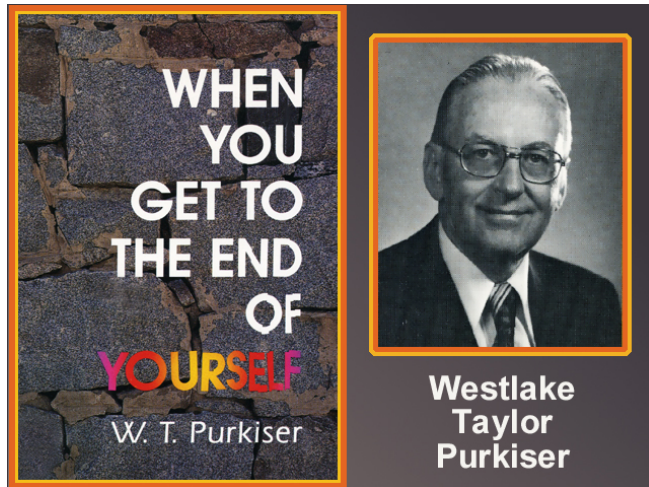


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## **WHEN YOU GET TO THE END OF YOURSELF**

By W. T. Purkiser



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## **DEDICATION**

**To the memory of Joyce whose severe suffering and radiant spirit have been the travail and triumph in which most of the following chapters have been born.**

\* \* \* \* \*

## **PREFACE**

The immediate occasion for this little volume came in a letter from a friend in South Carolina:

"I have just finished reading again an editorial of yours, pasted in my Bible, which appeared in the Herald of Holiness of November 13, 1968.

"Only God knows, for I cannot put into words, what this editorial has meant and does mean, once again in our present hour of catastrophe! It seems like there has been one wave after another of trouble, tragedy, adverse circumstances, and catastrophe that has swept over our lives.

"I thought of your editorial the other night as I walked and tried to pray at 3 a.m. when our 18-year-old daughter lay between life and death! I quoted to my heart and to God some of your statements! And so, while I cannot put into words what this editorial has meant to my own heart, I just want to say to you a big 'Thank you, and God bless you real good!'"

Much of the material that follows has appeared in other forms. It is sent forth in this book with the prayer that its simple truths may encourage trust in times of trouble, and reliance on the God who is too wise to make a mistake and too good to be unkind.

W. T. Purkiser

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## **01 -- WHEN YOU GET TO THE END OF YOURSELF**

To suppose that unruffled seas and blue skies are a token of divine approval is the cruel conceit of those with whom all things go well.

\* \* \*

Life can be terribly hard for most people some of the time and for some people most of the time.

There is no easy way to explain this. We cannot understand why the dark night of the soul should come. We probably should not pretend that we do.

But come it does, and we must learn to live with it without bitterness or self-pity.

It is not that God loves some people more than others. Nor is it that untroubled times are evidence of His special favor. To suppose that unruffled seas and blue skies are a token of divine approval is the cruel conceit of those with whom all things go well.

\* \* \*

I

Actually some of God's choicest saints have suffered terribly. One has but to think of Annie Johnson Flint, author of so much inspirational verse.

Miss Flint's poetry was not written for the literary critics. Rather, as a biographer said, "She wrote for the common people of the world who face life with its burdens and its difficulties, and who try to trace the rainbow through the rain and to perceive the bow in the cloud."

Miss Flint planned to become a concert pianist. But before she was 20, arthritis in one of its most crippling forms laid hold of her. Within five years she was hopelessly crippled.

Many of her most inspiring verses of faith and hope were written in great pain with a pencil she could hardly move--written on a writing board suspended over the bed where she lay flat on her back. It was so she wrote:

God hath not promised  
Skies always blue,  
Flower-strewn pathways  
All our lives through;  
God hath not promised  
Sun without rain,

Joy without sorrow,  
Peace without pain.

But God hath promised  
Strength for the day,  
Rest for the labor,  
Light for the way,  
Grace for the trials,  
Help from above,  
Unfailing sympathy,  
Undying love.

\* \* \*

## II

When you get to the end of yourself, you step out-not into darkness and the void--but into the strong arms of God. When we cannot understand, we can trust. When we cannot see, we can walk by faith.

Life goes on, and we go on--sustained by the presence of One who loves us when all other loves fail. In Mary Brainard's lines:

So I go on, not knowing--  
I would not, if I might--  
I would rather walk in the dark with God  
Than go alone in the light;  
I would rather walk with Him by faith  
Than walk alone by sight.

Even when pain is so severe that one cannot pray, the need of an obedient heart is the most eloquent petition ever heard at the throne of God. While still a young man, Samuel Shoemaker wrote some lines he entitled "A Prayer in Bed":

Dear Lord, one day  
I shall lie thus and pray  
Stretched out upon my bed,  
Within a few days or hours  
Of being dead.  
And I shall seek  
Then for the words to speak,  
And scarce shall find them,  
Being very weak.  
There shall be hardly strength  
To say the words if they be found, at length.

