14). Consequently, if you're a believer, you can defeat him. *"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you"* (James 4:7).

Satan is a potent adversary and much pain and suffering in this world is solely the result of his efforts. Never doubt that his efforts are significant in the realm of the misery that this world experiences.

Remember, we are not given the specific reasons why the Lord has allowed Satan to have some liberty in our world. Perhaps knowing his intentions will prompt us to be circumspect in some of our choices. His potential attacks could lead us to prepare ourselves, so we are on the alert, having options ready for a response to him. Additionally, we need not be devastated, or overwhelmed if he does attack since we understand the possibility of his malice. We have an ally in the Lord and plenty of resources to recover if we experience his aggression.

The Work of Satan

He slanders and opposes God: Genesis 3:4, 5

He counterfeits God and His work: 2 Corinthians 11:14-15

He accuses and slanders believers: Revelation 12:10

He sows tares among believers: Matthew 13:38, 39

He incites persecution against believers: Revelation 2:10

He tempts believers to sin: 1 Corinthians 7:5; 1 Chronicles 21:1

He harasses believers: 2 Corinthians 12:7

He yearns to harm believers: Luke 22:31

He deceives nations: Revelation 20:3

He blinds the minds of unbelievers: 2 Corinthians 4:4

He takes the Word from unbelievers: Matthew 13:19

He hinders answers to prayer: Daniel 10:13

He seeks to resist believer's work: Zechariah 3:1

He brings about physical sickness: Job 2:6, 7

He brings about death: Hebrews 2:14

He battles angelic entities: Jude 9

He has a vast cohort of demons that do his bidding: Revelation 12

Creativity

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:26, 27

God, the Creator, gives limited ability to created beings. Furthermore, he granted mankind the liberty to create. Up to this point in the Genesis account, the primary characteristic revealed about the Lord was his creative power. He had the freedom to make what he deemed appropriate. Mankind was given the ability to be problem solvers, creative, entrepreneurial individuals who work out simple to complex issues.

When we take a view of the universe, in its parts, general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition.

Thomas Jefferson, *Religious Humanism*, Winter, 1986, p.9

An Argument to be Creative

The teleological argument is an attempt to reason, from design in the physical universe pointing to a cosmic designer. The universe is orderly, and this is true no matter where in the universe one travels. Carbon atoms in one quadrant of the universe are exactly the same as carbon atoms in all other quadrants of the universe. From subatomic matter to the galaxies, all conform to a blueprint, an order that was imposed upon it. The universe is an orderly matrix that is governed by laws of physics. Creation is coerced into obedience by natural laws.

Yet, a puzzling phenomenon is also evident. Nature left to itself tends toward disintegration. There is a process that tends toward disorder. These forces, order versus degeneration, are in a titanic struggle for control. The second law of thermodynamics identifies a tendency toward entropy. Every atom would disintegrate, fly apart into chaos, yet laws—information—keeps our physical world in relative conformity.

The Bible notes that God, the Creator, implemented this system. It is evident from the creation account in Genesis 1 and 2 that order was brought by the Lord. It is also evident from the account that he enjoyed the results of what he created. In fact, in Genesis 1, seven times it says the Lord created and then saw that it was good (Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31).

This word *good* means pleasant or agreeable and carries the added idea of being glad or happy. In human understanding, one might have an emotional response to being prosperous or having enormous benefit. *Good* carries an understanding of well-being and satisfaction. God experienced enormous gratification with his creation.

Here is the interesting part: we are made in the image of God to be the same sort of creative being. Certainly, we do not possess the same power or engineering prowess; however, people can think and plan creatively, and we can have pleasing results. We can be satisfied or be glad with the accomplished end.

Order Out of Disorder

In the creation account in Genesis 1, order came out of chaos. The chaotic condition was transformed by intuitive, creative, and bold measures from an outside force, God. This process assumes that there is dissonance that needs to be harmonized. Putting it another way, the state of chaos must be addressed and put into a condition of harmony and beauty.

Accordingly, the doctrine of man in the image of God is a core principle to mankind's creativity. Man transcends nature and is capable of acting upon it because of man's relationship to a transcendent God. God supersedes the natural order, and mankind can reign over nature because he transcends nature.

That sounds simple enough.

The Problem with Nature

Nature does not always comply with our creative abilities. It is very hard to impose our will upon the creative order. Though the universe did not oppose God, but was absolutely dependent on him for its very existence, it does contain forces that are contrary to order and harmony. Interestingly, moderns tend to think of this contrarian process of nature as personalization of nature. This thinking perceives nature as an entity that is to be admired and even obeyed.

Murphy's Law seems to manifest itself when we try to implement a strategy for inventing something: If something can go wrong, it will.

Necessity Is the Mother of Invention

From a practical outlook, mankind has been forced to be creative, to seek out remedies and inventions that would alleviate problems and create solutions. Additionally, mankind has felt the glorious delight of creative expression, putting on paper or canvas the triumphs or tragedies of life. Music, drama, architecture, art, and poems all have been life tales that create memories, whether melancholic or triumphant. This creative endeavor often is from some lack, or trouble, or seeking to overcome difficulty.

When one delves into merely the mechanistic and repairs things, auto engines, elevators, or wheelbarrows, there is a sense of well-being that accompanies the conquering of problems. Others involve themselves in higher cultural and artistic expressions of life—romance, heroism, philosophy—they too experience the glories of the creative experience – just like God.

Where there is beauty apparent, we are to enjoy it;

Where there is beauty hidden, we are to unveil it;

Where there is beauty defaced, we are to restore it;

Where there is no beauty at all, we are to create it.

Robert McAfee Brown, *Christian Century*, April 2, 1980, p.380

Beauty and Excellence

“And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God experienced great satisfaction because what he created was very beautiful. He was pleased.

After the enthralling assessment by the Lord, there was silence and stillness: *“Thus the heavens and the earth were finished”* (Genesis 2:1). Activity had ceased. All that the Lord had designed for his creative masterpiece was complete, and it seemed there was enjoyment and appreciation. *“Behold it was very good”* (1:31).

The heavens and earth were completed. They had been molded into an organized, disciplined body of work. The various components of the universe were put into a clever and workable array. And the Lord was delighted.

“And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done” (2:2). In this verse, God’s creative activity was described twice as *work*. This Hebrew word *work* designates skilled labor, work that is performed by a craftsman or artisan. This word expressed the skills of finesse and professionalism with a high degree of excellence. This work and its completion, plus its distinction, were so important that God memorialized it. It was going to be appreciated for all time.

“So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation” (2:3). It became a day of rest and appreciation of all the creative work God completed. In Genesis 1:28, God blessed mankind who was made in his image; then he blessed the seventh day. This day alone he sanctified, or set apart, for a time of appreciation. The Sabbath and mankind were blessed. God completed a great creative work and then blessed the project. It was a great conclusion.

“The Lord shall rejoice in his works” (Psalm 104:31, KJV).

Mankind’s Ability

The great artistic and creative work that the Lord completed was a process that mankind can also implement to a limited degree. Man can experience a similar satisfaction as a result of a creative endeavor.

