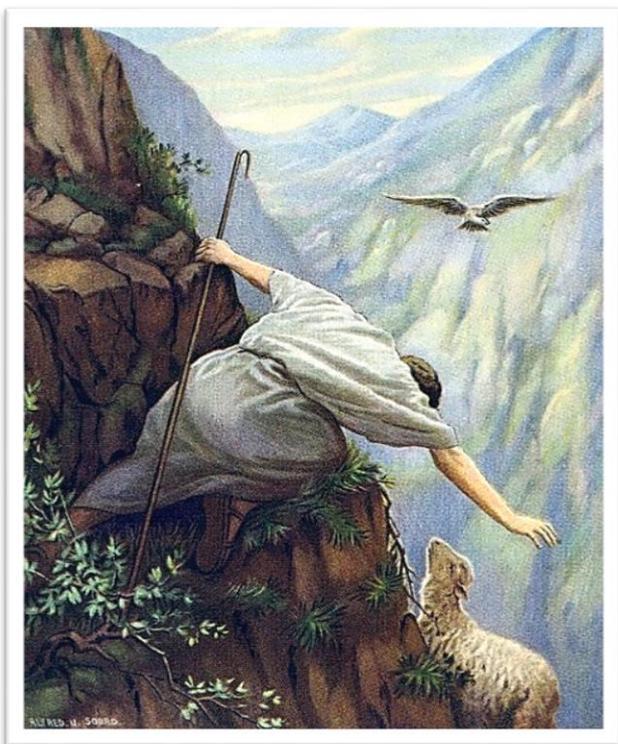


How to Walk Through Suffering



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**“The LORD is near to the broken hearted, and
saves the crushed in spirit.” Psalm 34:18**

Revised July 2017

IF YOU ARE REALLY HURTING RIGHT NOW

Do you feel like you're not going to make it?

The pain you are going through will not last forever. Of course you are agonizing over "How long?" But it will not be helpful to calculate when the pain might end. Instead you must live with the pain in this present moment. Breathe in now. Breathe out now. Inhale. Exhale. Take the next breath. Then the next. Then the next.

Projecting your pain into the future will only make it harder to bear. You simply don't know how long the suffering will last. It might end this afternoon. But the anticipation of days or weeks with this pain will only overwhelm you. So don't let your thoughts go there. As the Bible says, **"You do not know what a day will bring forth."** Jesus said, **"Do not be anxious about tomorrow. Today has enough trouble of its own."**

Live this moment now. Then the next moment. Then the next. Your mind may be screaming, "I don't know how I am going to survive this day." But you will survive it, if you stay in this moment. And then the next. And then the next. Like a person counting beads on a string, hold the present bead (moment). Let that one go and then take the next bead. You got through that last moment. You are surviving this present moment. You will survive the next. And the next. Breathe in, breathe out. Relief will come. It always does. But you must live in the "now," inhaling, exhaling, staying with the present moment, then the next, then the next. Before you know it, this day will have passed. You will have survived.

Everyone suffers in this life. Whether it is personal failure, the loss of loved ones, the death of pets, infidelity of a spouse, divorce of parents, incarcerated children, public humiliation, or the usual multitude of slights, injuries, and rejections – to be human is to suffer. Thankfully we do not suffer without end, though sometimes it may feel that way. The Bible promises to those who trust Jesus, "After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (1 Peter 5:10).

WHAT ARE SOME THINGS THAT WILL HELP?

Tell a trusted and compassionate friend.

There is pain in isolation. Not everyone can be trusted with your personal pain, but God will bring someone into your life with whom you can share. This will be a person who is not judgmental and not impatient and one who can keep what you share in confidence.

Cry out to God for mercy.

Even if you don't believe in God, cry out to him for help. The prayer always answered is, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The prayer never answered is, "God, you owe me!" It is a sad irony when people feel they cannot be frank with God. You can be angry with God, provided that you go to him with your anger. He can handle it. What will ruin you though is choosing to hate God for what has come your way. God is not the cause of your suffering. It may be your own doing, or the doing of other people, or the devil's doing, or simply because of this fallen world. But a sincere cry for mercy will be answered.

Forgive the one who has caused the pain. That might be you!

To forgive is not to excuse or minimize. It is not to say something is okay that was clearly not okay. But it is a choice of your will to let go of someone who has injured you. I recommend that you say out loud, as many times as the remembrance of that person's offense occurs, "I forgive _____ for what he did and I let him go."

Some people with perfectionist tendencies hold an unrealistic view of themselves. Faced with personal failure, such persons simply cannot accept what they have done. The perfectionist may believe Jesus forgives him but will not forgive himself. If God forgives you, you must forgive yourself. Are you better than God? Are your standards higher than His?

Get vigorous exercise every day. Outside is best.

Probably the last thing you feel like doing is to go for a walk, or run, or lift weights at the gym. But it is essential. Your body will produce the necessary serotonin (a chemical in the brain that creates positive feelings) in response to vigorous exercise as well as exposure to bright sunlight. If you are at all physically able to do so, make exercise a priority every day! And if outside, even better.

Keep away from drugs and alcohol.

It is true that drugs and alcohol give a temporary feeling of help – but it will not last and will only make things worse. You know that already, I'm sure. Relief will not be found there!

Expose your mind to helpful media only.

A perverse part of ourselves seeks distraction in things that brings us down. Instead, turn the radio to Christian music, take a break from the news, and watch uplifting movies rather than dark ones.

Begin to read in the book of Psalms.

The Psalms are one of the great treasures of literature and will be a great help to the one suffering. Just start at Psalm 1 and read one Psalm each day. You will find much hope and encouragement as you read.

Find someone you trust to explore your options.

When you are hurting, you can't think straight. It is not that you are weak – it is that you are in pain. Find a trusted, WISE friend, or a professional counselor to give you objective advice. Suffering has a way of narrowing your focus so you can't see alternatives that others can easily see. Don't let pride get in the way of asking for help!

Make an appointment with your doctor to consider whether medicine will help.

Depression is nothing to be ashamed of but it needs to be treated. No one gets over depression by "toughing it out." There are a number of excellent medicines available to help with anxiety and depression. You need to talk with your doctor sooner than later though. These medicines generally take about a month to become fully effective. These medicines are not "happy pills" but chemical aids to supplement what your brain would normally produce.

