

What to do when God makes a “mistake.”

By Gordon Rumford

Preface

If we live long enough, the majority of us will hear words or experience a situation that will stun us and paralyze us on the short term. A dreadful comment, an accident, or some other event will turn our world upside down and we will plunge into an abyss of darkness and despair.

A mother may hear her unmarried daughter sob out the confession, "Mom, I'm pregnant!" A police officer may appear at the front door and say with grim determination, "I'm sorry Mrs. Smith, but your husband has been in a dreadful car accident." The surgeon might hesitatingly say, "I have checked the tissue sample for myself, and I am sorry to tell you that it is indeed cancer." Our spouse might blurt out to us, "I just don't love you any more, I want a divorce, I have met someone else." However the message comes, whatever its contents, it will shake us to the core as we refuse to believe what we have just heard.

This book deals with how to begin the process of living with tragedy. It is different from many books written on this subject for one important reason: Instead of creating my own game plan for mastering circumstances and using that as the outline for the book, I have taken a situation from real life as described in the Bible and used that as a "case study" to show the reader how to come to terms with a devastatingly painful situation. By getting the outline for this book from a specific passage of Scripture rather than from my own perspective, I assure the reader that I am not seeking to be either novel or lazy.

I am thoroughly convinced that in the Bible, God has given us several historical descriptions of people in pain as examples of how we should behave when our personal world crumbles. Certainly there are stories recorded in Scripture which are there to show us how not to act in certain exceptional life situations. Those stories are easily recognized as being examples of how not to live as Christians, because they show obviously inappropriate behaviour on the part of the central character(s). Other stories, such as the one around which this book revolves, are wonderful teaching stories and their wisdom can be a light on the path for those who suffer.

The scene we consider from Genesis 22 is certainly a most dramatic and instructive story. It is rich in counsel for those who are living in desperate and confusing situations that seem certain to destroy them. This story is so dramatic

that it appears to be one of those moments in a person's life when they are convinced that finally God has made a "mistake".

Come with me into this story which occurred so many centuries ago and seek to view the situation from Abraham's perspective. Learn from this great man, what to do when God makes a "mistake".

Chapter 1

Getting Priorities Right in Tragic Situations

What is most obvious is not always what is most important
I recall driving home one warm spring evening from an appointment out of town. As I crossed Toronto on the 401 highway at the legal limit of 100 km per hour, the car in front of me suddenly skidded in a circle and stopped right in the middle of the highway. I pulled my car off to the shoulder, ran back and asked the driver what was the matter. The driver simply stared ahead and kept repeating, "I don't know where he came from." I noticed that the windshield of the car was full of cracks as though it had sustained a heavy impact. The passenger in the car informed me that they had just struck a person. In disbelief, I asked where the person was and she pointed to a form lying on the other side of the highway. During the two or three seconds it took to get to the unconscious person I tried to think of what I could do to help him. Not being trained in first aid, I could only think of the need for a clear air-way, stopping any bleeding, and covering the person for shock. When I approached the injured man, it was easy to see he was breathing normally, there was no apparent bleeding, and I soon had him covered with a coat to help prevent shock. However, one of his legs was clearly bent in a direction it was not designed to go. It was a bad fracture that would certainly need the surgeon's attention if the man survived his other injuries.

As we all know, there is an order of priority for attending to injured people's needs. While it was very evident that the man's fractured leg required attention, there were other, more demanding issues to address on the short term. He needed to be stabilized so that his life would be spared. The choice between stopping life threatening bleeding and reducing a fractured leg is very obvious. Everyone involved in the paramedical and medical community knows very well the necessity of prioritizing the patient's needs at an accident site and ignoring certain other important, but not life threatening problems in order to concentrate on saving the person's life.

So clearly, there is an order of priority in attending to the needs of the person who has just been devastated by tragedy. Some of the things which seem to

scream out for attention can be safely ignored in the short term. Other things, which might slip our attention as they quietly proceed with their lethal enterprise, are in desperate need of addressing.

The great problem for many when they fall into a circumstance full of pain and tragedy, is that they want to stop and try to figure out why it happened in the first place. "Why me?" they ask. This is possibly the worst thing the person in pain can do. At the time it seems the most important question to ask and yet, it is the one least likely to be answered right then. In fact it is a search for information that is irrelevant at that critical moment.