Take, then, my now clear prayer.  
Make it apply when shadowy words shall flee;  
When the body, busy and dying,  
May eclipse the soul.  
I pray Thee now, while pray I can,  
Then look, in mercy look,  
Upon my weakness -- look and heed  
When there can be no prayer  
Except my need!\*

\*Copyright, 1967, by Helen Smith Shoemaker. Used by permission.

It is in the hour of our infirmity, when we do not know what to pray for as we ought, that the Spirit makes intercession with groanings that cannot and need not be uttered.

\* \* \*

### III

Along with everything else the Cross means to us, it means that the Lord suffers when those He loves suffer. It could hardly be otherwise if love means what the Bible shows it to mean.

Do you suppose that one reason Jesus refused to take the drugged wine offered to Him at Calvary to help deaden the pain of the Cross was because He knew there would be times when sedation would lose its power for us and He would not take better care of himself than can be taken of us in such an hour?

No child of God suffers alone. The eternal Cross is witness to that fact. And the Father, who momentarily turned His face away from His Son dying as our Sin Offering, turned back to receive into His compassionate hands the spirit offered to Him when the travail was finished.

Eugenia Price has written, "If life has offered you more tragedy than joy, this is no secret to God. If you are suffering physically, so that every new day stretches away pain-dimmed and heavy, He knows. He knows about your fear, all the way from its cause to its devastating effect upon you now. He is the God of the shaking hand and the tormented mind. He is the God of the heart torn by grief and the eyelids swollen from weeping. 'Jesus wept.' And He still remembers the tight pressure of the heavy heart, the distorted way the world looks through eyes filled with tears.

"We do not need to explain ourselves to Him. He already knows."\*

**\*What Is God Like? Copyright, 1960, by Zondervan Publishing House. Used by permission.**

**And His promise is still, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in [your] weakness" (II Cor. 12: 9).**

**When we get to the end of ourselves, we can say with the Apostle Paul, "I am persuaded [or as Phillips has translated it, "I am absolutely convinced], that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8: 38-39).**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **02 -- WHEN GOD HIDES HIS FACE**

**An untested faith is an unsure faith. Faith grows strong and steady only as it is exorcised against the hard pressures of adverse circumstances.**

**\* \* \***

**One of the most poignant questions in the Old Testament Book of Job is the afflicted man's cry to the God he had served so many years: "Wherefore hidest thou thy face, and holdest me for thine enemy?" This, in all his trial, Job found hardest to bear.**

**That God does hide His face at times is a fact the most saintly have found in their own experiences.**

**The state in which the soul finds itself when God hides His face is described in the language of the devotional literature of the Christian centuries as "aridity." It is a spiritual dryness, a sense of deep frustration, barrenness, or loneliness.**

**\* \* \***

**I**

**One devotional writer has described aridity as "the darkness of spirit and emptiness of soul that ensues when one feels as if something has snapped in his religious life and his prayers now reach no further than his own lips. To the spiritually sensitive person, this loss of a sense of divine companionship is an acutely unhappy experience. Often it is joined with an exaggerated self-pity or self-accusation and with deep depression about life in general."**

**Any known and unconfessed sin, of course, will immediately dry up the springs of spiritual life. God declares that He will hide His face from those in whom there is no faith (Deut. 32:20), and sin does cut the taproot of faith.**

**On the other hand, dryness may come when there is no sin. It would be a great mistake to argue that, because sin causes God to hide His face, therefore whenever God hides His face it is the result of sin. One could as well argue that, because all dogs have legs, therefore all animals with legs are dogs.**

**The error of Job's friends was at this very point. They reasoned, and rightly, that all who sin must suffer. They erred when they turned it around and inferred that all who suffer have sinned.**

**At times, in the absence of sin and when faith has been as strong as it has ever been, a spiritual darkness may descend upon the soul. Such was David's case when he uttered the words echoed by Jesus on the Cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34)**

**It is possible that the Lord allows such aridity to come to one of His faithful children as part of the testing all must endure here on earth. It was said of one of Israel's kings, "God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart" (II Chron. 32:31).**

**Peter also speaks of the "trial [or testing] of your faith" (I Pet. 1:3-9). It is a testing that comes about because of "heaviness" brought on by many temptations. The light and buoyant spirit of earlier times is replaced by dullness and depression. The sense of well-being gives way to nameless fears and forebodings.**

**The amazing thing is that Peter says such testing times "must need be."**

**The truth is, an untested faith is an unsure faith. Faith grows strong and steady only as it is exercised against the hard pressures of adverse circumstances.**

**\* \* \***

**II**

**But while "heaviness through manifold temptations" must needs be, and works toward a faith "more precious than . . . gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire," the testing time is only "for a season."**

**There is an ancient legend about a king who ordered a servant to prepare a signet with a motto that would temper the king's happiness when he enjoyed good fortune, and lift him in spirit when he should descend to the depths of despair.**

The workman had no difficulty with the signet, but could not think of a motto that would do what the king demanded. Finally he went to a wise man and asked, "What can I put on the signet that will temper the king's ecstasy and at the same time lift him when he falls despondent?"