Suicide cannot be your option.

It may seem that death is the only thing that will bring relief. That is a lie of the devil. Your help might come tomorrow! Suicide will cripple your family and friends forever. That is not what you want. Call 911 if you are spiraling out of control.

Daily pray The Lord's Prayer, slowly and meditatively.

I recommend doing this even if you are not a believer. It is the most important prayer known to human beings and is well worth turning over in your mind in a meditative fashion. Take one phrase at a time and say it slowly out loud.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen!”

Thank God for the little blessings of each moment.

Pain has a terrible way of focusing your attention on your misery. At times it is all you can think about. But in your pain, make yourself notice the good things around you. Thank God, out loud, for every little thing that occurs to you. It may be the sunshine in your room. It may be the air conditioning. It may be your bed. A safe home. The food you had this morning. The fact that your pain is not worse than it is. Friends. Family. Clean water. And so on. These little things we take for granted are not owed us. They are gifts from God.

Find a prayer partner.

You may not even believe in God, much less believe in prayer. But take the risk and find someone who does believe in God to pray for you. You may feel foolish asking this when you don't believe in it yourself, but do it anyway. What do you have to lose?

Use the suffering to draw close to God.

God is aware of what you are going through. He is poised to help. Don't waste this experience by giving way to bitterness and despair. Draw close to God and he will draw close to you. Even in the midst of your pain, you will find an unseen Presence supporting you. “But you, O Lord are a gracious and compassionate God; slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness” (Psalm 86:15).

Make your suffering something God will turn into good.

Long ago I came to the realization that everyone suffers. So if I was going to suffer anyway, I decided to let my suffering have a point to it and work for my good. Here is how this can happen for you. Entrust yourself to

Jesus. You will then have God at work in your life. Even if it is your own fault you are in pain, by confessing and trusting Jesus to forgive you, by making restitution with others where possible, and by entrusting yourself to God, your suffering will be redeemed. The Bible says, “All things work together for good for those who love God.”

What else will help?

As time goes by and you find yourself gaining strength, add to this list finding a loving church, establishing a healthy diet, pursuing therapy, and joining a recovery group.

CONTINUING TO WALK THROUGH SUFFERING

Jesus teaches us that suffering is not something we need fear. He does not minimize the experience of pain. He himself went through horrible pain. He always has compassion for those who go through suffering, even when the suffering is our own fault. And through God our pain and suffering can be redeemed. Not only is suffering an inevitable part of living in this fallen world, God can also use it to bring about good.

Don't get me wrong. We all get scared when we think we will have to suffer. That's normal. But we can learn to trust God with and in our suffering—and that will make all the difference.

YOU ARE PRECIOUS IN THE SIGHT OF GOD

Many people have a hard time believing they are precious to God—and have little hope God would help them. Many seriously doubt THEY matter to God. They might believe others matter, particularly those who have lived a good life. But to suppose they are highly regarded by God and precious to Him can seem a fantasy, especially when they are in the midst of trouble and pain. Here is the truth from the Bible:

**The LORD your God is with you,
he is mighty to save.**

**He will take great delight in you,
he will quiet you with his love,
he will rejoice over you with singing.**

Zephaniah 3:17

God does delight in you. Not because of your obedience or usefulness to Him—but because He made you. You were conceived in His mind before this universe was made! You were not created as a generic human being and then placed here to see what you could make of yourself. No, you were painstakingly designed and planned.

Even if the circumstances of your birth were an accident that does not change the fact of your divine creation. Recently a mother confided to me that her soon-to-arrive granddaughter was an accident. I laughed and said “Before 1960 and the Pill we were all accidents!”

Most people find delight in the playfulness of a puppy chasing a ball, or in watching a parade of little 4 year old children marching in line beside the pool on their way to swim lessons. We look at puppies and small children and agree how precious they are. The Bible teaches that God views us the same way.

The fact that we have all done unlovely things does not change the affection God has for us. God has stronger feelings of yearning and protectiveness over us than even parents over their own children. The passage quoted earlier tells us that God delights and rejoices over us—with singing!

STILL, EVERYONE SUFFERS

Since the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, suffering has come into this world and into the experience of every human being. It is not possible to avoid it.

I have come to the conclusion that since I have to suffer anyway, I would rather my suffering be because I am a Christian, rather than suffer because of consequences of sin. What is more, I also want to be able to take my suffering (even if it is from my own foolishness) and find an eternal purpose in it—rather than consider it a waste and becoming embittered.

**Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and my body with grief.**

**My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak.**

Psalm 31:9-10

You will find the Psalms, more than any other single book of the Bible, express the longing and hurt we experience in the midst of suffering. I've said many times if I was stranded on a desert island and could have only one book from the Bible, the one I would choose would be the book of Psalms. On any given day, if I don't have time to read my usual pattern of one chapter in the Old Testament, one chapter in Psalms and Proverbs, and one chapter in the New Testament, I will make my reading in the Psalms.

THE ANSWER TO YOUR SUFFERING

Jesus Christ is the answer to human suffering. More specifically, He is the answer to YOUR suffering. He is personally and vividly aware of the pain and the misery you are going through. He has authority over everything in this universe and is willing and able to be of help.

That little child you once were is deeply remembered by the One who conceived you fully in His mind before you were born. As far as God is concerned, you still are that little child you once were. Your body has grown up around you, but you are still that precious child in His sight. And He regards you with the tenderest affection. You, and countless others like you, are why God sent Jesus!

Jesus is present with you right now—wherever you are reading this—and is poised to begin to place within your body a divine in-flow of His life “from above.” This new life in Christ is the Gospel He and His Apostles proclaimed. It is the ultimate blessedness for human beings this side of heaven.

No matter what distress you are in right now, the way through is found by means of this new life from Jesus Himself. This new life consists of a recurring flow of God's energy, strength, faith, peace, hope, joy, and love—His very living presence supporting you.

How might you receive this flow of life? By receiving Jesus as your means and way of life. Jesus Himself said:

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

John 16:6

Jesus invites you to turn your attention to Him and to begin to entrust to Him everything about yourself, including your pain. My favorite verse of the Bible expresses this beautiful invitation:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30

Here we read that Jesus invites all who suffer to come to Him (turn one's attention to Him and begin to trust Him) and learn from Him (as His disciple—someone who wants to learn from him how to live this life). The promised reward is you will find rest for your soul, even in suffering, as you learn to walk with Jesus, who is the one carrying the "lion's share" of your burdens.