Doing is more important than thinking

The story of Abraham offering up Isaac affords an excellent example of what to do when the crisis first strikes. It should be noted that I speak first to the matter of what to do rather than how to think in crisis situations. People who have been devastated by tragedy immediately seek to think their way through the situation. The question "Why?" crowds into their thoughts and dominates their horizon. Now, while thinking is important, it is a poor time to try to think critically about such matters when your world has collapsed. Other things are more pressing at that desperate moment. The person who is in the water over their head, and does not know how to swim, should not waste precious time asking how they got into this predicament in the first place, but rather, "What do I do to get out?" Only when they are safe on shore can they afford themselves the luxury of reflecting on how they got in over their heads to start with!

My son who is a trained and practicing paramedic has told me often of his reaction when he arrives at an accident site. Because of his college training he has memorized thoroughly the procedures to enact when a specific problem is observed at the scene. He tells me that his emotions are turned off and he acts instinctively as he observes what is presented to him. After delivering the patient to the hospital, his emotions may catch up to him and cause him some distress, but while addressing the need at hand, he is swift and efficient in dealing with the most important needs of the patient.

Clearly we cannot expect all people who are suddenly caught up in tragedy to know just how to respond to the situation. Those who have experience in dealing with difficulties are more adept, but those who are in a sad situation for the first time may flounder. That is when the friends around the person need to act for them. I was in Scotland a while ago revisiting some churches where I had preached three years earlier. When I had dinner in the home of an elder in one church he reminded me of my first visit and the message I gave then. He assured me he had not forgotten the points in the sermon. The sermon was on Genesis 22

and dwelt on the three things to do when tragedy strikes. He then shared with me that when a fellow elder had recently gone through some very difficult times, he was able to take the story of Abraham and apply it gently to the grieving man's heart.

The apparent absurdities in Abraham's situation

It is so easy to breeze through the story of Abraham, but it was certainly difficult for him to live that particular section of his life described in Genesis 22. It seems impossible that the Lord actually meant Abraham to sacrifice his own son. Nothing of this sort was ever known in the history of God's dealings with His people. What parent would wish to murder their own child? Call it sacrifice if you will, Abraham must have looked on the situation as an act of murder. Another thing which made it appear that God was making a mistake had to do with the fact that this child was the child of promise. It was through this child that God promised to bless the earth. From Isaac's descendants God pledged that a great nation would arise. Now, because of this strange request of God, all the promises God made to Abraham were going to be ruined! A dead person cannot produce children. The whole situation was irrational to say the least. So, very often, as far as our point of view is concerned, God does make "mistakes". Many people find themselves in similar situations in their own generation as Abraham did in his generation. How dreadful for parents to watch helplessly as their child slips into a coma and then as they sleep the sleep of the dead. How devastating for a person to hear their spouse of many years confess they no longer love them and are leaving the marriage. Imagine listening to the doctor tell you that the biopsy proved malignant and that there is no use in operating as the disease is so pervasive. Dreadful news always seems to be a horrible mistake on the part of the one bearing the evil tidings. Denial is the first weapon we use to resist the reality that cruelly invades our lives.

A further indication of the absurd dimensions of this story centers on the fact that most parents dearly love their children and would move mountains to preserve them alive and well in this world. This is not a situation of Abraham passively standing by and watching his son die. The boy was to die at Abraham's own hand! This flew in the face of every parental instinct of Abraham. Therefore what he does in this situation appears all the more incredible.

Three emergency procedures to follow in crisis

But, what do you do in these critical situations? What can be done to help yourself as you try to fathom the dimensions of the tragedy? What is the spiritual first aid that needs to be enacted? Abraham gives us three significant ways to stabilize yourself when you are hit with disaster. If we implement these steps to

help ourselves, we will certainly come out of the difficulty in a far better state than those who ignore these effective steps.

The three things of paramount importance when you discover yourself in great tragedy are as follows: 1. Obey God, 2. Worship God, 3. Trust God. Sadly, these are the last three things many people wish to do. Instead, they seek to think the unthinkable, to analyze what defies analysis, to understand what is a mystery. Until the person in pain moves past their efforts to understand and begins to do what is right, they will flounder.