The answer of the sage was, "Inscribe upon the ring, 'This, too, shall pass.' When the king gazes upon it in triumph, it will humble his pride. When he looks at it in despair, it will lift his hope."

Although carrying a different primary meaning, the oft-repeated Bible phrase, "It came to pass," assures us that the darkness is not here to stay.

We will never find the security we seek in our emotions or in circumstances. Security in a changing world comes only from the inner conviction that God works in all things for good to those who love Him.

\* \* \*

### III

Apart from confidence that "this, too, shall pass," is there any cure when God hides His face? Certainly not "self-pity or self-accusation" or "deep depression about life in general."

A little wholesome self-examination may help. Too much of it may become morbid and only increase the darkness it is hoped to cure.

It is important that one be sure there is no sin in act or attitude. One should therefore invite the searching of the divine Spirit, remembering always that it is His work to "convict. . . of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment."

The prayer of the Psalmist is always in order: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (Ps. 139: 23-24).

In this connection, we must distinguish between Satan's accusations and the Spirit's conviction. The difference is usually that the enemy's accusations are sweeping and general, while the Spirit's ministry is definite and specific. Satan cuts and slashes. The Spirit helps and heals.

The scriptures that describe the malady also suggest the remedy. In the same chapter in which Job laments the hidden face of God, he says, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

Job said, in effect, "I do not know where to find Him." He could well have added, "But He knows where to find me." And that is what counts.



Since heaviness of spirit is "the trial of your faith," its cure is a firm trust in the faithfulness of God. As a father understands and cares for his children, so the Lord understands and cares for those who serve and trust Him. "He knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Ps. 103:13-14).

\* \* \*

#### IV

This is not the groundless faith and empty hope of a thoughtless crowd. It is faith that trusts a mighty Saviour and hope that is "as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil" (Heb. 6:19).

Dr. A. J. Cronin, in an autobiography he called *Adventures in Two Worlds*, relates that, after many years of strain and effort in his professional medical career, he found himself still spiritually empty. He became aware that something was missing in his life. He had forgotten God.

Here and there he could see glimmerings of the Christian life in others, including some of the devoted and dedicated medical practitioners with whom he worked. What Dr. Cronin finally found--the factor that revolutionized and redirected his life -- he described in his own words:

"I have handed myself over to God, body and soul. It is this surrender, total, unquestioning, in complete and absolute humility, which is the true essential of belief."

The writer to the Hebrews (10:35-39) gives us a practical plan for maintaining such surrender and faith. When God hides His face, "cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward" (v. 35).

When God hides His face, remember the need for patient endurance "that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise" (v. 36).

When God hides His face, strengthen your faith with the promise, "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry" (v. 37).

When God hides His face, recognize that "the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him" (v. 38).

"But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul" (v. 39).

\* \* \* \* \*

### **03 -- WHY DID IT HAPPEN TO ME?**

**We can never avoid trouble, it is part of life in a sin-cursed world. But whether we rise above trouble in victory or go down beneath it in defeat depends, not on the hardships life brings to us, but on the way we react to them.**

**\* \* \***

**For a great many people this is more than an academic question. It is wrung from the heart by bereavement, misunderstanding, sickness, trial, or losses and reverses of many kinds.**

**It is a perfectly human question, though there is not always a very good answer at hand.**

**Of course we almost never ask it about the good things that come our way. Perhaps we should. Why should I have been so favored? Why should I have had the promotion, or the raise, or the unexpected "windfall"? Why should so many blessings have come my way?**

**Still it is natural to expect the best and to be surprised at that which is less than the best. "Hope springs eternal in the human breast." Though we may try to shield ourselves against disappointment by "hoping for the best and expecting the worst," we don't seem very successful in the attempt.**

**\* \* \***

**I**

**Even more pressing is the question which almost always comes to the Christian mind: Did God will this to happen? Was this His purpose for my life? The fact that God is Lord and Ruler of all would seem to mean that He could dispose of all the details of life in ways that would suit Him.**

**It is exactly at this point that we must think clearly and distinguish sharply lest we "charge God foolishly."**

**When we put the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man together, we come face-to-face with the fact that God permits some things which He does not purpose. There is a secondary or permissive will of God, as well as His primary or directive will.**

**Actually, the freedom of man demands responsibility. Unless life were arranged so that choices had consequences and those who make choices must bear, or at least share, those consequences, freedom would be impossible if not**

immoral. It is the sovereign will of God that those whom He has created in His own image shall grow to mature selfhood by making choices which God does not compel.