I promise you from my own personal experience this invitation is real and it works. I have learned how to walk with Jesus in His "easy yoke." Yes, there are still times when I choose to "go it alone" and consequently suffer for it. But I have also learned that AT ANY INSTANT, I can stop, turn back to Jesus and follow Him once again.

To the extent any human being begins to place his confidence in Jesus and to adopt His way of life—that person will be taught of Jesus Himself, receive divine strengthening, and begin to experience this new life with God. This life the Bible calls "the kingdom of God." It is life with God available now, not just for heaven when we die.

Whatever measures of relief or comfort or strengthening you need because of trouble and distress, all can be found, at this very moment, in the living Lord Jesus Himself and His divine resources in the kingdom of God.

You do not need go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to find this. You do not need to go anywhere other than where you are right now. Jesus is closer to you at this moment than the air around your face. You do not need to strain, or strive, or stir up any kind of special spiritual feelings. Simply yield yourself to His control and follow where He leads.

Jesus has gladly come into the minds and bodies and souls of millions upon millions of human beings, in all sorts of incredible moral, emotional, physical, relational, and spiritual troubles. He has promised to accept ALL who will come to Him in faith. He will accept you.

He is ready now to gently impart to you God's tender grace. Will you begin to look to Him and trust Him?

AS YOU BEGIN THIS PROCESS

Everything you will read here to walk with Jesus through your suffering can be described these ways:

**Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.**

Psalm 105:4

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
In all your ways acknowledge Him
and He will make your paths straight.**

Proverbs 3:5-6

The resources you need to walk through suffering are divine ones. They will be found in a shared-life with Jesus and experienced by conscious "looking to Jesus" (cultivating an awareness of His presence, trusting Him, and obeying Him).

WHAT YOU CAN DO NOW IN THE MIDST OF YOUR PAIN

The first action you want to take is to pray and ask God to LIFT the pain. God is not in the business of seeing how much misery and pain you can bear. He does want to see to whom you will turn in the midst of your pain.

Jesus said about Himself,

“When you have seen me, you have seen the Father.”

John 14:9

In other words, if you want to know what God is like, study the teachings and actions of Jesus. Consider the multitude of occasions recorded in the gospels in which Jesus relieved the misery of others. Ask yourself, “Would He not also be willing to help me?” Of course He would. Our Lord taught us that our heavenly Father even takes care of individual little birds—how much more His own children. So our first step is to ask for the pain to be lifted and to trust.

WHAT IS IT TO TRUST JESUS?

To trust Jesus, to have faith in Him, is to act as if it is true He exists and rules over your life, protecting you, forgiving you, strengthening you, guiding you, and providing for you. To trust Him is not to rely on proof, or “signs,” or even spiritual feelings. It is to take Him at His word found in the Bible.

The one praying for relief will want to assume Jesus is present and willing to grant you relief. How can we assume such a thing? Again, by faith. We start with the foundation of simply resting in His promised (therefore, assumed) constant presence and loving care.

WHAT IF YOUR PRAYER DOESN'T WORK?

What if the pain does not go away when you pray? Then by faith, you trust that the Lord will bring you relief in His time and for now give you grace to carry on. Take to heart what is written in Scripture:

Wait for the LORD; be strong and let your heart take courage and wait for the LORD.

Psalm 27:14

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

2 Corinthians 12:9

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.

Luke 22:42-44

This last passage, describing the experience of the suffering of our Lord Himself, is very instructive. Dark dread and despair from Satan was being poured out upon Jesus, in the attempt to crush Him and keep Him from going to the cross. As you remember, Jesus pleaded for supporting prayer from His disciples, but exhausted, they slept instead.

If our Lord Himself was not too proud to ask for relief, why should you not also ask God to lift your pain?

The Father did send relief to Jesus, in the form of an angel from heaven who came at that moment to strengthen Him. But notice that not all the suffering left Him. However, he was strengthened sufficiently to get up and continue on to follow the Father's will.

This is the point. Our loving heavenly Father will lift our pain in response to prayer so that we can carry on. Now, if "carrying on" means only getting back to frivolous living, with little regard to the doing of our Lord's will, then Scripture has little promise of relief to give to us.

If on the other hand, we use this time of pain as an opportunity to repent (change our mind about who is best suited to run our life) and come back to our senses and choose to live again yielded to finding and pursuing the loving purposes of God for our life—we have every reason to expect that our Lord will at once give us sufficient relief to carry on in the pursuit of the doing of His will.

WHAT IS THE TRICK TO WALKING THROUGH PAIN?

The "trick," if there is one, is not to fight the pain, but to surrender it—surrender it into the care of the Lord Jesus. How do you know He has taken it from you? You don't know, in the sense of proof. However, you trust His merciful nature and the promises of Scripture, like this one:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

1 Peter 5:6-7

When you surrender your suffering to Jesus, you offer it in prayer (out loud is best) and BY FAITH assume that He has accepted and taken your suffering into His own care. Begin then to live just knowing you will be given sufficient strength to bear your pain, counting on healing and deliverance to come from the Lord, and trusting Him to give you insight if you need to take further steps.

Humans pride ourselves on intelligence. Well, certainly we are smarter than plants and animals—but so what? All of us know the tragedy of being intelligent, but not knowing what to do.

When I am in pain, I know I must have guidance directly from God. I am not wise enough in myself to make the choices that will be best—and at those times, I'm hurting too much to risk further mistakes!

We need not despair. God will guide us, if we are willing to be guided. It is not remarkable, when you think about it, that the testimony of many who find Jesus for the first time is when they were in great suffering. Here is one of many passages in Scripture promising divine guidance if we will seek it:

**I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.**

**Be not like a horse or a mule,
without understanding
but must be curbed with bit and bridle
else it will not keep with you.**

Psalms 32:8-9

Remember that living by faith is acting as if something is so. Consider how you would act if you knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus had taken charge of your suffering for you. Consider what that would look like. Then, in spite of your feelings, begin to act that way.