Is there a compelling factor that will prompt us to invent or create? Yes, though not exclusively, discomfort can be a compelling influence for man’s creativity. Necessity is the mother of invention. This holds true even in creative endeavors. Mankind often is compelled toward expression of his experience. This may be joy, appreciation, exhilaration, or sadness, anger, hatred, confusion, or other diverse emotions which result from experience.

We are expressive when we are in tension, when we need to tell the world or help the world solve a need. This is true in the scientific realm and is true in other areas of endeavors, like exploration. Mankind is compelled to discover, create, and investigate.

Endurance

Ernest Shackleton was a great British explorer. He was most noteworthy for leading the ill-fated Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, also known as the Endurance Expedition between 1914 and 1916. Although Shackleton failed to achieve his goal of crossing the Antarctic continent on foot, he is known for his leadership abilities, which were evidenced when Endurance became stuck in ice.

Shackleton, known by his contemporaries as “the boss,” was able to lead his men to refuge on Elephant Island before heading across 1,287 kilometers (800 miles) of the open Antarctic Ocean to South Georgia Island with five other men. Upon reaching the remote island, Shackleton crossed difficult mountainous terrain to reach a whaling station at Grytviken. Once he arrived, he was able to muster a ship to rescue his men on Elephant Island. All the men on Endurance survived their ordeal after spending twenty-two months in the Antarctic.

In order to get a qualified crew for his grueling expedition, Shackleton placed an advertisement in a London newspaper, *The Times*. It read, “Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success. Ernest Shackleton.” Over five thousand persons responded to the ad!

There is a need in people to respond to danger and intrigue or great adventure, or to conquer overwhelming conditions. Mankind has an inborn need to make harmony out of chaos. They simply believe that difficulties can be addressed and brought into conformity, and honor and recognition were reward enough to engage in this great exploring adventure.

Cool!

A Bose-Einstein condensate (BEC) is a state of matter of bosons confined in an external potential and cooled to temperatures very near to absolute zero (0 degrees Kelvin or -273.15 degrees Celsius). Under such super-cooled conditions, a large fraction of the atoms collapse into the lowest quantum state of the external potential, at which point quantum effects become apparent on a macroscopic scale. So what?

This state of matter was first predicted as a consequence of quantum mechanics by Albert Einstein, building upon the work of Satyendra Nath Bose in 1925, hence the name. Seventy years later, the first such condensate was produced by Eric Cornell and Carl Wieman in 1995 at the University of Colorado at Boulder NIST-JILA lab using a gas of rubidium atoms cooled to 170 nano-Kelvin (nK) (-273.150000017 degrees Celsius). For this effort Eric Cornell, Carl Wieman, and Wolfgang Ketterle at MIT were awarded the 2001 Nobel Prize in Physics.

When these three scientists described their endeavor, they acknowledged they were eager to conquer the quandary of providing the conditions for the Bose-Einstein condensate. Problems occurred over the course of many years and involved constant work and failures. The challenges from rival groups, the competition to confirm this new state of matter, brought intensity that made working around the clock a necessity, as well as working doggedly through trials.

These three scientists, as well as their competitors, worked hard, then failed, went back to work harder, and failed again, which prompted another round of working hard, then being set back by another failure. These men had to keep a constant vigil, pursuing their goal with persistence and tenacity, not letting their workload, keen competition, or any other struggle deter them from their mission.

Finally, their resolve paid off, and they achieved the goal of getting their cocktail mix of atoms to a temperature of 1/175th billionth of a degree above absolute zero. This monumental feat secured for them the Nobel Prize in Physics. Their determination and steadfastness in pursuit of a fourth state of matter—liquid, solid, gas, and now the Bose–Einstein condensate—won them notoriety. The recognition of their expertise and persistence was a payoff that far exceeded financial rewards. The satisfaction they received from their own hard labor and effective work habits, coupled with peer appreciation, gave them fulfillment. Their compensation was their contentment in a job well done.

Shackleton, the explorer, and these three scientists all experienced the same sense of appreciation of conquering or problem solving. Their pursuit of excellence was a race to produce something that was grander than themselves. It was their destiny; they had to do what they felt they were called to do, no matter the circumstances or consequences. They overcame all sorts of bitter failures and crushing setbacks, and they found the resolve to carry on in spite of problems.

God might allow us to look at an issue or problem or creative enterprise and seek to work toward a satisfactory conclusion or workable solution. The Lord took immense pleasure in his creative work, and the enjoyment he took from so great an endeavor, he passed on to all of us. He even set a memorial to his completion of his great work, celebration of the Sabbath to reflect upon his endeavor. The great joy and enormous satisfaction he experienced can also be enjoyable for us in our endeavors.

First, Inner Contentment

“But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to rejoice will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor” (Galatians 6:4). There is an appreciation that God allows for every individual to have self-esteem, gratification in a job well done, within him or herself. Preceding this self-satisfaction is humility. *“For if any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself”* (Galatians 6:3). Don’t let your self-estimation exceed reality.

Galatians 6:3 is pride, an attitude of conceit, thinking that one is above failure. The remedy for this is Galatians 6:4, where one is told to test his own actions. This means rather than comparing oneself with others, one should take an objective look at oneself and his accomplishments. Then one can take self-satisfaction in what

God has done in and through one's life. This self-esteem is not sinful, but an internal celebration within our own emotional and spiritual being.

The Lord delights to have us experience glorious, successful enterprises. *Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,* (Ephesians 3:20). Remember, we are made in his image; the things that please God will please us. He had great happiness in his Creation, and the same sort of satisfaction awaits us, even in the midst of difficult trials and setbacks.

This chapter may be confused with our look at fruitfulness, but the difference lies in the outcome. Fruitfulness in our lives was the aim. However, in creativity, fulfillment and satisfaction are the rewards.

For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.

(Col. 1:29 ESV)

The Lord's Pain and Suffering

Many people view God as immense and powerful, insulated from outside forces. He is viewed as being separated in his heavenly dwelling. He dutifully watches the situations on earth, and he even inserts some management directives occasionally to influence outcomes.

Many think that God is likened to a sports reporter, one who watches an athletic event and then reports the game with impartiality. The reporter has no bias to either of the competing teams and merely relays information to interested fans. The game may be exciting or intriguing, but the reporter sets his personal interests aside, does his job and then he goes on with his life.

This is how the Greek and Roman gods, Jupiter or Zeus, etc. were perceived. The gods were unimpressed with mankind for the most part and had to be bargained with in terms of religious ritualism. One had to make solemn promises to the gods, along with specific sacrifices or offerings if one desired a precise outcome or if peril was to be averted.

The gods were quite busy with their own interests and heavenly intrigues to be bothered much with mankind. Mankind was left to fate.

Jehovah is not like this.

Unlike the sports reporter, the Lord subjects himself to the effects of pain, suffering, and sorrow. In our athletic analogy, the Lord is more like the coach of an athletic team, planning, directing, and experiencing the effects of the event. He is ultra-involved, even willing to take a dousing of the Gatorade if need be.