As we consider these steps to control the damage a tragedy creates, I recognize that the person in the position of suffering may not wish to do these things. That is understood. In the early stages of seeking to survive a catastrophe, we do not ask the person to “like” the necessary procedures any more than the patient likes the thought of the surgeon’s scalpel. To recognize the necessity of the actions and get on with them is what is important.

“I can’t or I don’t want to?”

Some people wrongly equate a dislike of doing something with the inability to do something. So, when we say “I can’t do that,” we really are saying, “I don’t want to do that.” Occasionally one of my children, when I ask them to turn off the T.V. and get on with their homework will say to me, “Dad, I just have to watch this T.V. program.” Now, I must confess that when I hear that statement from my child I am tempted to respond in a rather unusual manner. What I am tempted to say to them is something like, “Well I know you really want to see that program very much, but I do not believe that you ‘have to see it’, and to prove to you that you do not ‘have to see it’, I am going to insist that you go to your room right now and start the homework.”

What I wish to demonstrate to my child is that there is a world of difference between saying “I can’t” and saying “I don’t want to.” I wish them to see that they are far more capable of doing certain things than they realize. I also know that they are already aware of their ability to shut off the T.V. and miss the program and I wish them to word their thoughts more accurately when they speak. That, of course is exactly what they do not want to do. They think that by wording their resistance to my request as they do, it will excuse them from displaying genuine rebellion.

Well, we are certainly capable of doing much more than we modestly deny. The steps Abraham took are achievable by any Christian in crisis, and to say they are not, is a form of self-deception that will only compound the problems at hand.

The parents who refuse to clean out their dead son's bedroom two or three years after his death will often say, "I can't bring myself to do it." Kind hearted counselors will often agree with this and reinforce the deception. The best thing for grieving parents is to get in the room and box up the clothing, etc., and ship it off to a city mission or whatever. We will speak more about such things later in the book; for now the point is that we must face up to the fact that distasteful things are still necessary for our good and for our deliverance from bondage in crises.

Our advantage over Abraham in tragedy

What was so especially difficult for Abraham was the fact that there did not appear to be a mentor for him to help coach him through the difficulty. As the writer to the Hebrews makes clear, our duty to one another is to consider how to "stimulate one another to love and good works". People in crisis desperately need a loving and wise person to come alongside to assist them as they navigate their way through the minefield of adversity. This is what Abraham did not appear to have. He had to go it alone.

We shall speak more about this matter of being a mentor or comforter to those in pain in another place; suffice it to say here that we need to recognize our responsibility to bear one another's burdens.

Chapter 2

Obedience: The Ugly Duckling of Christian Values

Have you ever noticed how much easier it is to get into a series of messages on the life of David than it is to find yourself attracted to a series of studies on Moses? We have a problem with people like Moses simply because he is so boringly consistent.

When Anne of Green Gables was discussing with Merilla the upcoming marriage of her best friend Diana Berry to roly poly Fred Wright, Anne's complaint was that Fred was so "good". Shocked, Merilla said, "And so he should be." Merilla then went on to ask, "Would you want him to be bad?" "Well, not really bad," Anne admitted, but she went on to say she would like him to be able to be bad, but simply not actually do any evil.

There is a mystique about people who have a mischievous air lingering around them. Those who never deviate, nor show potential for wandering from the right way threaten us, they are boring, and we wish away from their company. Hence

we prefer David to Moses. With David, you never knew what he would do next. He was unpredictable, glorious one moment and a disaster the next.

Victorious or virtuous

Another way Christians demonstrate an aversion to this matter of obedience in the Christian life is the interesting manner in which they describe the "successful" and the "unsuccessful" Christian by using the terms victorious and defeated. Someone who is being "successful" in the Christian life is described as "victorious". This term does have some marginal biblical warrant and therefore it is difficult to simply dismiss it totally from our vocabulary. But the more customary biblical way to describe the Christian is with the term "obedient".

You see, the term "victorious" is far more glamorous, it sparkles, it has sizzle, and it subtly exalts the Christian as some kind of spiritual hero for winning battles in the Christian warfare. The inherent danger with using the victorious vocabulary is that it is an ego feeder, it stimulates spiritual pride. Obedience, which is far more biblically justified as a term, is a flat, uninteresting, and uninviting description of the Christian life by comparison. And, in our age of advanced marketing techniques, we seem to know more than the Bible about how to "peddle" the Christian life because of our preference for terms the Bible uses infrequently and our neglect of terms the Bible uses often.