Faith is having confidence about certain things you cannot see, but believe to be true, nonetheless. It is then acting in ways consistent with

believing it to be so. The Bible promises you will have sufficient grace from God to live this next moment, alive in Him and able to respond to His purposes. You can act calmly in your suffering, not fearfully, for you know God is taking care of you today, tomorrow, and forever.

On a daily basis, the one suffering will want to meditate in the Bible, particularly the Psalms. God has given us the Psalms especially to give shape to our thoughts and feelings as we move through seasons of distress. As you read, linger over their meaning, phrase by phrase.

While pondering what is written, you will find an interactive presence giving you gentle insight and calm encouragement. Take any one phrase that particularly "speaks" to you, write it neatly on a 3 x 5 card, and throughout your day, recite those words, mulling them over in your mind as you go about your daily routine.

You could begin with this phrase for example:

**"Because he loves me," says the LORD, "I will rescue him;
I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name."**

Psalm 91:14

or this:

**Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers
him from them all!**

Psalm 34:19

or this:

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.**

Proverbs 3:5-6

HOW LONG WILL YOU SUFFER?

**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?**

Psalm 13:1-2

Who has not felt what the Psalmist expresses here? The anticipation of unending suffering is what most discourages us when we are in pain.

It is important to take stock of the fact that you and I can only live in this present moment. One of the worst things about pain is the imagined length of time ahead of us in which we think we will have to suffer. Can we agree that we have no idea of how long that might be? It could be five more minutes or five more months or five more years.

But take heart. First of all, you and I can only live one moment at a time. The pain you imagine you might go through in the future (which Satan is only too willing to let you dwell on that you might despair) is not real. I repeat—the pain you imagine you will go through even five seconds from now—that pain is not a reality. Though it is easy to be anxious about anticipated pain, the only moment we really “have” is right now.

People worry that their faith isn’t “working” because they don’t feel strong about something that is YET to happen. I want to assure you that God has not left you and your faith is working. It is just a fact that suffering (and the grace to bear it) can only occur in this present, real time.

GRACE FOR THE FUTURE IS NOT GIVEN US. GRACE IS GIVEN US FOR THE “RIGHT NOW.”

We suffer in this present moment only. Similarly, the grace of God to cope with our pain comes to us in this present moment only. So let us be sure to distinguish between the fear of pain and pain itself. Our Lord has gently and often said that we do not need to be afraid of anything. The more of our pain we can trust Him with, the less fear we will experience. And yes, it is absolutely appropriate to pray about the FEAR of pain as well as the pain itself.

THE PAIN WILL END

The second thought is that however long it might take, the pain will come to an end. There is no suffering for the believer that will not eventually disappear. We find an ability to cope, or the cause of the distress fades away, or both.

The suffering for those who trust in Jesus will end completely when we see Him in heaven. Pain will not cross over the threshold of the grave. But short of that, in this life, the present pain we are walking through will lessen and eventually disappear.

We know this by experience. Our lives in this life are a continual cycle of trial and relief, trial and relief. Whether it is headache, or heartache, the trials of this life come to an end. Other trials also appear. But new deliverances and relief from God also come as well!

One of my great concerns in working with teenagers is that they do not have enough life experience to know this. One reason some teenagers commit suicide is that the enormity of pain, in some tragic event, never before experienced, convinces them that their suffering will never end—leading them to see suicide as relief.

Adults have weathered tough events and know that no pain lasts forever. Relief will come. The Psalmist records what we know to be true from experience:

**Weeping may remain for a night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.**

Psalm 30:5

INFUSED JOY IS OUR STRENGTH

The joy of the Lord is the sustaining force to carry us through suffering. Dr. Dallas Willard, philosopher and author of many helpful books about Christian discipleship, describes joy as a “pervasive sense of well-being.” Joy is the dominant emotion of the Kingdom of God. Where God is encountered and His ruling presence is accepted, the presence of joy is experienced as well.

The Apostle Paul confirms this as an essential attribute of life now in the Kingdom of God:

**For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking,
but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.**

Romans 14:17

I recall my visits with Miss Helen Moreland, a dear elderly soul, and very close to me. I met her when she was 92, had the great honor of leading her to Jesus at age 98, and rejoiced with her upon her death at age 102. Helen was always happy to see friends. In fact, though she suffered terribly from arthritis and the general debilitation of her age, when she was with her friends, the joy she felt in their company caused her to forget her pain.

WHERE JOY ABOUNDS

I hesitate to describe joy in “how to” terms, because it is a gift that flows into the believer’s consciousness, without direct effort on our part. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ has given certain directions to His disciples about abounding in this grace of joy:

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:9-11

Our Lord is saying that His very joy can be inside our bodies. The circumstances under which this joy abounds is the settled way of life found in those who are walking in tandem with Jesus, trusting Him, listening to Him, responding to His wishes, “abiding” in His presence.

It has also been my experience that God is kind and will infuse joy into life at times when I least deserve and expect it. His joy is what enables me to carry on.

One final word about joy and gladness of heart. It is possible to have this joy in the midst of suffering. The recorded testimony of Christians under terrible suffering and persecution in times past confirms this. Saint Francis of Assisi spoke of this kind of joy. Frankly, his words are so strange, I don’t blame the reader for thinking St. Francis must be wrong. Yet I have had small glimpses into what he describes—enough so as to be very sure he has God’s mind on this matter.

One day Saint Francis was traveling from Perugia to Saint Mary of the Angels. It was winter, and he was suffering severely from the bitter cold. And he called to Brother Leo, who was walking a short distance ahead, saying:

“Brother Leo, even though the Friars Minor throughout the land are setting a high example of holiness and edification, nevertheless write down and note well that this is not the source of perfect joy.” And a little further along the road, Saint Francis called out a second time:

“Brother Leo, even though a Friar Minor could give sight to the blind, make the crooked straight, cast out devils, restore hearing to the deaf, make the lame walk and the dumb speak, and even raise to life one who had been dead four days, write down that this is not the source of perfect joy.” Going on a little further, Saint Francis again called out loudly:

“Brother Leo, little lamb of God, even if a Friar Minor could speak with the tongue of an angel, know the courses of the stars and the properties of herbs; and if all the treasures of the earth were revealed to him, and he understood the ways of birds, fish, and all beasts, of men, of trees, of rocks, of roots, and of waters—write down that this is not the source of perfect joy.” And walking on a little further, Saint Francis called out loudly:

“Brother Leo, even if a Friar Minor were such an eloquent preacher that he could convert all unbelievers to the Faith of Christ, write down that this is not the source of perfect joy.”