That God is all-powerful is certainly a basic premise of the spiritual life. While philosophers may debate it Christians rarely doubt it.

But omnipotence does not mean that everything which happens is in line with God's primary or directive will. In an order of existence where men and women are free to act ignorantly as well as wisely, and sinfully as well as rightly, many things will happen which God permits but which He does not purpose. God allows sin and the harmful effects of ignorance. But He does not "will" them in the sense of desiring them to happen.

What omnipotence and the sovereignty of God do mean is that nothing can happen which will permanently defeat God's purposes. For God is not an absentee landlord who lets his tenants run their affairs quite as they will, coming only to collect his rent at the end of the lease. As a better translation of Rom. 8:28 puts it, "We know that God works in all things for good to those who love Him, who are called [and have responded] according to His purpose."

It is never suggested that "all things" are good, for some things are not. They originate in the kingdom of darkness with the prince of evil, or they come from the wicked designs of sinful men. What is said is that God works in these things to bring ultimate good for His own.

\* \* \*

## II

Here we must understand why the hard things come to us. "Soft nests are made for little birds," and whatever God wants His people to be, it is not that they be little. Candy has sickened more children and ruined more teeth than vegetables and meat ever have.

We grow physically by attempting what at first trial is impossible to us. Consider a child learning to walk. Parents could prevent many a bruise by padding the floor and walls of the nursery, and by running to support the toddler every time he wavers. But the probabilities are that such a child would be a long time learning to walk.

However, while the parent does not carry the child comfortably from spot to spot, and does not pad the walls and floor of the nursery to prevent an occasional bruise, as one writer has said, what he does do is to be sure that knives, razor blades, and bottles of poison are kept out of the infant's reach! This is faith's confidence: God will permit many things to come to me as the result of the sins of

others, my sharing in the common human lot, and even my own ignorance and foolishness. But He will not permit anything to come but what He and I together can handle, and I will be the stronger for it.

The grace of God is not intended to save us from trouble. It is intended to save us from defeat.

Commenting on the verse in the Psalms, "Many are the afflictions of the righteous: but the Lord delivereth him out of them all" (34:19), someone wisely said, "I'd rather have a thousand afflictions and be delivered out of them all than have half a dozen and get stuck in the midst of them!"

We can never avoid trouble. It is part of life in a sin-cursed world. But whether we rise above trouble in victory or go down beneath it in defeat depends, not on the hardships life brings to us, but on the way we react to them.

The very storm that drives one vessel nearer its destination swamps another. The water that lifts one boat sinks another. The difference depends on the skill of the skipper and the soundness of the hull.

As we use the term "grace" in reference to God, it always means two things. It stands for His love, given freely and without stint to those who could never deserve it and at first do not even want it.

But grace means more than God's loving goodwill toward us. It means the outstretched hand of help in our human need. Grace is more than an attitude in the mind of God. It is action in behalf of man. This is why we can speak of saving grace and sanctifying grace. God comes to meet our need for pardon and peace, and our need for purity and power.

And this is why we can speak of sustaining grace, the help that holds us up in the times of trouble. Daniel Day Williams was most certainly correct when he said, "There is a word in the Christian vocabulary which expresses and covers the whole activity of God in human existence -- the word of 'grace.'"

Though we might like it another way, the facts are that there is no victory without a battle, and in a battle someone is apt to get hurt. There are no rewards without effort, and the labor may be arduous and irksome. There is no stamp of approval without the grinding and bitter trial of the proving course. And there is no refined and pure faith without the fiery furnace of testing and trial.

\* \* \*

**God has a way of reversing trouble and failure when faith takes hold. Someone has commented on the familiar story of Joseph in the Old Testament: "All Joseph's adversities were advances." I'm sure Joseph didn't see it at the moment, although he may have trusted it would be true.**

**It would be hard to see any advance in being snatched from a doting father's home and sold into slavery in a distant land. It would be hard to see any advance in the false accusations of a perfidious woman and the jealous suspicion of her powerful husband.**

**Being put in prison and becoming the victim of the callous forgetfulness of a fellow prisoner would not ordinarily be listed on the asset side of the ledger of life.**

**Up to a point, Joseph's whole life was a series of temporary gains followed by greater setbacks.**

**An ordinary person could easily have become embittered and cynical under such circumstances. But Joseph had learned to trust the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to put conviction ahead of convenience and principle before profit.**

**When at last the turn came and the pattern became plain, Joseph told his fearful brothers whose jealousy had started the whole chain of consequences, "Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive" (Gen. 50:20).**