God's Pain

Many of you might have an internal protest over the concept, that a powerful, Creator God is subject to pain, because something does not jive with that idea. Perhaps the argument is that a sovereign God has no need to let the matters of discomfort and sorrow invade his existence. Isn't God like the wealthy that hire people to do their menial tasks? God need not concern himself with the trivial. He's got bigger problems like managing gamma radiation bursts from a far off galaxy or those nasty immense black holes that are sucking all kinds of cosmic matter into their vortex. Shouldn't that be his focus, managing the universe?

Why would God experience pain? Why wouldn't he create a universe where he is immune from suffering? After all, pain and suffering are so toxic to us that we try every conceivable way to deflect it. Why would the Lord allow it to impact him?

Usually, everyone is upset at God for allowing suffering into our world, wondering why we have to be the subject of its effects. However, not many wrestle with the issue of why the Lord subjects himself to the consequences of pain. Our proposal is if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces

a benefit for the sufferer of which would not be provided without the suffering. Think carefully. What is the benefit to God in his suffering?

Before we tackle that problem, let's look at some instances where the Lord himself suffers. Since God is three in one – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – we'll see each one experiences pain. From our knowledge of history, we certainly are assured that Jesus of Nazareth suffered physically. His torture before and on the cross was excruciating, beyond our ability to comprehend. Now let's look at God the Father.

God's Grief?

“And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:6).

In the time of Noah, before the great flood, the situation on the earth was a mess. Mankind deteriorated into a wicked and violent culture. Man had declined into such a depraved state that when Jehovah looked at them, he had two responses.

First, he was sorry. This ought to jangle your conceptions about God. Didn't he foresee all this? He sure did however, God allowed mankind liberty and their choices they made led to a moral nosedive and consequently disaster. The Lord isn't stoic about their poor choices. He's emotionally connected to mankind and has a response to their moral failures. He experiences grievous emotional pain, watching them.

I have a grandson who, when he was just seven months old, had to have surgery to close four holes in his heart. After the surgery, I visited him in the recovery room. He could only cry because of his discomfort. He was too small to speak words, but he could express his pain. His little face expressed profound distress, and I was sorry. It hurt me to see him experience such adversity.

God has the same reaction to people in distress. When he viewed mankind's predicament, he was sorrowful, not that he created mankind, but that he made man on the earth. He was never sorry he made man. However, because of man's sin all of the earth, all the plants, the animals, the birds, and all living creatures were going to suffer consequences because of mankind's choices. All ecosystems and biosystems would be negatively impacted. The choices of man's depravity touched much more than just the progenitor of sin.

Second, the entire circumstance of man grieved him. This involved deep emotional pain that went beyond regret to vexation, even torture. This situation was torturous to the Lord. This was not merely mild upset. Rather, God agonized over the condition of mankind.

Israel in the Wilderness

Now consider the twelve tribes of Israel after they had gained their freedom from Egypt. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years and were as contrarian as could be. They were ungrateful, demanding and rebellious. The Lord had a response to their attitude.

“How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert” (Psalm 78:40). Here is the same word as Genesis 6:6: grievous, painful. It was torturous for the Lord to expect them to repent and to give them blessing. They refused!

“They tested him again and again, and provoked the Holy One of Israel” (78:41). The word *provoke* carries the sense of deliberately causing pain. The Israelites, for some strange reason, felt like poking a finger in the eye of God, not just once, but repeatedly!

Later in the Psalms, the Lord reflects on Israel’s perversity toward him.

“Forty years long was I grieved with (that) generation, And said, It is a people that do err in their heart, And they have not known my ways” (Psalm 95:10, ASV). The word *grieved* in this verse carries the idea of loathing. The Lord was so disappointed that he detested Israel for their behavior.

Here is food for thought. Israel’s behavior was so grievous that the Lord loathed them. It is conceivable that some of our behaviors could be of such a nature as to grieve the Lord. Furthermore, it is possible that we are blind to the fact that we have caused and are causing heartache to the Creator of the universe.

King David

Not only can a nation hurt the Lord, a single individual can bring sorrow and grief to him. Earlier, we shared at length David’s infidelity with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah. Afterward, Bathsheba had an appropriate mourning period over Uriah’s death; and she made a culturally acceptable demonstration of grief. I believe she sincerely grieved in losing her child.

“And when the mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife, and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord” (2 Samuel 11:27). The word *displeased* in our culture sounds like mildly distracted or upset. The Hebrew word *displeased* is quite different. It means to quiver or to shake. The Lord trembled. This is not a word for anger. God was so hurt that he shook. David’s behavior and his inappropriate actions were so offensive that the Lord was impacted with sadness and grief.

I have been hurt by the behaviors of my children. I have experienced deep grief and pain as a result of their rebelliousness. It is entirely appropriate to reflect on our own behaviors and consider the grief our choices have on our Lord who loves us.

Jesus

We have already noted the horrible mistreatment that Jesus endured on the cross. It is the epicenter of Christian theology. In addition to his physical suffering, he experienced emotional and spiritual distress.

His emotional agony was a heavy burden. Psalm 69 is a sorrowful song, and on the surface one can see that it is a song written by David. However, at another level, this song points into the future and earmarks another

one who is also the object of the song. Psalm 69 is called a messianic psalm since it clearly points to the future Messiah, Jesus Christ.

“They gave me also gall for my food; And in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink” (69:21, ASV). This verse obviously points to Jesus on the cross. The Sixty-ninth Psalm is laden with sorrow. Four times the word *reproach* appears in the Psalm (verses 7, 10, 19, 20). This word signifies a condition of shame or disgrace that has been heaped upon Christ.

Additionally, verse 9 indicates *reproaches*, a plural, and *reproached*. In other words, he received all sorts of insults. Verse 9 illustrates that the shame and insults were directed at him. Jesus’ motives were targeted and his enemies were deadly. The KJV uses the word *reproach*, the RSV says, *“For zeal for thy house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me.”* In the beginning of the verse, the Messiah’s ardent zeal was for the glory of God. However, observers accused him of sinister motives. Those who targeted God for insults now turned their attention to the Messiah and made him the target of their ire. The Messiah also bore the insults aimed at the Father.

These insults and vicious verbal attacks do have an effect. *“Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none”* (69:20). *Broken my heart* is likened to someone taking a hammer and smashing an object into pieces. Our Lord had a broken heart. Yet, he did not respond in kind: *“When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly”* (1 Peter 2:23). Though severely emotionally wounded, he did not reciprocate. Christ was not vindictive.

Another Old Testament passage spoke to this emotional turmoil and pain that Jesus suffered is Isaiah 53:3: *“He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.”* Jesus received no pity, no comfort. Even his disciples abandoned and denied him. Jesus was alone and mightily abused. *“I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none”* (Psalm 69:20).