Saint Francis continued to discourse on this theme for nearly two miles, until Brother Leo in great bewilderment asked him: “Father, I beg you in God’s Name, tell me the source of perfect joy!”

And Saint Francis answered him: “When we arrive at Saint Mary of the Angels soaked with rain, stiff with cold, covered with mud, and exhausted with hunger, and we knock at the friary door, and the porter asks angrily, ‘Who are you?’ and we answer, ‘We are two of your brothers,’ and he says, ‘You are liars. You are a couple of rogues, who wander about deceiving folk and robbing the poor of alms. Be off with you!’ and he refuses to open, and forces us to stand outside all night in the snow and rain, hungry and frozen, then if we bear such ill-treatment, abuse, and dismissal patiently and calmly, without complaint, humbly and charitably

thinking that the porter recognizes us for what we are, and that God moves him to denounce us; write down, Brother Leo, that here is the source of perfect joy.”

“And if we go on knocking, and he comes out angrily and drives us away as importunate rogues with abuse and blows, saying, ‘Be off, you dirty thieves! Go to the poorhouse, for you’re not going to eat or lodge here!’ and we bear this patiently, cheerfully, and charitably, Brother Leo, write down that here is the source of perfect joy.”

“And if, driven by hunger, cold, and darkness, we continue to knock, begging him with tears to open and admit us for the love of God, and he, more furious than ever, says: ‘These are persistent rascals! I will give them what they deserve!’ and rushes out with a knotted stick, grabs us by our cowls, throws us to the ground, and rolls us in the snow, belaboring us with every knot on his stick; and if we bear this patiently and cheerfully, remembering the sufferings of Christ the Blessed, and how we should bear this for love of Him: Brother Leo, write down that here is the source of perfect joy.”

“And now listen to the conclusion, Brother Leo. Above all graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit that Christ gives to His friends is the grace to conquer self, and willingly to bear any pain, injury, insult, and hardship for the love of Christ. For we cannot glory in any other gifts of God except these, because they are not ours, but God’s. Therefore the Apostle says: ‘What did you possess that was not given you by God? And if you have received it from Him, why do you glory as though you had it of yourself?’ But in the cross of suffering and affliction we may glory, because this is our own. So the Apostle says: ‘I will not glory except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,’ to whom be everlasting honor and glory for ever and ever.”

NOT THERE YET? YOU CAN STILL GIVE THANKS!

When I read that story of Saint Francis, I shake my head and think, “Wow. I’m not even close to that.” Even though trial and abuse is not yet “perfect joy” to me, I can still give thanks to God in all circumstances. It is not a matter of feeling, but of choice.

**Be joyful always; pray continually;
give thanks in all circumstances,
for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**

1 Thess 5:16-18

Notice that this text says the WILL OF GOD is to give thanks in the midst of all circumstances. We should pay attention to that!

When was the last time you felt like giving thanks when you were hurting, say for instance, when you have had the stomach flu? For me, never. If you are like me, all you can think about is how utterly miserable you feel. In some way I do not understand, but which I see in Scripture and take by faith, thanksgiving to God, especially in the midst of suffering, results in a doxology of praise to Him in the heavenly realms. More is at stake in our giving of thanks than just our own edification or training in what is appropriate.

Scripture teaches us that thanksgiving is always appropriate. No, we are not instructed to be masochists. We are simply encouraged to choose to reflect with our voices what is always true—that God is great and that God is good.

**Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name;
make known among the nations what he has done.
Sing to him, sing praise to him;
tell of all his wonderful acts.**

1 Chronicles 16:8-10

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.
For the LORD is good and his love endures forever;
his faithfulness continues through all generations.**

Psalms 100:4-5

**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.
Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving
thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord
Jesus Christ.**

Ephesians 5:19-20

Part of giving thanks is singing to the Lord. Most people I know are shy about singing. But—if you allow Scripture to be your guide, singing from your heart to Jesus is something you can and need to do. Praise songs, favorite hymns, singing in a “prayer language,” or just singing a tune you make up on the spot—the Lord sees what you are doing to acknowledge His greatness and goodness.

AND YOU WILL ALSO FEEL BETTER

The old hymn says “Count your many blessings—name them one by one—and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done!” With that “surprise” will also come a strong measure of relief—for two reasons. One, your mind has been distracted from your pain to focus on God and the good things He has done for you. Thanksgiving helps recall to your mind that your universe is larger than your suffering. It is an essential part of finding relief.

You are not a hypocrite to thank Him when you don’t feel thankful. Where we place our thoughts will in fact direct our feelings. If we are not deliberate with this, then the usual thing that happens is the reverse order—our feelings dictate our perception of reality and then our choices.

The second reason you will feel better is because God Himself will impart blessing to your soul in response to your thanksgiving. It is His way of saying “I know what you are going through. I am concerned for you. I appreciate your trust and desire to thank me in the midst of your distress. I will sustain you and do well by you—and am pleased to do so. This is who I am.”

UNDERSTANDING WHY WE SUFFER

When we are hurting, what we want is comfort. An analysis of why suffering occurs is not what we need at the moment. I do believe though, at some point, when we are in a time of relief, we must come to terms with why we suffer.

From the divine purpose, suffering is necessary for our transformation into sons and daughters of God. As the caterpillar must struggle in the

chrysalis in order to emerge as a butterfly, so too we who children of God develop Christ-like character only as we struggle in faith through pain.

Does this shock you? Even our Lord Jesus, who was born and lived without sin, required the pain of suffering to confirm His calling and faith and obedience. How else can we explain the following passage?

Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Hebrews 5:8-9

I want to be careful here. This text is not saying that Jesus needed to suffer because He had done wrong. No, it is saying that our Lord was TRAINED in obedience through suffering. In other words, obedience and faith could not be developed, proven and publicly displayed, until it was put to the test. Because He was tested and tempted and tried—and came through it all victoriously—He is now able to save to the uttermost all who call on His name.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:15-16

Because Jesus lived as a man and suffered in His resolve to live obediently in faith, He is not shocked or ashamed about weaknesses and failures in us. Our Lord Jesus knows how hard it can be. He does not view us with contempt. He sympathizes with our pain and weakness and is constantly reaching out to sustain us and when we fall, encourage us to make fresh beginnings with Him.