**In fact, each of the series of adversities was an important step in the advance to which God was bringing His servant. While God did not purpose the sins of others which were Joseph's adversities, He did permit them and He did weave them into the overall pattern for good.**

**\* \* \***

#### **IV**

**There is a simple yet inspiring story along this line in the life of Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle of the Salvation Army. In a street meeting one evening Commissioner Brengle was struck on the head with a brick thrown by a ruffian. It was a vicious blow, and the Salvationist was almost killed.**

**But it was during a long convalescence of 18 months that Mr. Brengle began to write for the War Cry, the Salvation Army's publication. His were simple articles on the principles of holy living, and made a deep impression on their readers. So great was the demand that the material be placed in more permanent form that the articles were printed in the book Helps to Holiness, which has been a blessing to thousands across the years.**

When Commissioner Brengle was at last recovered, his wife handed him the brick which had been the occasion of so much suffering. Lettered on it were the words of Joseph: "As for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good . . . to save much people alive."

Most of us can testify to ways in which even the wrath of man has been turned to the praise of God. When our lives are totally committed to God's will, we may be sure that He does work in all things for our good. Many times we have been able to look back on what had seemed at the time to be sheer calamity, to see how our Heavenly Father has shaped the seeming evil to our greater good.

Perhaps we may never find a complete answer to the "Why" that springs up in the soul. Perhaps it will be with us as it was with Job, who, as far as we know, never found out why he had suffered as he did, even after the suffering turned to sunshine again.

But one thing we have that Job did not. That is the assurance that nothing worse will ever happen to any of us than happened to God's only begotten Son. Thomas a Kempis, one of God's great saints, wrote:

Think you to escape  
What mortal man can never be without?  
What saint upon earth has ever lived apart from  
cross and care?  
Why, even Jesus Christ, our Lord, was not even for  
one hour free from His passion's pain.  
Christ says, "He needs must suffer,  
Rising from the dead,  
And thus enter upon His glory."  
And how do you ask for another road than this--  
The Royal Pathway of the Holy Cross?

And a greater than Thomas a Kempis wrote, "We are. . . joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Rom. 8:16-17).

And like Job, it will be enough for us if "the sufferings of this present time" bring us to a new and even closer relationship with the Saviour, who not only asked, "Why?" but followed it with the great commitment, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit."

\* \* \* \* \*

#### 04 -- THE VALUE OF THE TESTING TIMES

God does not offer us a way out of the testings of life. He offers us a way through, and that makes all the difference.

\* \* \*

One of the great hymns in the heritage of the Church has some helpful lines for those who are going through times of testing. We do not sing them as often as we ought:

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie,  
My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.  
The flames shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.

That we do not enjoy the fiery trial goes without saying. What we need to remember is that even bitter medicine may be good for us. Those things in life which appear to us as disappointments, obstacles, or hindrances may in fact be stepping-stones, not stumbling blocks.

Years ago Frances Ridley Havergal asked, "Did you ever hear of anyone being much used for Christ, who did not have some special waiting time, some complete upset of his or her plans first? I look at trial and training of every kind in this light -- its gradual fitting of me to do the Master's work."

\* \* \*

I

Buried near the heart of the longest psalm in the Bible is a passage on the value of affliction. The Psalmist says, "Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word . . . . It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes" (Ps. 119:67-71).

Admittedly, this is not the way people normally react to afflictions. But the Psalmist had learned one of the most important spiritual lessons in God's textbook of life.

One of our problems is that we too often forget to look up until something comes along that lays us flat on our backs. It is the value of the upward look that makes the affliction bearable, and even worthwhile.

It is not the easy things in life that make us strong. We grow by conquering obstacles and overcoming difficulties.

One man illustrated this truth in rather striking fashion. He said, "I have on my table a violin string. It is free to move in any direction I like. If I twist one end, it responds; it is free. But it is not free to sing. So I take it and fix it into my violin. I bind it, and, when it is bound, it is free for the first time to sing!"

The Christian preacher-poet, George Matheson, stricken with blindness at the outset of his ministry, wrote:

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword,  
And I shall conqueror be.  
I sink in life's alarms  
When by myself I stand;  
Imprison me within Thine arms,  
And strong shall be my hand.

\* \* \*

## II

One of the greatest values of the testing times in life for the Christian is that they draw him closer to God. We learn to lean hard on the all-sufficiency of our Heavenly Father when our own insufficiency is made more apparent to us in weakness, in pain, or in the failure of our hopes and desires.

The real brilliance of heaven's stars is never seen until earth's lights go out. The rainbow in the sky is painted against the underside of a storm cloud.

Someone has said that the call of the Psalmist, "O magnify the Lord with me," does not necessarily mean, "Let us tell God how wonderful He is and how mean and insignificant we are." Rather it means, "Let us recognize how truly great God is, how completely adequate for all our needs -- and let us rest our hearts, our minds, our worries, our concerns, and all the details of our lives on His everlasting arms."