Defeated or defiant

On the other side of the coin, we often speak of the "defeated" Christian life rather than the "defiant" Christian life. Again, we are seeking to make life easier for modern Christians. To call the "defeated" life "defiant", is an insult to the sinner, it bruises the ego, it puts us down, it's negative, it puts the blame on us. We want to be upbeat all the time and make life "easy" for ourselves. So we employ euphemisms to disguise the realities of the situation. Only when we become honest and regard sin as despicable, disgusting, and filthy in God's eyes, will we be able to move ahead in life to the glory of God.

The first thing to do

Abraham's first great step forward in dealing with tragedy is to obey. He got up early in the morning and prepared to go and do the Lord's bidding. On one hand it would be easy for Abraham to get up early that particular morning, it's likely he never slept all night. What thoughts tumbled through his mind is anyone's guess, but certainly they revolved around the dreadful realities of Isaac's future, or rather, lack of a future.

We can only speculate on the struggle that went on inside Abraham as he started to move towards the place where he was to take his son's life.

While the New Testament indicates that Abraham did come to believe that God was able to raise the dead, we are not told when he came to that realization in the course of the whole process. Was it during the long, restless night before the trek began? Did he come to understand about the possibility of a resurrection when they were in the process of traveling to the mountain? We don't know, we can only guess. Evidently he decided that God could do this by the time he arrived at the base of the mountain, for he told his men that he and the lad would go and worship and they would both come back to them. He apparently understood that the boy would be resurrected the same day he died.

Disobedience comes naturally to the wounded

But Abraham obeyed. That is the important issue, because for many who dislike God's providence, there is a general distrust of God. The person realizes that God could have prevented the tragic situation from occurring but did not. Hence the desire to rebel against Him can almost overwhelm the wounded person. It's sort of an "I'll show Him!" attitude the person has towards the Lord. We need to recognize that it is very easy to get into such a rebellious state following the experience of a tragedy. This is a most common response.

There is a difference between recognizing a common or frequent reaction to adversity and approval of such reactions. We do not approve of people being rebellious against God, but we do know that it is a very frequent way sinners react to adversity in their lives. This is one of several ways Abraham stands out from the crowd. He might have wished to disobey and run in the opposite direction, but he resisted the temptation and did the right thing.

Gentle encouragement to obey

For those who are alongside the wounded, recognize them for what they are, i.e. wounded. They are people who have been decimated in life and scramble even to think in a straight line. They need to be handled with gentleness and tender comments. Allow them to say things that are inappropriate in the first moments of shock. If they say, "I do not believe this is happening to me!" do not demand that they face the brutal reality an hour after they have learned about its presence.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus, as recorded in Luke 24, appear to be rude to our Lord. They abruptly ask Him how it was that He could be in Jerusalem and be the only person there who did not know the great topic of conversation

by everyone that weekend. They were shocked by His apparent ignorance. Instead of responding in kind, our Lord gently coaxes them to tell Him the problem. So it is with those who have just been devastated by shocking news. We should let them talk without interruption. They need to restate the terrible reality to a sympathetic listener as they struggle to believe the bad news themselves.

Quiet compassionate affirmation of the seriousness of the difficulty will do much to assist the person in coming to terms with the issue that causes the pain. Yet, so often, we feel a desperate urge to quote Romans 8:28 to the person and believe that will solve the problem for them. Such a comment is not unlike the doctor who is called at 2:00 a.m. by a patient with a complaint and he says, "Take two aspirins and if the pain does not go away, call me in the morning." Romans 8:28 is a wonderful verse given in the right context just as aspirin is an amazing medication when used properly. But a flippant quotation by a thoughtless counselor is almost as difficult to bear as the disease.

Chapter 3

Worship: The Forgotten Art

Worship: by whose definition?

"The problem with your church is that you don't know how to worship!" thundered the visitor after attending a service at our church. We were all very interested in the harsh judgment and rather taken aback at the great freedom the person felt at liberty to exercise in putting us down. Naturally we had a keen interest in understanding where we were failing in this matter of worship. The criticism had caught us off guard as many of us found the worship time very refreshing and we looked forward to it eagerly every week.