HOW SUFFERING TRAINS OUR CHARACTER

Our goal in this life, as disciples of Jesus, is to become like Him. If we only needed to be forgiven, and not inwardly changed, we could have just died and gone to heaven the day we placed our trust in Christ. But no, God's plan is that we become transformed on the inside so we can reign

together in the universe with Him. For God to be able to trust us with this responsibility, we must become different kinds of people at the level of our motivations as well as behavior. Growth in athletic ability is a wonderful comparison to growth in Christ-likeness. The person who is willing to compete must be trained. The training is not just what is received from a book. No, the body itself must be trained by exercise, conditioning, and practice—so the athlete can perform naturally and easily without even thinking.

The great performers in any sport have been transformed so their minds and bodies “automatically” know what needs to be done. The guard bringing the basketball down the court is not paying attention to his dribbling of the ball (unlike me in high school, never quite sure which way that ball would bounce!). No, his eyes are on the flow of the game in front of him, to initiate or react as needed.

In a similar way, as disciples of Jesus, we have entered a regimen of training that will result in complete transformation of character. Tests of faith and obedience (though painful) constitute the training which must occur for transformation to happen. As Dallas Willard often said, what God gets out of our life is the kind of person we have become. God intends us to become the kind of persons he can trust to do what WE want through all eternity. Obviously for that to happen what we want on the inside will need changing.

The person who lifts weights to gain strength allows pain into his body, knowing the recovery time will bring about muscular growth. The suffering we go through in life can similarly be experienced as training in righteousness of character.

Endure hardship as discipline. God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:7-11

Let us be specific. The highest Christian virtue is love. But, as you probably remember, Jesus pointed out that even unbelievers can display a certain type of love towards those with whom they are fond and are

good to them (Luke 6:32). What was our Lord's point to His disciples then, about love?

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you... Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Luke 6:27-36

In other words, Jesus taught that it is no big deal to be nice to those who are nice to us. Most people can do that. But children of God begin to take on the family resemblance as we are changed inwardly to the point where we routinely treat all people well—even those who can't stand us!

Think about this. Is there any way you and I will learn to love those who are injuring us without our experiencing pain and suffering? We cannot just choose to love those who are against us as a matter of will power. No, instead, there will be a long, painful process of attempting to show love to people like that, failing, getting discouraged, picking ourselves up again to follow Jesus, seeking more grace and the power of the Spirit, practicing spiritual disciplines such as solitude, prayer, Scripture study, and finally, beginning to succeed more often. Growth is slow.

But if we do not give up, we find over time the Lord has been chipping away at our hatred, stubbornness, rebellion, and anger, and replacing those unattractive qualities with His steadiness of purpose, peace, and power of his love. We will find a growing sense of ease and naturalness in treating well those who don't like us.

THE IMMEDIATE CAUSE OF OUR SUFFERING

The Bible teaches that the immediate cause of suffering usually has to do with wrongdoing--either our own, or someone else's.

This is not a pleasant fact to face. It does not cover all suffering we experience, but if you look hard enough, wrongdoing is usually somewhere to be found. Maturity requires that we admit responsibility for our actions that contributed to the suffering we are going through. If we need to apologize to others and make restitution, we should do so.

ARE YOU BEING PUNISHED BY GOD?

I would not be truthful to omit the possibility that some suffering we experience may in fact be the result of God's judgment against sin. For the believer, this punishment always takes the form of discipline. God disciplines His children—not to inflict anger, but to train us and teach us.

The writer of Hebrews says:

“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, And he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?

Hebrews 12:5-7

This punishment for sin is usually in the form of the direct consequences of the wrong doing. For example, let's say a believer was arrested for DWI. Direct consequences of this sin could include the loss of one's driver's license, loss of job and reputation, lawsuits, even the lingering guilt of having harmed someone while driving intoxicated. This type of pain of direct consequences can also be regarded as God's judgment against sin.

Years ago a woman asked for my counsel. She admitted to me she had seduced the husband of another woman, caused a divorce and then married the man. Now ten years later, she and her husband hated each other. What is more, each of them was suffering from various illnesses. She asked me if I thought God was punishing her for what she had done. I told her it was a possibility—but if it was God, it was to make her aware of her wrongdoing, so she could repent and find forgiveness. Sadly, the lady didn't want to do that. I don't know why.

More recently a man confided to me that his adult daughter was a drug addict. He and his wife had found it necessary to gain the guardianship of their granddaughter because of the mom's addiction. The man used to be a terrible alcoholic before he was saved. 30 years sober and a devout follower of Jesus, had now had come to believe the misery of his

daughter's life was pay-back for his past sins and alcoholism. I told him firmly that could not be true – Jesus Christ had taken care of punishment for his sins. Yes, consequences of sin are real, but if a person is repentant, “pay back” is not what is going on with the suffering.

Here's the point. The Scriptures are filled with examples of God bringing trouble to His children when they live in rebellion. But the punishment is tempered with mercy to bring about repentance. The severity of the punishments we read about in the Bible were not even close to what could have happened. God's mercy triumphs over justice!

As I review my own life, most of whatever suffering I have experienced has been due, at least in part, to my own fault. What is more, every time God has allowed me to experience painful consequences, it has always been less than I deserved. He has been very kind to me.

WE CAN BE ASSURED OF FORGIVENESS

Our Lord wants us to be confident that we are forgiven. It is on the basis of the shed blood of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection from the dead that we are forgiven. As we are assured of our forgiveness and acceptance before Him we are then enabled to take steps in obedience and trust—not the other way around. The cure for anxious striving is the rest of faith.

HOW TO BE ASSURED OF FORGIVENESS

We receive forgiveness that Jesus Christ obtained for us by confessing our sins to God (which implies remorse) and trusting Him to forgive us. We base our confidence upon what the Bible says, not our feelings on the matter. Here are two typical texts:

**Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the LORD"--
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin.**

Psalm 32:5

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

When you ask God's forgiveness, immediately thank Him for that forgiveness. You are not to wait until you FEEL forgiven before you start to believe it. You trust Jesus for your forgiveness. When you sin, you keep short accounts with God. You get up from your mess, turn back to the Lord, ask Him for forgiveness and cleansing, and then thank Him for the forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ. And follow after Jesus once more.