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,  
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,  
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,  
Our Father's full giving is only begun.\*

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In this we shall find that the trials and the testings are not the end of all things, but the edge of new things. We shall learn to live each day at a time, not carrying tomorrow's load with today's. We shall see that it is not the work of life but the worry of life which robs us of strength and breaks down our faith. There is some truth in the little couplet:

Life is hard by the yard;  
By the inch, it's a cinch.



Really, the hardest burdens in life to bear are the things that might happen but usually don't. God sees to it that we have grace to bear the actual and the present. He does not always give us grace to face the multitude of situations that could come but haven't yet.

Lots of us spend a great deal of effort crossing bridges to which we never come. In effect, we are "pulling tomorrow's cloud over today's sunshine." The Boston Transcript is said to have carried on its masthead for years the words, "I am an old man. I have worried a great deal about many things, most of which never happened."

Someone has said that the epitaph of this age could be written in three words: hurry, worry, bury. One thing is sure, he who broods over his troubles has a perfect hatch every time.

\* \* \*

### III

Newsman Eric Severeid recalls a lesson he learned as a 17-year-old high school boy. He and a school pal set out to travel by canoe from Minneapolis to the historic fur-trading post of York Factory on Hudson Bay. The last leg of the journey was the most difficult and dangerous. It lay across 450 miles of rugged wilderness with only one permanent settlement in the entire distance. The boys were awed by the prospect. But just as they were about to set out, an old fur trader gave them this advice:

"Just think about the next mile you have to go, not about the ones after that -- never about 450."

Mr. Severeid said that this advice had stayed with him through the years. "Many times in the future," he recalls, "I was to rediscover that there is only one mile to make, never 450."

So it is. The longest journey is made only a mile at a time. We live life in the same way that we travel, one day at a time, one problem at a time, one experience at a time -- never 450 of them.

Testing times can teach us not to try to pull aside the veil over tomorrow which has been drawn by God's goodness and wisdom. Our Lord knows we are not able to carry today's load and bear tomorrow's burden at the same time. To try it, as we do when we do not trust, is to break down sooner or later under an impossible weight.

After all, our faith is not in a "what" but in "whom." Paul put it best when he wrote, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day" (II Tim. 1:12).

F. A. Blackmer expressed the experience of many in his lines:

Once I thought I walked with Jesus,  
Yet such changeable feelings had;  
Sometimes trusting, sometimes doubting,  
Sometimes joyful, sometimes sad.

Oh, the peace my Saviour gives,  
Peace I never knew before;  
And my way has brighter grown,  
Since I learned to trust Him more!

It is a strange blindness that makes us think we can better manage our lives than our Lord can. There is something of conceit in the notion that we know better than He what is for our good.

But when we see that "he is able" and willing to keep what is committed to Him, we can rest in that confidence. God does not want us to be "careless," but to be free from corroding care and doubt.

There are burdens to bear. But we bear them better when we do not add to them the hardest burden of all -- the things that might happen but probably won't.

\* \* \*

#### IV

Nor is it necessary that we now understand the purpose of the testing times. The Bible says, "Through faith we understand" (Heb. 11:3), not, "Through understanding we come to have faith."

There are many questions for which we shall never find answers. But a thousand difficulties need not add up to a single doubt. Robert Browning saw it when he said, "We fall to rise, are baffled to fight better."

God does not offer us a way out of the testings of life. He offers us a way through, and that makes all the difference.

It is when faith is "tried by fire" that the dross of self-dependence and human reliance is burned away and the pure gold of trust remains. Jesus asked, "Why are ye fearful, O ye of little faith?" Their faith was not to keep them from being tried, but to keep them from being afraid.

**It is said that Albert Einstein's wife once confessed that she could not understand her husband's theory of relativity. But, she added, and it was more important, she could understand her husband. We may not understand all the ways of God with man. But what is more important, we can love and trust Him.**

**Then let us not fret in the testing times. Rather let us draw from God, as Dr. J. B. Chapman used to say, "grace to live the common life in an uncommon manner." Then we shall see in trial, not fire to destroy, but the flame to refine.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **05 -- TURNING TROUBLES INTO TRIUMPHS**

**Trouble allowed to fester within the heart turns to tragedy. Trouble overcome by the vigor of a healthy spiritual life turns to triumph,**

**\* \* \***

**Some people seem to have the notion that Christians are, or ought to be, exempt from trouble. Even the most casual reading of the Bible should correct this mistake.**

**"Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7), is a simple statement about human existence that includes all men. Trouble, like temptation, is the common lot of all.**

**In fact, being a Christian increases the probability of some kinds of trouble others may not have. To accept the world's values, to live by its standards, and to drift with its current is usually the easiest thing to do.**