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, we would certainly expect that he was beyond the efforts of mankind to hurt him. Saul of Tarsus, later to become the Apostle Paul, was on a mission, *“and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting’”* (Acts 9:4, 5). Even after Jesus had left this physical world, he could still experience pain? *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”* Extraordinary! Persecution in this sense means to run after, to drive away. Saul of Tarsus was murdering Christians, and this was a horrid experience for the Lord Jesus. We can image our own painful horror if a family member is hurt or killed by a fanatical terrorist. This is what Jesus was experiencing because Saul was killing his followers.

Spiritual Angst

Let’s, take into account the consequences of Jesus becoming sin for us. *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God”* (2 Corinthians 5:21). The summary of

the entire gospel is in this verse. The cross epitomizes the love of God (John 3:16). In order for the sins of the world to be forgiven, just as in our court system, there are penalties for breaking the law. Someone must pay a fine or face incarceration or deprivation. Jesus took on himself the sins and the penalty for the entire world, every man, woman, and child, whoever lived (John 1:29; 1 Peter 2:24).

God the Father made him, Jesus, to be sin for us (Isaiah 53:4-6, 10). The sins of the world were placed on him, so his righteousness could be given to those who trust in him. You do not have to accept his work on your behalf, but why wouldn't you?

"If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:17).

Think of Jesus on the cross. He utters seven statements. The first was *"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34), and the last was *"Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!' And having said this he breathed his last"* (23:46). The middle phrase Jesus uttered was *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46). Why the change in name from my Father to my God?

Jesus had never been separated from his Father before. Jesus entered a new situation in being forsaken by his heavenly Father. Since becoming the embodiment of sin, the Father had to turn judicially from his beloved Son (Romans 3:25-26). Jesus always had perfect fellowship with his heavenly Father, without conflict, without competition, always perfect love. Then on him was put all the sins, from all mankind, for all time.

When I reflect on my past life and the shameful things that I have done, I myself am abhorred by my behavior, and I shudder, shaking my head to make the memories go away. However, all my sin was placed upon Jesus, and not mine only but everyone's sin. What an absolutely horrid thing. I can barely stand my own ignoble history, but to have the sins of all others other's piled upon me would be dreadful.

Jesus willingly took those sins, knowing he would be seen by his heavenly Father as detestable. So it was as Jesus cried in protest in losing his Father's tender attention. He had never experienced separation from his Father who at this point must turn away. The Father's holiness prevented him from looking at Jesus, who was a detestable mass of sin. *"Thou who art of purer eyes than to behold evil and canst not look on wrong"* (Habakkuk 1:13).

Jesus' willingness to lose his Father's affection and become the object of his Father's judgment in place of you and I, had to have been most painful. Jesus' became sin for us and bore the penalty of our sinfulness. Thus our sin was grotesque to bear.

Even before the cross, when Jesus considered the upcoming torture and loss of his relationship with his Father, he experienced agony. In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed to his Father: *"And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became as it were great drops of blood falling down upon the ground"* (Luke 22:44). Jesus was in great agony, turmoil so intense that he sweated blood.

“The ultimate purpose of the universe is to display the greatness of the glory of the grace of God. The highest, clearest, surest display of that glory is in the suffering of the best Person in the universe for millions of undeserving sinners.”^[15]

Holy Spirit

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). We have the capacity to hurt the Holy Spirit.

This verse is sandwiched on both sides by alerting believers to abusive, unkind words. *“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear”* (4:29). Our language should be thoughtful and gracious, even helpful. Believers are not to speak unwholesome words. When we do not speak with grace but use nasty bantering, this grieves the Spirit.

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice” (4:31). There are six vices listed in this verse that will cause the Holy Spirit grief. The first is bitterness, which is deeply unkind and produces hatred. The next is wrath, which is an explosive outburst. Then anger is identified, which is violent, impulsive emotion. Fourthly is clamor or brawling. This identifies shouting and yelling as unacceptable. Fifthly is slander, *blasphemia*, or gossip. Finally, malice is listed and means ill will or a desire to injure, either with words or action. These behaviors are to be deleted in the human program by believers. Thus verses 29 and 31 give a succinct list of what grieves the Holy Spirit.

One is tempted to be irreverent and tell the Holy Spirit to toughen up. For goodness sakes, we run into this sort of language or behavior everyday, and we do not have this sort of revulsion. We just deal with it. Being an ex-Marine, encountering the most sordid of language, I know that one can become immune to vile words. However, the Holy Spirit is just that, holy. That which is unholy, one does not get used to if one is holy. One is impacted by unkindness or hurtful words. The Holy Spirit is hurt by thoughtless and unkind words and deeds.

Let's Think About This

In these previous examples, we have shown how the Lord does not exempt himself from experiencing the effects of pain. God has no buffer zone around him to protect himself from negative events in his universe. He could have.

God could have exempted himself from sorrowful experiences.

The Lord does not exempt himself from negative consequences because he can use them for good, not in himself, but for the benefit of those who he loves. Remember our premise that a good God allows evil because it produces a benefit for the sufferer, one that would not be provided without the suffering.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in

every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

These verses clearly indicate that Jesus, who is our High Priest, is not removed from the realities of our human experience. His involvement with us, assures us that he can sympathize with our weaknesses. Our feebleness is something he experienced as a human being. In his humanity, Jesus experienced the reality of pain, sorrow, privation, hunger, exhaustion, making him perfectly attuned to life issues we face. Jesus was not isolated from the reality of earthly life. He lived life here in all its drabness and with all its pressures. He not only survived the ordeal of earthly life, he triumphed over it and had a victory that we can hope for.

Jesus' humanity and his death on the cross makes him uniquely qualified to give us something, something we could not have otherwise. We receive the confidence to approach God.

Hold on!

"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). There are no preconditions or prerequisites in this verse other than approaching God with confidence. The confidence is not in our nature but in Jesus' character. Jesus did all the groundwork. Finished, *fini*, done.

You, *draw near to the throne of grace*. You cannot clean yourself up to look good enough to God. He knows every little tiny detail about you, even your thoughts. You're not going to surprise him with some new information that he did not know about you. You're known completely! We are not a big mystery to the Lord. He knows us far better than we know ourselves.

He does not have a big whooping stick waiting for you. He's not going to embarrass you. He does not want to humiliate or get even with you.

Decades ago, I was in Russia with other Christians, teaching public school teachers a curriculum based on morality and ethics. We used the Bible as our source material. The hundreds of teachers attending our conference were not Christians, but most were hard-lined communist atheists. We gave them information and let them decide how they would handle situations.

We told them the first part of the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24). We explained about the ungrateful son took his inheritance and squandering it all on profligate living. Then the son decided to go home because he squandered his inheritance. We asked the teachers what they would do if their son did this to them. They all were indignant and would severely punish the young man, heaping scorn upon him for being so thoughtless and bringing so much grief and humiliation to them.

Then we told them the ending of the story, how the father looked for the young man and ran to him, showering him with kisses and greetings, then held a party for him. The teachers were stunned. A feather could have

knocked them over. They had never considered such a response. When we further related that their heavenly Father was like this, and they were like the son, their demeanor changed. First they had thoughtful appreciation to being awestruck at the wonderful nature of God. They never knew that God was so good!