Can you prove that God has forgiven you? No—but, provided that you have repented and confessed your sin to God, you can ASSUME that He has forgiven you, by faith. Is this not presumptuous? It would be if we were making this all up. But we are not. God has said so in His Word. He has demonstrated it publicly in the crucifixion of Jesus and with His resurrection from the dead. The atonement necessary for human sin has been accomplished in Jesus Christ. We take His Word to heart and then ACT accordingly. Here is one of my favorite verses about this matter:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:17-21

SUFFERING UNIQUE TO CHRISTIANS

Followers of Jesus Christ are subject to unique difficulties and hurt—simply because they are Christians. These are the “sharing in the sufferings of Christ” so we may also share in His resurrection life and power.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:11-12

Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Romans 8:17

For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.

2 Corinthians 1:5

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

1 Peter 4:12

This suffering includes persecution and criticism from others because of our beliefs and lifestyle as well as the demonic efforts to discourage our hearts and make us doubt God's kindness to us.

THE PART THE DEVIL PLAYS

Jesus said this about the work of the devil in contrast to his work:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10:10

The Apostle Peter (who certainly knew by experience how easily one might fall) had this to say:

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your

brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

1 Peter 5:8-9

The New Testament warns believers that we must remain spiritually alert and poised at all times to stand against the devil and his schemes. What do those schemes look like? Attacking believers by stirring up within them critical and judgmental attitudes, contempt for others, refusal to forgive, bitterness, envy, jealousy, stubbornness, temptation to immorality, legalism, discouragement and despair, and so forth.

When he attacks our faith, it is always the devil's goal to lead us to despair. He is called "the accuser" for good reason. He delights in tormenting believers with reminders of past sin (which God has certainly forgiven) trying to create uneasiness and anxiousness in our souls about our security with God.

For non-believers (and Christians too if we allow it) the strategy is getting us to indulge works of the flesh. The devil knows we easily harden our hearts toward God through sinning.

The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21

God has permitted Satan to have a large measure of reign on this planet. Actually, it was Adam who gave this authority to Satan when he and Eve disobeyed God. Their act of disobedience gave Satan authority over them. But, as Dr. Richard Lovelace, one of my seminary professors, said in my hearing:

"The devil is like a dog on a leash—and God holds the end of that leash."

THE CAUSE OF SOME SUFFERING WILL REMAIN A MYSTERY

There is suffering that defies any easy answer. Hurricanes, earthquakes, birth defects, mental retardation, hereditary disease, cancer (not related to abusing our bodies), asthma, accidents of all sorts, victims of crime and terrorism, and so on. I'm reminded as I write this booklet, **"God is in heaven, and you upon earth; therefore let your words be few."** (Ecclesiastes 4:2) God does all things well—and we believe that by faith, not proof. There are many things we just do not understand. But we trust God anyway.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!

**How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!**

Romans 11:33

THE COMPANIONSHIP OF FRIENDS

What we need in the midst of pain is not theology but the felt love of God and the love of friends.

Every Christian needs to have a small group of praying, supportive, like-minded friends who can be trusted. For many years, I have sought out such groups, even forming them when I could not find one to join. I cannot exaggerate the importance of having believing and praying friends who are "there" for you.

You remember the story of Job. Unbeknownst to Job, God's honor in the heavens was at stake in how Job would respond to his suffering. Would Job continue to be loyal to God, or would he curse God?

One day, three of Job's friends came to visit. Each of them tried to persuade Job of the correct theological answer for his suffering. **All turned out to be wrong! But to their credit, this they did well:**

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize

with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

Job 2:11-13

When we suffer, do we not appreciate the kindness of our friends who simply come to be present with us?

KEEP STANDING

Our Lord is training us as children of God. His goal is for us to be transformed from the inside-out so that we easily and gladly do the will of God from our heart. God's intention is to empower us to reign with Him over this universe. When we so completely understand His will and desire it, then God can trust us to do what WE want.

We see this principle with our children. Do we really want to have to supervise them when they reach the age of 30? No. Instead we train them when young so they will freely choose to do the right thing WITHOUT our supervision. Granted, it does not always work out that way with our children. Nor does it always work out that way with God's children, either.

God knows our weaknesses and does not despise us for them. He is tender with us. Nothing about us surprises Him. He knows full well what we are like on our own at this stage in our development. We don't expect toddlers to be able to ride bicycles—neither does God.

When our Lord determines it is necessary for us to enter a season of training through trials, He is not examining us to see "how much pain we can take." Nor is he seeking heroics from us. He expects us simply to STAND. Specifically, He is training us to look to Jesus, counting on His strength and guidance. Here are the Apostle Paul's thoughts on this:

Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Ephesians 6:13

Notice that Paul’s exhortation is “so that when the day of evil comes”— in other words, we are to prepare to stand ahead of time. Even seasoned followers of Jesus, if not alert to what is happening around them, can be distracted and overcome by the suddenness of Evil.

You may have had the experience of standing in ocean surf. Facing out towards the waves, you brace yourself to stand in the sand towards the oncoming breakers and find yourself easily able to do so. Sometimes though, if you are not paying attention, the wave you don’t see can knock you down. The Bible teaches us to stay alert:

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.

Matthew 26:41

Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints.

Ephesians 6:18

You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled.

1 Thessalonians 5:5-6

Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings.

1 Peter 5:8-9

Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.

Luke 21:36

So, let us take courage and learn to call on the Lord that we too may be able to stand in faith when He comes.

KEEP YOUR FOCUS ON JESUS

Dr. Frank Laubach, pioneer missionary to Muslims in the Philippines in the 1930's, experimented with the attempt to keep his thoughts directed towards God continually. His experiments are wonderfully described in his published diary, *LETTERS BY A MODERN MYSTIC*. The two excerpts that follow illustrate his progress.