**The gospel can be a disturbing gospel as well as a peacemaking message. "Think not that I am come to send peace on earth," said Jesus; "I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34).**

**It was said of Paul that wherever he went there was a revival or a riot, and sometimes both. "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also," was not spoken in admiration by those who were happy to see a topsy-turvy world set right side up. It was rather an expression of their determination to keep it as it had always been.**

**\* \* \***

**The secret of successful Christian living, then, is not in avoiding troubles but in turning them into triumphs.**

**Much depends on the way we meet the pressures and trials life brings. If to the pure all things are pure as St. Paul said, then to the victorious all battles are victories -- and by the same token, to the defeated all contests are calamities.**

**It is not what life directs against us that matters most. It is how we take it.**

**It is true, God may deliver His own out of their troubles. There is a cry of desperation that is heard in heaven. Yet more often He delivers His own through their troubles, if not unscathed, at least unbroken.**

**The promise of the Lord comes clear through Isaiah's pen: "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee" (43:2).**

**This does not say that there shall be no flood and no fire. It does not even assure us that we shall never be in deep waters or under fiery trial. It reminds us that when we do face hardship, suffering, and trouble, we have a Presence with us.**

**Even in "the valley of the shadow of death," David said, "I will fear no evil: for thou art with me" (Ps. 23:4).**

**And it is important to notice that when we are in flood and fire, and in the valley of the shadow, it is not for us to stay in. It is to pass through.**

**When we cannot find the answer we can trust the Answerer. Even before we gain the victory, we walk with the Victor.**

**Pain, suffering, and trouble do give us one opportunity we should not otherwise have, namely, to offer God "an unbribed worship," a love not bought by prosperity and ease of circumstance.**

**\* \* \***

## **II**

**A pastor calling door to door one afternoon came by strange chance upon two young housewives each in the advanced stages of multiple sclerosis, that strange, slow, terribly crippling, and usually fatal disease.**

**To the first, life seemed small, unjust, lonely, and senseless. She had gained some formal knowledge about God, but her limited concept of the Divine had long**

before become useless for her needs. Her world reached no farther than her dinner tray. Existence was without meaning.

As Pastor Baker tells it, "Five doors down the street, the second lady looked out of her window with great yearning to be up and out, participating and being involved. She asked questions about community matters, school problems, future plans, and her eyes sparkled with life even though, she acknowledged, she probably would not be around to see these fascinating projects come to completion."\*

\*From *More than a Man Can Take*, by Wesley C. Baker. Copyright 1966, W. L. Jenkins, The Westminster Press. Used by permission.

Through the suffering of the second young woman there was no complaint, only thankfulness for the love and thoughtfulness of others -- and a profound faith in the total adequacy of the grace of God.

Let's not glibly toss out trite answers to the "Why. . . ?" wrung from troubled hearts. Let's remember our mortality and our dependence on the One so much greater, and stronger, and wiser than we.

\* \* \*

### III

But troubles do not turn to triumphs without our giving attention to the situation.

First, it helps to remember that trouble will come. We need not go looking for it, but we should not be caught off-balance when it strikes. If one by becoming a Christian expects to "be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fought to win the prize and sailed through bloody seas," the first appearance of trouble is apt to lead to discouragement and doubt.

I hear with real misgivings the presentations of the gospel which make it appear as a panacea for all human ills, and an automatic solution to all human problems. It would be more honest to say that the gospel makes possible a cure for all "human ills, and an ultimate solution to all human problems. But the victory is not to be won without a battle.

Second, we should avoid magnifying our troubles. It is easy to exaggerate the hard things, to "water our woes, and hoe down our blessings."

Most of our troubles are minor. To complain about them only increases them. Often the people who have the least trouble fuss the most, and those who have the most trouble say the least about it.

**We may complain about our lack of shoes when we need to be thankful we have feet. There is one thing worse than having little food, and that is no appetite and no physical health to digest and gain strength from the food we do have.**

**The size of our troubles generally depends on the amount of time we spend brooding over them and cultivating them. This does not mean that if we turn our heads they will go away. But dwelling on misfortune and woe merely increases their hold upon us.**

**\* \* \***

#### **IV**

**Whether or not these suggestions help, the touch that transforms trouble comes from another world. It is the added strength God's grace supplies. It is the undergirding of the everlasting arms.**

**Trouble is to a triumphant spirit what water is to a boat. Inside, the water sinks the boat. Outside, it buoys it up. Trouble allowed to fester within the heart turns to tragedy. Trouble overcome by the vigor of a healthy spiritual life turns to triumph. The stumbling blocks may become stepping-stones if we stand on them instead of falling among them.**

**A Christian was talking with a friend and inquired how he was getting along.**

**"Oh, fairly well, under the circumstances," was the reply.**

**"I'm sorry to hear that you are under the circumstances," the other said. "The Lord wants us to live above the circumstances, not under the circumstances."**