Perhaps you do not know that God is good, so good that you can confidently approach him. *“Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need”* (4:16). You do not need to keep distance from God. He is approachable and is willing to receive you into his presence. When you do enter into his presence, good things are in store for you: mercy and grace.

What are Mercy and Grace?

Mercy in the biblical sense has to do with kindness. It's not a kindness that you are such a pitiful loser God can't help himself but to help you. Rather, it carries the understanding that a person who is in need can receive help because of the goodness in the one who gives. It is not about the receiver, it's about the giver. Mercy finds no further fault and then gives comfort.

Grace also carries a sense of kindness. This is in accord with what someone does not have. He is lacking something, and his condition is blessed by someone who, in joy, gives him what he needs. Grace is not earned. A person is in a position that they do not consider receiving it. Grace comes without merit.

Mercy is not giving what is deserved while grace is giving what has not been earned. These characteristics are available to us because Jesus became a human and suffered. Without his experience of the human condition, you could have no confidence whatsoever that kindness can be in store for you. When we fully realize that Jesus came into the world for our particular need and benefit, we can have boldness to enter into the presence of our heavenly Father, who is willing in kindness to meet our needs.

Jesus allowed himself to experience pain and sorrow, so that we can be confident that we have an advocate who knows exactly what we're suffering, since he himself has walked the same path in the same shoes as you. Additionally, God the Father and God the Spirit also can be counted on to identify with your situation, since they have willingly experienced grief and loss. You can be assured they are thoughtful enough to minister to your needs.

Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.

Isaiah 30:18

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.

Rom 8:26

The Lord's Reputation

For it is for thy sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face.

Psalm 69:7

For zeal for thy house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me.

Psalm 69:9

Thou knowest my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to thee. Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none.

Psalm 69:19, 20

In my life after my service in Vietnam, I was an immoral young man. I remember hanging out in a bar when two big, burly toughs walked in and were going to make an impression on everyone in the bar. These two were hard nosed guys, and they wanted to prove it to anyone who would challenge them.

No one challenged them, and they became louder and more boisterous. A young barmaid was managing the place, and she asked them to behave themselves. Since she was the only one who confronted them, they focused on her as their target. They verbally abused her and threatened her with harsh words. She, of course, shrunk from them, and they followed with a brutal verbal attack. Then I heard a voice challenge these men, "Leave her alone!" The only problem with this voice was it came out of my mouth! I shocked myself with my outburst.

These two gentlemen now turned their attention to my five-foot-nine-one-hundred-sixty-five-pound frame, and saw a new challenge to their manhood. Now their belligerence would have a real outlet. Everyone else studied their mug of beer very thoughtfully. I quickly got off my bar stool and went to the pool table and grabbed a pool cue. This was going to be a nasty few minutes, and I was going to make it count.

As they eyed me and were approaching around the table, the proverbial cavalry arrived. Two policemen walked through the door. What timing! Someone had called them, and they arrived on the scene just before I would get myself hurt. The police carted the two brutes off to jail, and I was a hero.

I reacted to the men because they were threatening the young lady, not because they were big oafs. I was coming to the aid of the barmaid who was pitifully weak against those thugs. I was interceding on her behalf because she was not able to stand up to them.

Here is an interesting thought. Sometimes the Lord allows us to stand up for him on his behalf. God, the mighty Creator who wields such immense power that he controls the entire universe, has a need. There are hundreds of billions of stars in the Milky Way galaxy alone, and there are perhaps hundreds of billions of

galaxies, and he manages and created all that! You'd think he could stand up for himself! Well, he can, but then again, he doesn't or sometimes he may not.

Wait! God is all powerful and can do anything he sets his mind to. I am telling you that this powerful God often waits for an advocate who protects his reputation.

Sometimes the Lord waits for people of faith to exercise some gumption on his behalf. He's worthy to receive our praise, and he's worthy to receive our protection.

David and Goliath

And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, "I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will." Acts 13:22

David was a man after God's heart. In fact he pursued the heart of God. He loved the Lord and sought his highest good.

Remember the story when David was a young man, Israel was facing off against the Philistines? The Philistine champion was nine feet nine inches tall and probably weighed close to seven hundred pounds. He could play guard and tackle on an NFL offensive line. Goliath was big and mean. War was his business, and business was good.

The Israelite army faced the Philistines, but they didn't have a champion to challenge this monster. David came on the scene and witnessed the occasion when Goliath was challenging the Israelites. *"All the men of Israel, when they saw the man, fled from him, and were much afraid"* (1 Samuel 17:24). No one stood up to fight him. David was astounded at Goliath's behavior and he asked, *"For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?"* (17:26). David was worried about the honor and reputation of the Lord, not about Goliath's gigantic size.

In fact, David was so perturbed by Goliath's behavior that he requested an audience with King Saul. He told Saul that he would fight Goliath. Saul was a bit taken aback by David's audacity, but David explained that he had fought lions and bears and killed them. *"Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, seeing he has defied the armies of the living God,"* (17:36).

Again, David took note that Goliath had defied God. David was going to stand up for the Lord's reputation! David boldly proclaimed this matter of the honor of the Lord before the most influential man in the kingdom, Saul. He didn't hesitate to be bold in his testimony, just as he is bold enough to fight.

David understood that God could just take Goliath out himself if he wanted. One lightning bolt, and poof, Goliath's toast. David could wait for God to fight his own battle, but David's heart won't allow him to delay.

David was even bold enough to accuse Goliath that he has defied God! Well, Goliath was a religious man, too. He was just as bold with his religious fervor as David, *"and the Philistine cursed David by his gods"* (17:43).

Two warriors were squaring off, arguing theology. David retorts his now common point, “*then David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied’*” (17:45). David emphasized the point that the Lord’s reputation was at risk, and he was going to defend it!

In fact, David utters a startling statement. He said their fight was so important that the entire world will hear about the reputation of the Lord.

This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down, and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel.

Samuel 17:46

The Lord’s reputation mattered a great deal to David and he declared that the Lord’s renown would be revealed to the entire earth. It came about not because God used a bolt of lightning, but rather one person stood for God’s honor to be upheld.

However, David went through a very challenging and dangerous experience. David had to put his own reputation on the line in front of thousands of Israelite soldiers. He gave an impassioned defense of the Lord’s name and character to Saul, the ruler of Israel. Then he also defended God’s nature to Goliath, this fierce antagonist. Nothing about this event for David was easy. This was a severe time of testing for him.

Jesus the Radical Intimidator

The Jewish temple, at the time of Jesus was an impressive wonder. Herod the Great had reconstructed the temple, and the surrounding temple mount. It was an awesome complex of beautiful buildings and majestic outer courts. Fourteen acres of open courtyard surrounded the temple itself. When foreign Jews came to the temple to worship, they needed to buy animals for sacrifice. The temple courtyard became an active marketplace. Money exchanging and purchasing of animals was big business, and it was handled adjacent to the magnificent temple proper.

And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’; but you make it a den of robbers.”