May 24, 1930

As I analyze myself I find several things happening to me as a result of these two months of strenuous effort to keep God in mind every minute. This concentration upon God is strenuous, but everything else has ceased to be so. I think more clearly, I forget less frequently. Things which I did with a strain before, I now do easily and with no effort whatever. I worry about nothing, and lose no sleep. I walk on air a good part of the time. Even the mirror reveals a new light in my eyes and face. I no longer feel in a hurry about anything. Everything goes right. Each minute I meet calmly as though it were not important. Nothing can go wrong except one thing. That is that God may slip from my mind if I do not keep on my guard. If He is here, the universe is with me. My task is simple and clear.

June 3, 1930

This experiment which I am trying is the most strenuous discipline which any man ever attempted. I am not succeeding in keeping God in my mind very many hours of the day, and from the point of view of experiment number one, I should have to record a pretty high percentage of failure. But the other experiment—what happens when I do succeed—is so successful that it makes up for the failure of number one. God does work a change. The moment I turn to Him it is like turning on an electric current which I feel though my whole being.

To keep one's thoughts turned toward Jesus, though difficult at the beginning, will become easier. Here's why: God Himself will assist you. Granted, it does take practice on our part. But the greatest barrier to overcome is simply beginning the effort. Keeping God before the mind is

not just for those who want to be more “spiritual.” It is the essential first step in the transformation of the human being!

Take to heart the following passages from the Bible that speak to the idea of keeping God constantly before the mind:

**I have set the LORD always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.**

Psalm 16:8

**My eyes are ever on the LORD,
for only he will release my feet from the snare.**

Psalm 25:15

**Look to the LORD and his strength;
seek his face always.**

Psalm 105:4

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.

Colossians 3:1-3

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:17-18

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:2-3

OUR THOUGHT-LIFE CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

Where we choose to place our thoughts will make all the difference. We have the ability to direct our thoughts. But if we are not vigilant with our thought-life, our thoughts (and then our feelings) will proceed on a downward spiral. We will become obsessed with the pain, then discouraged at what is happening to us, even lashing out at God. The discouragement will give fuel to the darkening of our thoughts, which leads to hopelessness and despair. Sin and the devil can gain a vice-like grip when invited by the despairing attitude of “What’s the use?”

When sin is freely allowed, further darkening in the mind, hardening of the heart, and even more despair rolls in. You can count on the presence of Evil to hasten this process, so that the child of God draws close to giving up on his faith. That is Satan’s goal.

But our good Lord will only let this go so far. He is our good Shepherd. He will not let us be tested beyond what we can bear. We will not be overcome. He after His sheep who wander away—and He brings us back home!

This passage is a good one to memorize:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.

John 10:27-30

AS A DISCIPLE OF JESUS

It may be that one can grow in faith so suffering no longer troubles one unduly. I’m not there yet. Even after many years as a Christian and pastor, I still find myself at times dealing with thoughts of “Why me, Lord?” and “How long, Lord?!” and feelings of anger, confusion, doubt. I know these thoughts and feelings are not based upon truth—nevertheless, I admit to the reader at times I still experience them.

There is no easy solutions to suffering. The Bible provides a way to live through suffering, though—and that way is to walk in tandem with our living Lord Jesus, who knows what it is like to suffer.

**Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.**

**But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was
upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.**

Isaiah 53:4-5

Having agreed to live as a disciple of Jesus, you are learning how to do everything as He would, if He were in your place, living your particular life. In other words, given whatever suffering you are passing through (even if it is your fault), you learn from Jesus how to walk through the pain as He would if He were in your shoes.

You need the spiritual disciplines of fasting, prayer, solitude, silence, worship, study, and service to be thoughtfully arranged in your life. It is through the planned practice of these disciplines that you enable yourself to be open to the inner transformation Jesus is working in you.

Memorizing key passages of Scripture that deal with God’s promises to us in suffering will be essential. I strongly recommend that you begin with the 23rd Psalm. Commit it to memory, mull over portions of it in your mind during the day, and recite it to yourself as you go to sleep at night.

You want to remember it is the inner change into Christ-likeness you seek. WHO you are becoming is more important than WHAT you are doing. When your “insides” are good, the outside will take care of itself.

But specific actions for your own particular situation will come to you from Jesus Himself, if you will seek it. He has a great variety of ways to give His loved ones insight. You will find the wisdom you need if you seek it from God.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OBEDIENCE

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of obeying what you believe Jesus wants you to do. Without the willingness to obey and the intention to learn how to obey, no amount of prayer or spiritual discipline will compensate. You need to consider the closing words of our Lord Jesus in His Sermon on the Mount:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

Matthew 7:24-27

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

It is an unnerving thing to realize that we are not masters of our lives, but simply creatures, vulnerable and here for just a brief time. We are not the one in control. We are ultimately the recipients, not the originators, of whatever befalls us.

“Yet not my will, but thine be done.”

Having surrendered outcomes of life to God, the disciple of Jesus awakens to the relief of discovering that no matter what may happen, he will be protected and taken care of:

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

Matthew 6:26-27

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even

the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

Matthew 10:29-31

PROMISED GRACE IS FOR NOW

Remembering that we cannot receive grace for the future, nevertheless we are promised the grace FOR THIS PRESENT MOMENT.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 4:13

The grace of God to give us courage and strength to endure is available to us NOW. God's working with us enables us to bear with the pain and carry on following after Jesus.

Consider these words from Romans chapter 8:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

WHEN JESUS COMES AGAIN

There is no pain that will not be healed in the glorious, heart-thrilling sight of the vision of our Lord's loveliness, kindness and awesome splendor.

Maybe you have seen an old dog, stiff with age, hardly able to move, head slumped on his paws, lying on the porch. It would seem with his arthritic hurt nothing, not even a stray cat, could entice that old dog to move. Yet, when he sees his master drive into the driveway, that welcome sight moves the old dog to forget about his pain, come to his feet, and with tail wagging, rush down the steps to greet him.

So will it be for us when we see Jesus face to face. And the pain of life will be gone and will not return.

On that day we will lay our burdens down. We will have finished our race, we will have kept the faith. We will hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant—enter now into the joy of your Lord!” We will weep in profound relief as Jesus places His hands on us and heals to the uttermost the wounds and remembrances of every hurt suffered.

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

Revelation 21:4

Easing into the rapture of our soul and mind will come the knowledge that we are HOME.

Even now we are never alone. He has promised. You can trust Him.

**Wait for the LORD;
be strong and let your heart take courage
and wait for the LORD.**

Psalms 27:13-14