We gently inquired as to where we were failing to measure up in the matter of worship. The person clearly enjoyed being asked for their judgment and commenced to share their wisdom with us about how we might greatly improve our worship of the Lord. First, we were informed that we needed a worship team up front to keep things moving. Then, we needed to use more modern hymns and lots of choruses. A band with drums and electric guitars would also help. We needed to get people clapping their hands and stomping their feet. "What you really need is a good shaking up!" our judge concluded.

Something deep inside of me was urging me to tell this person that much of what they described sounded exactly like the worship of people involved with primitive religions where the worshippers did much the same thing as they called on the spirits from the dark worlds. I managed to restrain myself, but just

barely. This person spoke with such authority and conviction that I simply had to leave them in their ignorance lest they become even more frustrated with me than it was evident they already were.

Worship: a biblical view

Looking at worship from a Biblical perspective, we learn that it is the act of drawing near to God in submission to offer praise and thanksgiving. The Greek New Testament word for worship, "proskuneo", means to bow down and kiss the foot or the hem of the holy one's garment. It clearly conveys the idea of reverence, submission, and adoration.

As we observe the worship of God in the Old Testament, we easily recognize that the worshipper always brought something with him as an approach was made to God. Worship is drawing near to God and bringing with you that which allows you to draw near. In the Old Testament it was the sacrificial blood which allowed the worshipper to come into the presence of God. In the New Testament time we come to God by the blood of Christ (Heb. 10:19) and we offer the sacrifice of praise which is the fruit of our lips.

When Abraham went to worship God, he understood that sacrifice was involved. So did Isaac! That was why Isaac asked his father about the missing animal for sacrifice. He had gone to the place of worship with his father many times and knew what was required to complete the act of drawing near to God.

Worship: a difficult exercise

It is interesting to observe that in most instances when someone says, "The Lord is good," they have just received some extraordinary blessing that sets them above the level of most Christians. When someone says, "Praise the Lord!" that exhortation is the result of some good thing coming into their life. It is easy to say God is good when all is well, but to praise the Lord when everything breaks loose, well now that is a different story.

For Abraham to draw near to the One who was afflicting him would require an incredible amount of grace. God had commanded Abraham to kill his only, and much loved son of promise. How could Abraham offer praise to such a God who was exacting this incredible price? It seems impossible to fathom how an act of praise and bowing down before God was possible. Instead of drawing near to the One afflicting him, Abraham must have been tempted to run away from Him.

However, we must do the thing that is very difficult. We must come before the One who seems to have wounded us and praise Him and thank Him for all his mercies. This is where many Christians balk. Tragedy strikes their home and they stop attending church, they cease to pray, they avoid contact with the One who appears to be the source of all their misery. "After all," they reason, "what good has it done me to follow the Lord?"

Suffering acts as a wedge

In some instances we might not blame a person for moving on, such as when they have miserable neighbours, or a difficult boss at work. To run from the scene of such pain and frustration could be the best thing to do. A fresh start or a new beginning is in order after some of life's more difficult alternatives. However, when it comes to having a fresh start apart from God, that is a different matter altogether. We may think that absenting ourselves from church and ceasing to have an active prayer life when adversity strikes is appropriate. However, the opposite is what is needed! We need more worship and prayer than ever before.

In John 6:66-69 we witness the aftermath of the most controversial sermon Jesus preached. It says that many of his disciples went back and walked no more with Him. They did not accept Jesus' teaching and therefore deserted Him. This is similar to what people do with God's difficult providence. They do not like it, so they turn away from Him. Peter makes a significant comment to our Lord when Jesus asked the twelve if they too would go away. In one of his most glorious moments Peter says, "Lord to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life, and we believe and have come to know that Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Peter is confused about some of our Lord's teaching also, but he is wise enough to know that his understanding of what Jesus said or did is not as important as remaining close to the good Shepherd. For some people it is a great dilemma. They reason that if God strikes them they ought to flee from Him. But if they flee from Him, where shall they go for the help they need? This is the paradox, the riddle of evil in the world.

It is commonly known that those who suffer great pain are either driven away from God in great bitterness of soul, or they are driven into His arms, confused and frightened. Those who turn to the God who seems to be afflicting them know that they must say with Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him." The person in pain must move forward as though everything is all right when it appears that it is all wrong. Faith "sees" what sense does not.