Matthew 21:12, 13

The cleansing of the temple is told in all four gospels and may have involved more than one occasion. The issue that was so offensive to Jesus was the use of the temple courtyards. It was changed from a place of adoration and worship to corrupt commercialism. His heavenly Father’s house was being misused and had become a place of extortion and exorbitant overcharging. Jesus was outraged, and he took matters into his own hands.

Jesus went blasting through hundreds of people pushing and throwing them around. The words of verse 12 describe his behavior that includes a level of violence that you would be surprised to see in a patient, loving individual. In John 2:15, it says, *“And making a whip of cords, he drove them all out of the Temple.”* Sweet, mild-mannered Jesus was whipping and hitting people. My goodness, something had outraged him. It was the insult to his Father’s reputation.

“It is written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer’” (Matthew 21:13). Jesus even quoted scripture while he violently purged fourteen acres of corruption. He was quoting Isaiah 56:7: *“These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”*

Bible verse, and *wham!* His eyes must have been flashing and his whip smacking. Righteous indignation oozed from every pore of his body as he released justified judgment. Never, ever think that Jesus was so mild mannered that he wouldn’t hurt a fly. He was angry and expressing it with justified outrage.

All this was instigated by his Father’s reputation being sullied. The religious authorities certainly should have been morally outraged by the corruption and degrading condition of their temple as well. But they were not.

“And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him” (Mark 11:18). The religious authorities wanted to kill Jesus. Their religious mandate of care for the integrity and honor of the Lord and for the care of the temple had been compromised. It seemed God’s honor was just not that important to them. Their commerce was. Eventually, their insidious intentions would bear fruit and they would have the Lord crucified. Jesus was well aware of all this.

Jesus was willing to bear extreme consequences for the reputation of his heavenly Father. He knew men’s hearts. He was aware of the consequences of his actions. Extreme hostility was going to be coming his way, and he knew it, yet he did not shrink from it. The honor of God was too important to overlook, even if it led to losing his own life. Death was preferable to God being dishonored.

Couldn’t Jesus just have been careful and preached a sermon? The people who were buying and selling weren’t interested in spiritual matters. Rather, self-interest was their motivation. Their hearts were black and hard. They were not going to listen to provocative words. Actions were the thing that would get attention.

So Jesus acted, just like David acted in confronting Goliath. Both put themselves into extreme situations that were life threatening. There was no easy way out, and both made their own behaviors subject to questions and eventually antagonism. King Saul even tried to kill David because he was so popular. Malice and misinterpretation were in store for David and Jesus, when they protected the understanding about God. They were not protecting property, relics, or artifacts, they were defending God’s reputation.

Job, the Unknowing Protector

Earlier we mentioned Job concerning the Lord’s ministry in his life. God gave Job a deeper understanding of knowing him. God allowed some critical losses to come into his life for that reason. Yet, as we explore fur-

ther, we see that Job was allowed to experience much of his pain because the Lord's reputation was at stake. Job never learned about these conditions. As far as we know, he was never privy to the machinations in the heavenly realm that made him the epicenter of a spiritual controversy.

We learned earlier that Job was a father of ten, seven sons and three daughters and that he was the wealthiest and most prestigious man of his day and time, *"so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east"* (1:3). He was also a pious man, faithful in religious practice, acting out his faith with persistence.

And when the days of the feast had run their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, "It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

Job 1:5

Job was peerless, thoughtful, and godly. He was a successful man in many respects. Perhaps he is one that we would want to trade places with, until, of course, we find out that he is going to have a bitter pill to swallow. Furthermore, his hardship was not going to be the product of his own making. He was a central figure in a celestial argument, and the attention on him was because of his relationship with the Lord.

The following verses are not talked about much, but they present a brief glimpse into a heavenly setting. *"Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them"* (Job 1:6). This indicates that Satan did have access to heaven and had the opportunity to bring concerns before God. Knowing the character and nature of Satan, *"the accuser of our brothers,"* (Revelation 12:10), we are confident of his reasons for approaching God (Zechariah 3:1). Satan wanted to bring ethical charges against believers and against God himself.

Though in the presence of the Lord, Satan appeared a bit coy. *"The Lord said to Satan, 'Whence have you come?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it'"* (Job 1:7). Satan was so clever, even seeking to hide his agenda. 'I was just out for a walk!'

Though Satan wasn't honest, the Lord put his finger on Satan's target. *"And the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?'"* (1:8). Satan, it seems, had been eyeing Job, watching him carefully, fully aware of his character and situation. In our chapter on Satan, we noted that Satan is malicious and only has negative intent for followers of the Lord.

We are interested in whom Satan accuses, and it was not necessarily Job. Though Satan does respond initially to the Lord's observation, he pointed out that Job is nothing special; he's just protected. *"Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nought?'"* (1:9).

Satan added an audacious point. He accused the Lord. Satan attempted to put God on trial. *"Hast you not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land"* (1:10).

It is at this point that one marvels at the patience of God. He was being accused of protecting Job so that he can look good. Imagine that the entire population of heaven's celestial beings is watching this interchange. There are innumerable witnesses to Satan's charge. Millions of angels were quietly observing (Hebrews 12:22; Revelation 5:11).

Furthermore, Satan added that the Lord's protection of Job was to prevent him from cursing God: *"But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face"* (1:11). Satan contends that Job was a charade, and that his protection prevented the Lord from suffering some sort of curse from him. Satan contended Job's situation was a big façade to impress observers. Job was not genuine. His allegiance to the Lord was just a fraud.

If I was God, I can imagine my fist balled up and then sending it right for Satan's nose. I marvel at the patience of the Lord. He was being accused of deception in his own domain in front of millions of observers! Putting Satan on his backside seems like a fitting response in my opinion.

"And the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand.' So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord" (1:12).

God did not defend himself. Surely God could articulate the best defense in the entire universe. No one, not even the devil, could stand against his relentless logic and perfect evidence. The astonishing revelation was the Lord was going to let Job be his defense. In addition he was not going to tell Job. Job will be God's defense lawyer and prime witness, and Job's behavior will be the evidence in this celestial trial.

Satan wreaks horrible havoc on Job. Satan's merciless attack took everything from Job, except his wife. He lost all ten children to death, and all his property and wealth vanished (1:13-19). *Poof*. Gone. The devil was cruel, trying to make a trumped-up charge stick to the Lord. Job was a convenient means to get at God.

Job knew nothing of the behind-the-scenes maneuvering. He could only respond to the terrible destruction, this atomic warfare on his life. Would he abandon God and curse him as Satan charged? Remember, God's reputation was at stake. The Lord left his honor in Job's care.

"Then Job arose, and rent his robe, and shaved his head, and fell upon the ground, and worshiped" (1:20). Cheers and clapping were probably heard among the angelic realm. God's reputation was preserved by the behavior of Job. Job did not curse the Lord. He honored him by worshiping. Job did not disregard his loss. He mourned and certainly grieved the loss of his children, yet he honored the Lord. Job both worshiped and grieved simultaneously. Job paid homage to the Lord, showing devotion and adoration to him.

"And he said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'" (1:21). Job worshiped in word and deed. God was not just a convenient meal ticket, he was a being, in Job's mind, that he could value and trust.

"In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong" (Job 1:22).

We might imagine that the case would be closed and the verdict announced. The Lord was guiltless and honorable. Not guilty. But there was another charge, Satan did not give up or give in. Again, the heavenly courtroom was opened, and Satan entered again with a stack of court documents and announced another indictment. After he was given access, the devil accused, *“But put forth thy hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face”* (2:5). In other words, Satan declared that Job was selfish. He could take the loss of everything, but touch him personally, take your protection off of his body, and he’d would curse the Lord. Satan contends that you, God are not worth that much to him,.

Again, the Lord’s reputation was put into the hands of Job. The ante was upped, and God allowed a man to uphold his honor in this celestial standoff. Satan was not allowed to kill Job, so he gave him grotesque and loathsome sores over his body (2:7). This condition was grossly humiliating, as well as uncomfortable and irritating.

Job’s wife even gets into the fray, her emotional tolerance simply at an end. She gives up hope and asks, *“Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die”* (2:9).

We inwardly groan because we witness Job’s life. We understand he lost ten children, his vast wealth and property has disappeared, he was now covered with gruesome sores—it seemed God had abandoned him. Then his wife became embittered. Satan was still pursuing these trumped up charges against him. All this was to repudiate Satan’s attack at besmirching God’s honor.

Job’s response? Had he finally had enough of this and would he just be fed up with God, as was his wife? *“But he said to her, ‘You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?’ In all this Job did not sin with his lips”* (2:10).

Job unfolded the mind of God. He understood that good and evil can be tools in the Lord’s repertoire, used for reasons only God can divine. To accuse or curse the Lord indicates that his wife did not understand God’s character and goodness. Job faithfully protected the honor of the Lord. *“In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”*

It seemed Job successfully protected the Lord’s reputation to his wife, and in the courtroom of heaven. Countless angels observed the great drama played out, though Job never had a hint that he was the center of the trial.

Is That The End?

The story does not end with Job. Satan does not give up. He continued his attacks against the Lord, and it is possible that you will be the Lord’s advocate. You might be used to protect the honor of the Lord in the presence of a celestial audience.

Here is the challenge. Job was in the cross hairs of Satan. Job was targeted, and Satan’s bomb blast into his life was ultimately aimed at God. Job’s attitude and behavior deflected the accusations of the devil against the

Lord. If Satan targeted you, would your character be of such quality to protect the reputation of the Lord in the courtroom of heaven?

You might be God's advocate and not know it. It is better to count on it and prepare for it. If you are experiencing distressing times and you do not understand why, you may not find out until you step into eternity that perhaps you are the Lord's advocate.

Caution!

We want to take care to note that the Lord is never a victim. He is sovereign of the universe and does not need us to defend him, he is well able to do that. However, the Lord does give us the great privilege of standing for him, defending his reputation. He is worthy and should be of ultimate value to us. We should consider defending his honor a duty as well as a privilege.

Nevertheless, we may have to wait to know about our advocacy until we get to heaven. On this side of eternity, we are not necessarily given the kind of glimpse into celestial courtrooms that are described in the book of Job. However, we should consider that we might be in the witness chair.

Man is very much like a barrel of apples. The apples that are seen on the top are his reputation, but the apples that are down below represent his character.

Bishop Fulton Sheen, *Emphasis on Faith and Living*, May, 1986, p.14

Formula for Success

When circumstance throws a bombshell into our life, and we are faced with difficult or catastrophic dilemmas, there is a way that we can right our life. There is hope we can grasp. There is a template we can follow for dealing with the after effects of devastation. Here it is:

And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me." And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt."

Matthew 26:37-39

In the closing hours of Jesus' earthly ministry, it seemed he had little success. He had only twelve faithful followers, and one of those men was betraying him at that moment. There was hatred for Christ by the political and religious elites, and they had instituted a plan to destroy him. He was hated, reviled, and betrayed. Many people wanted him dead.

In addition, Jesus knew he would be dying by crucifixion, a thoroughly hideous manner of death. Also, he would be carrying the guilt and shame of sin for every man, woman, and child who ever lived. His heavenly Father would be disgusted with this sin and turn from him. Jesus had an emotional response to this situation. *"He began to be sorrowful and troubled."* Grief and sadness permeated his soul, coupled with anguish and depression. His situation and near future were so overwhelming that in his humanity he was emotionally distraught.

Thus, when Jesus was in the garden of Gethsemane, he was close to an emotional meltdown. His rejection by mankind and eventually by his loving heavenly Father was overwhelming to his human nature.

Jesus set in motion a procedure to retrieve his equilibrium. He implemented a formula to get victory in spite of this circumstance.

His first step in having victory, *"taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee."* Jesus took an inner ring of confidants and brought them with him. Jesus began the initial steps of dealing with his troublesome situation by being proactive. He sought out men who knew him, who were time tested and able to be with him in times of adversity. These were men whom he was well acquainted and men with whom he could be vulnerable, sharing his deepest heartache.

Be courteous to all but intimate with few, and let those few be well tried before you give them your confidence; true friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to appellation.

George Washington, letter, Jan. 15, 1783

There was not a parting of the clouds and the bright sun sending delightful beams of warm light. There were not celestial choirs and flowered fields. This was the nitty gritty hardness of life that was crushing the Lord's soul, and he implemented this strategy for coping with issues that were overwhelming him.

The second step in the formula for victory: Jesus opened his soul to them in confession of weakness. *"Then he said to them, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me'"* (26:38). He expressed to them that he was experiencing sorrow. He was sad to the point of distress. The sorrow was so deep that it was bringing him to the doorstep of death.

The Bible says when Jesus prayed, he sweated drops of blood. This is a condition of severe emotional stress when the capillaries in the skin tissue burst and combine with the sweat and leak at the skin surface.

Jesus did not try and hide behind a façade of toughness or to put on a false face and proclaim, "I'm fine." He wasn't okay, and Jesus wanted persons with sympathetic understanding to be with him. The Lord opened his inner heartaches to his closest confidants. He did not minimize his condition, nor exaggerate the impact. Jesus honestly assessed his emotional needs.

Thirdly, Jesus asked for his friends to help in spiritual warfare. *"Remain here, and watch with me"* (26:38). The Lord asked them to be vigilant on his behalf. He wanted them to be proactive for him, to be engaged, to fight with him, to wage war against that which was attacking him. Jesus needed aggressive allies, to be present and sympathetic.

The word *watch* means to give strict attention to or be cautious or to be active. In the Gospel of Luke, in a parallel account, Jesus implored the disciples. *"And when he came to the place he said to them, 'Pray that you may not enter into temptation'"* (Luke 22:40). They were to pray so they could watch. Pray for their own failings, but watch on his behalf. These are the kind of friends we need to cultivate, ones who are aware of their own foibles, yet ones who are concerned with other's needs and who can engage on their behalf.

"But exhort one another every day" (Hebrews 3:13).

The fourth step?