Chapter 4

Faith: The Elusive Virtue

False forms of faith

It needs to be considered very carefully how some people go off on tangents concerning faith and suffering. A line of reasoning that is often brought to someone in pain is, "God wants you to be happy doesn't He?" To such a question virtually any person in misery will answer "Yes." "Well then, pray a prayer in faith for the disease to be removed. Remember, the Bible says, 'It shall be done unto you according to your faith.'" This tantalizing way of reasoning is actually an abusive way to treat the one who suffers. Anyone in pain loses some reasoning capacity and is therefore susceptible to arguments of this kind.

The fact is that nowhere in Scripture are we called to seek happiness as a primary goal in life. In fact we are hard pressed to see anywhere in Scripture that we are called on to pursue pleasure. What we are constantly exhorted to do is to pursue holiness. If we set this as our goal instead of happiness, I believe that happiness, or contentment will follow. For as we fulfil the will of God for our lives, we shall find peace and joy that nothing in this life can destroy. When the apostle Paul says, "Rejoice always," he says it in the context of exhorting his readers to be disciplined, subject to spiritual authority, praying always, offering thanks in every situation, following the Spirit's leading, and so on. Surely if we are doing these spiritual exercises, we will not be able to help ourselves, we shall rejoice, we will be happy.

Abraham's faith

As we consider the most dramatic moment in Abraham's life, it is obvious he had great faith in God. This scene is used elsewhere in Scripture as proof of Abraham's faith. Abraham trusted God in a most difficult situation and God honoured him for it.

The proof of Abraham trusting God is seen from the fact that there was no arguing with God's unusual providence. There is no evidence that Abraham rejected God's will nor that he argued with Him. In Genesis 22:5 Abraham told his servants that he and Isaac would go worship and they would then return. So, Abraham believed that both would go to the place of worship and both would come back. The writer to the Hebrews tells us (11:19), that Abraham believed God could raise Isaac up from the dead. We do not know when in this scenario Abraham came to this conclusion, but somewhere between the commission from the Lord and the departure of Abraham and Isaac from the men near the mount,

he decided that if the boy died, God would raise him to fulfil His promise concerning Isaac's offspring.

If we are to have faith as Abraham did, there are several things to consider. What does it mean when the Bible says that "Abraham believed God"? What is faith? What is involved in trusting God as He commands us to do?

Faith involves knowledge of a message

First faith has an intellectual component. In the case of Abraham, he understood that God had said that through Isaac, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God had revealed Himself to Abraham and told him that he and Sarah in their old age would have a child and that through this child many nations would be established. Abraham understood what God had promised.

In Romans 10 we read where Paul argues for the necessity of an intellectual component to faith, when he says "How shall they call upon Him of whom they have not heard?" The question carries its own answer. For people to exercise faith, they must have been given a promise. The promise of the Gospel is, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." People must hear that promise and understand that it says if we call upon the name of Jesus Christ, we will be saved.

Faith involves acceptance of the message as true

This brings us to our second component of faith, the matter of persuasion or confidence in the truthfulness of the facts or promise given. To have an intellectual comprehension of the message and to be persuaded that it is accurate are two very distinct things. The jury listening to the conflicting evidence of witnesses in a trial is supposed to grasp the essence of what each witness is saying, then decide who is telling the truth. Many people hear of the Easter message and understand that the early church preached Jesus and the resurrection. However, they decide that the message is bunk and reject it as nonsense.

Faith involves trust in the message personally

But there is a third element in true faith that is crucial. You see, up to this point, even Satan believes. He knows the message of the church concerning the Gospel. And secondly, he is fully persuaded that it is true. Oh yes, the devil himself is orthodox in belief to that point. This next element is where he and so many falter. It is in the area of trust or reliance.

Our part is to bring to Him the promise and plead for its performance. Abraham's confidence in God's promise extended to the miraculous if necessary. So he knew that his Father in heaven would perform what He had pledged. This matter of trusting personally was expressed many years ago in a line from a hymn which says,

Venture on Him, venture wholly,
Let none other trust intrude

The prepositions used to speak about true faith in Christ are instructive. In Acts 16:31 the Philippian jailer is instructed to believe "upon" (Greek word "epi") the Lord Jesus. The imagery there is of Christ bearing the believer up as they place themselves onto the Saviour, or rest upon Him. The most beloved Gospel verse of all, John 3:16, uses another preposition when it calls on people to believe "into" or "in" Him. The idea is of motion from outside Christ (where we stand condemned), to inside Christ, or inside His sphere of activity (where there is safety).

I well remember on my 7th birthday being taken by my father into a bicycle store and him telling me that I could have any tricycle I wanted! We were a family rich in love and poor in finances, and such an extravagance was unprecedented! I immediately seized the biggest one there. It was far too big, my father tried to talk sense to me, but it was no use. He had promised and I held him to it. Well, I still do not know how he paid for that thing, but he was as good as his word. Even at the tender age of 7 I knew my Dad did what he promised. So it is with our Father in heaven. His promises are good. We may venture into them as we learn of them and accept them as true.

True faith is based on promises

We must accept the fact that suffering is something God has for all of us as part of His will for our lives. Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians and says, "We... sent Timothy, our brother... to establish you... concerning your faith: that no man should be disturbed by these afflictions: for you yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto" (Thess. 3:1-3). Jesus told His followers, "In the world you shall have tribulation" (John 16:33). Therefore for us to pray that suffering cease, we must expect that sometimes the prayer will not be answered as we wish.

It is not sinful to pray and ask God to give us some relief in suffering, nor is it sinful to ask that the cause of our sorrow be taken away. What is sinful is to demand that God relieve us of our sorrow. The example of our Lord in Gethsemane is to the point. He prayed and asked that the cup be removed. So

may we. But when our Lord saw that the cup was not taken away He took it and drank it. So must we. If our prayers do not see the removal of the source of suffering, we are to follow the Lord's example and drink the cup of sorrow.

The apostle Paul had such a situation when he prayed three times that the "thorn in the flesh" might be taken away from him. What he discovered was that the Lord would not remove the source of suffering, but would provide adequate grace to sustain Paul during the awful time. Paul knew that there were no promises that all believers would have their personal millennium during this lifetime, therefore he prayed without a specific promise which stated that all "thorns in the flesh" would be removed.

Faith feeds on adversity

It is far more in the trials of life than in the good times that we grow strong in faith and give glory to God. Those who prove most useful in the work of the Lord tend to be those who have gone through the deepest trials. Adversity shapes our character into the image of Christ as nothing else can do.

I recall very well visiting a personal friend who was dying of cancer after a nine year battle. She had fought a brave fight and lasted much longer than the doctors thought she could. As she reflected on her long and weary battle she said to me, "Gordon, as I look back on the past nine years, I can honestly say that the darkest times when I walked through the deepest valleys were also the times of greatest intimacy with God, they were mountain top experiences."

Time and again, I listen to people tell me that while they would never have asked for the suffering they have endured, they would not have missed if for anything because they know more of the Lord now than they ever did while in safe and secure situations. Spiritual maturity comes only through the stretching of our faith in trials.

It is not that we are to seek pain and misery. No, that is not put to us as a goal in life any more than we are offered as a goal the pursuit of happiness. We are to seek personal holiness and the knowledge of God. If the Lord sees fit to take us through difficult times to accomplish those goals, then let the sorrow come. As long as we honour the Lord and are drawn closer to Him, it matters little the cost involved, the reward is that great.

This is, of course, where some break with the faith. They do not believe that the cost of following Christ is worth the reward. As Jesus says, "When affliction or persecution arises because of the word, they immediately fall away." (Matt. 13:21). Elizabeth P. Prentice puts it well in her hymn entitled, More love to Thee.

Let sorrow do its work,
Send grief and pain;
Sweet are Thy messengers,
Sweet their refrain,
When they can sing with me-
More love, O Christ, to Thee,
More love to Thee.

How curious it is that two modern hymnals I consulted did not have that verse in the hymn, I had to consult one published in the last century. Does that not make an interesting comment on the mentality of our age?

So, while we may be required by God to walk a difficult road, we have many assurances that He will walk with us and keep us. We shall overcome the world because He has overcome the world.

The feeblest saint shall win the day

Though death and hell obstruct the way

"And this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith."

1 John 5:4.

In Conclusion

I expect by now some readers will be saying, "But you have not tried to solve the problem!" The idea of doing things that will not solve the problem seems a waste of time to many. What most people immediately desire is a "quick fix" to the dilemma. How can we remove the problem so it no longer interferes with our life? That is the question many ask. What we have suggested so far in this book, does nothing to eliminate the undesirable thing that has spoiled our happiness. Why not focus attention on getting rid of the undesirable thing rather than wasting time on such matters?