"And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed" (Matthew 26:39). Jesus poured out his heart in prayer. In an attitude of humility, he approached his Father with an expression of reverence and desperate need. He had been open and vulnerable with his friends in expressing his sorrow. Then he was going to be open with his Father and pour out his heart. He was not reluctant, nor hesitant. He went directly and confidently and approached his need openly and with passion. Jesus did precisely what he had asked his disciples to do in Luke 22:40—pray.

Those who are experiencing the heartache of overwhelming pain need to be able to go to God. Asking others to pray for you is a necessary step, however going to the Lord is an essential component in having a successful victory in the situation. Hesitancy toward God will not be made up by confidants who are praying for you. You and the Lord need to talk.

Jesus took the initiative. We will also need to go to God with a sense of reverence just as he did. We must be confident with God, he can handle our issue.

The first portion of Jesus' prayer again showed his vulnerability. "*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me*" (Matthew 26:39). He openly expressed his wish to be out from the crushing burden of the situation. We can be absolutely honest with God, just as Jesus was honest. We can express our complaints or our wishes, our discomforts, even our anger. There is nothing off-limits. Jesus asked to be free from his present circumstances and the future pain.

Now came the fifth and most difficult step in the formula for victory. Jesus prayed, "*nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt*" (26:39). This final step for victory is in resting one's soul in the sovereign wisdom of God. Jesus submitted his will to the will of the Father, just as we will need to do when we are facing adversity. Trusting in the goodness of God in spite of circumstances is of paramount need since it is then that we, like Jesus, will have victory in the midst of pain and loss.

Jesus, in his human nature, was reluctant to take the last step of suffering for the sake of his Father's reputation and mankind's redemption. His self-focus was supercharged by the significant pain and suffering that he had experienced and what his future held. Yet, he willingly submitted his entire being, his entire future, into the care of his loving heavenly Father.

Jesus had absolute confidence in the goodness and kindness of God. He did not let circumstances sway his understanding of who God was. His situation did not prevent him from viewing his Father in a positive light. Jesus trusted his Father and let the Father's sovereign wisdom reign in his life in spite of the harsh conditions that came.

When you have no helpers, see all your helpers in God.

When you have many helpers, see God in all your helpers.

When you have nothing but God, see all in God;

When you have everything, see God in everything.

Under all conditions, stay thy heart only on the Lord.

Charles H. Spurgeon, *Banner*, Feb. 10, 1978, p.8

Formula For Victory

Here is a simple formula for victory:

1. Cultivate trusted confidants.
2. Open your soul to them by being vulnerable.
3. Ask for their help in spiritual warfare. Ask them to fight with you through their prayers and

remaining or watching with you.

4. Pour out your soul to your heavenly Father in prayer.
5. Rest your soul in the sovereign wisdom and goodness of God.

The will of God is not something you add to your life.

It's a course you choose. You either line yourself up with the Son of God...or you capitulate to the principle which governs the rest of the world.

Elisabeth Elliot, *Wesleyan Advocate*, June 20, 1977, p.13

In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider; God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.

Ecclesiastes 7:14

When you have faith in Jesus: you rejoice in his glorious deity as Christ, you rejoice in the humble, sinless, virgin-born humanity of Jesus, you're satisfied by the universe-creating, miracle-working power of Jesus, you're satisfied by the covenant-keeping, law-fulfilling righteousness performing perfection-providing obedience of Jesus, you're satisfied by the wrath-bearing, justice-satisfying, sin-atoning, death of Jesus, you're satisfied by the death-defeating, devil-destroying, heaven-opening, resurrection of Jesus, and you're satisfied by the sovereign, interceding, ever present, never leaving us alone, triumphant reign of Jesus at the Father's right hand.

John Piper at SBTS

Conclusion

We have finished a difficult journey viewing some reasons why God allows pain and suffering into lives. Though my hope was to be thorough, I am not confident that I have exhausted the mind of God and do not claim that this search has been complete.

The core premise is: if a good God allows evil, it can only be because the evil in question produces a benefit for the sufferer and one that would not be provided without the suffering. Our proposition is that God is good and that he is our advocate.

My source for truth has been the Bible, confident that its contents are reliable and trustworthy. I have also used quotes from people of renown, which have stood the test of time to confirm the Biblical precepts.

A Few Considerations Concerning Pain

In looking to understand an exclusive reason for suffering in a particular circumstance, we might surprisingly encounter a multilayered system. That is, one circumstance may involve many persons, and each person may be affected by different reasons within the circumstance. That is, person A, God is trying to influence to soften, while simultaneously, individual B, he is strengthening.

For example, consider David and Goliath. David was defending the honor of the Lord while God also was drawing, Goliath. Yet as soon as Goliath refused to respond, God would implement more forceful means upon Goliath, like the chapter on Judgment outlines. Thus there were two people with at least three reasons for responding to a situation which was highly negative. The threat of conflict and/or death was imminent. Multiply that by thousands of observers of the situation, and this can be a gigantic puzzle that only God can decipher. This can make for a very sophisticated and complicated system that is difficult, if not impossible, for us to unravel and understand the mind of God for all involved.

In addition, at least two reasons, *Prevention* and the *Lord's Reputation* are potentially unknowable this side of eternity. Those conditions might not be revealed until one steps into the presence of the Lord. Therefore, in the present, one must fully rely on the goodness of God to be comforted in the midst of pain or suffering.

Consequently, even when we have reasons why God allows pain and suffering, we may not fully understand and might not interpret correctly, the reasons he lets conditions be as they are. As a result, at times we may only be left to hope in the goodness and faithfulness of a just and holy and loving God. The summation may be to trust him even when we do not understand our condition. It is the Lord who assures us that he has beneficial plans for us. Yet he uses a number of different tools to shape and form our character into being Christ-like.

“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

We dare not treat God like a pilot does a parachute: it's there for emergencies but he hopes he'll never have to use it. I'm certain the Lord will not let that perspective stand.

C.S. Lewis said when "our own life remains agreeable, we will not surrender it to him. What then can God do in our interests but make our own life less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible sources of false happiness?"^[16]

To the Skeptic

To those persons who are not persuaded by these arguments and who insist that the presence of evil argues against God, there arises a problem. If one resolutely maintains this supposition against God, then one must also answer the issue of the existence of honor, devotion, love, courage, etc. What do they argue for? If your negative argues against a good God, what do positive values claim?

God is subtle, but he is not malicious.

Albert Einstein, *Notable Quotes*

Sorrow is better than laughter, for by sadness of countenance the heart is made glad. (Ecclesiastes 7:3).

Endnotes

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5. *Guidebook for Marines*, July 1, 1967, Washington, D.C., p. 17
6. Lewis, C.S. *The Joyful Christian*. Macmillan Publishing, New York. 1977. p. 212.
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12. MacDonald, William. *Believer's Bible Commentary Old Testament*. Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1985. p. 675.
13. MacDonald, William. *Believer's Bible Commentary Old Testament*. Nashville, Thomas Nelson Publishers. 1985. p. 675.
14. Ibid. p. 3
15. John Piper, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Illinois. 2006, p. 89.
16. C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, Macmillarn Publishing, New York, 1977. p. 210.

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