The answer to such questions comes in the form of a question from God. He comes to Cain when Cain is angry and depressed about his rejected sacrifice and says to the man, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door, it desires to have you, but you must master it." Genesis 4:6.

The way to resolve a problem is not to remove it, but to do what is right in spite of the difficulty. God's answer to Cain's problem is to encourage him to pursue the path of obedience when he does not want to do that. God calls him to get on

with life in spite of the difficulty and if he does, then he will discover contentment. However, if he does not do what is right, even when he does not want to do the right thing, then he will be in a far worse state. Doing what is right may not take away the suffering, but it will prevent a far worse situation from occurring. How careful we need to be that we follow the emergency procedures described in this book if we hope to escape a far worse situation.

But, someone objects, "Why not pray that the difficulty be taken away?" This is a very practical consideration and we have precedent in Scripture for such prayers, we hear both the apostle Paul and our Lord praying that a difficulty in front of them be removed.

In the case of the apostle Paul, the problem is not defined, it's simply called a "thorn in the flesh". We are not given specifics on what it was Paul was suffering and that is so anyone with a significant physical difficulty can identify with the apostle. The apostle made three special prayer times when he petitioned the Lord to remove the problem. After the third prayer time when the problem did not go away, the apostle heard the voice of God telling him that the problem was staying and that grace would be given to endure the difficulty.

The situation with our Lord was similar in that He too prayed three times that a difficulty, in this case the cross, would be removed. It is interesting to note that our Lord's prayer changed as He prayed through the situation. You will note in Matt. 26:39 there is a request that the cup pass and also a word of submission. In Matt. 26:42, as He prayed the second time, the prayer changes to, "O my Father, if this cannot pass away, except I drink it, thy will be done." So we see a shift in His focus as He prays the second time. In the third prayer Matt. 26:44, He uses the same words as in the second prayer. So the prayer changed the Lord, not the situation. He knew He had to obey and accept the cup that was passed to Him. So it is with us. As we pray over the problem, we may find that it is ourselves that change, not the difficulty. This may not be what we want, but the Lord knows best. We must leave to Him whether to remove the source of pain, or give us grace to endure.

So, if we pray for relief from the suffering, we are in good company! Remember too, that if we pray and the problem remains, we are getting a message from the Lord to let us know His grace is sufficient, that we will be equipped to endure the problem.

However, that is the "rub" to quote Shakespeare. In our modern age, we are pressed into the mindset that technology can solve every problem for us. We have come to think that we are the masters of reality. We believe that we can adjust reality to our liking. Advertising appeals to our desire to have things and

assures us that we can afford the merchandise the ad displays. Convenient payment plans are advocated that will fit our budget and allow us to have the desired thing immediately. This is the age of instant gratification.

Christians take this worldly mindset into their spiritual thinking and it does not work. The Lord warned us that in the world we would have tribulation. (John 16:1-3, 20, 22, 33, etc.) Paul tells us that we are appointed to such suffering. (1 Thess. 3:1-5) Becoming a Christian does not guarantee that our personal millennium begins immediately. In fact the Bible everywhere warns us of various tribulations that we must endure. We are to recognize that if our Lord suffered, so shall we. There is no escaping the suffering, but there are many blessed promises made by God to be with us in the midst of suffering and to take us safely through the problems of life until we see Him face to face.

Our problem is, as one theologian put it, "We would rather be ruined than changed." We would rather have an easy life than a life with problems that change us into the image of Christ. It is more desirable to have smooth sailing where we know little of God's grace, than rough seas where the goodness of the Lord is seen everywhere. The mentality of our present age has permeated our view of life so completely that we cannot see the benefits that come from adversity.

It is not the adversity we seek, but the blessings that accrue from adversity. If suffering is the price we must pay to have the blessing, we will learn to accept the unwanted difficulties in order to have the experience of God's abundant grace in our lives. We shall learn that the presence of the Lord is worth whatever price we must pay. It is not the absence of problems, but the felt presence of the resurrected Christ that will fill us with joy and contentment.

I close with a verse from Deuteronomy 10:12, "What does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands."

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