**There is some truth in such a play on words. We rise above our circumstances, not in our own strength, but through the lift God gives us. He enables us to see that trouble is not the last word for the Christian, and that all the tribulation that could possibly come cannot separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

**Trouble reminds us that God doesn't want us to become too firmly attached to the passing world. That He may put thorns in the nest does not show that He does not care. It shows that He cares enough to teach us to try the wings made for the upper air.**

**So materialistic and so sense-bound are we that we identify God's blessing with prosperity and happiness. The facts are that the very abundance of "things" may suffocate us much more readily than it may elevate us.**

**G. Ray Jordan tells of an incident that occurred during the hurricane of 1948 in New England. It was feared that the railroad bridge at White River Junction would be swept away. Apparently there was no way to make it secure.**

**The bridge was saved by the suggestion of a keen-minded engineer. A long train of heavily loaded freight cars was backed onto it. The bridge stood -- saved by the weight it bore.**

**Dr. H. Orton Wiley used to comment on the parable of the kite. If the kite were conscious, it would no doubt look upon the string that holds it to the earth as a limitation.**

**If I could only get rid of that string, it might think, then I could really soar into the heavens.**

**The truth is, of course, that without the string the kite could not fly at all. What appears to be a liability is really its liberty to stay aloft. If the string breaks, the kite falls.**

**Even trouble itself may turn into blessing. Can we ever forget that our very salvation comes from a Cross -- the greatest trouble ever to befall anyone in this world or any other?**

**We have never begun to suffer like our Saviour. But like Him, we may endure the cross and despise the shame, encouraged by the joy that is set before us (Heb. 12:1-3). The very greatness of His suffering is, in fact, the measure of His victory. And He is able to help us because He trod the way before us, and His glory lingers near the path.**

**"Now obviously no 'chastening' seems pleasant at the time: it is in fact most unpleasant. Yet when it is all over we can see that it has quietly produced the fruit of real goodness in the characters of those who have accepted it in the right spirit. So take a fresh grip on life and brace your trembling limbs. Don't wander away from the path but forge steadily onward. On the right path the limping foot recovers strength and does not collapse" (Heb. 12:11-13, Phillips).**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **06 -- IS SICKNESS "IN THE WILL OF GOD"?**

**Sickness and suffering are not the purpose or intention of God for His people. Although He may permit them, He does not "will" them. He works through Christ and His Spirit not only to replace sin with holiness but also to change ignorance and folly to wisdom, and sickness and suffering to health.**

**\* \* \***

**This is a question we run into "head on" whenever we begin to pray for divine healing. There are many who will have it that sickness and suffering are part of God's will for His children and that every prayer for healing must be prefaced with an "if" -- "If" it be Thy will."**

**Whatever the measure of truth in this attitude, we must be careful that faith be not crippled and the healing touch be missed because we are too quick to assign to the will of God What may actually be the work of the devil.**

**\* \* \***

**I**

**Certainly we do not act as if we believed most of our sicknesses and suffering to be "in the will of God." If we have a headache, most of us take an aspirin tablet. If we suffer other ailments, we seek medical help for their relief.**

**This is quite as it should be, and the person who would argue that one must ignore the help medical science can give in order to trust God would be as foolish as one who would argue that a farmer must sell his plows and destroy his seed in order to trust God for a good harvest.**

**But no devout Christian would deliberately seek to avoid the will of God. If we knew it to be the will of God that we should be sick, then we would sin if we tried to do anything to avoid sickness. If suffering were the will of God, the relief of pain would be a work of darkness instead of a deed of mercy.**

**How much wiser we are to recognize the truth of Peter's summary of our Lord's healing ministry when he said that Jesus went about doing good and "healing all that were oppressed of the devil" (Acts 10:38)!**

**Jesus himself said of the woman He had healed that Satan had bound her for 18 years (Luke 13:16); and Paul regarded his "thorn in the flesh" -- almost certainly a physical infirmity -- not as the will of God but as "the messenger of Satan to buffet" him (II Cor. 12:7).**

**\* \* \***

**II**

**We must see clearly here, as in adverse circumstances generally, that God permits some things that He does not purpose. For example, God permits evil men to do wicked deeds. But who would be so blasphemous as to suggest, as an older theology seemed to, that God purposes all this evil?**



God does not intend that men shall sin and reject His will. He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (II Pet. 3:9). He "will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (I Tim. 2:4). Yet He allows the "contradiction of sinners against himself" (Heb. 12: 3) because He has given the creature made in His own image the power of choice and self-direction, even when that power of choice is turned against Him and when that self-direction is counter to His design and purpose.

Is there any ultimate answer as to why God permits the suffering and sickness of His own saints? It is not hard to see why wicked people should be allowed to suffer. Such could be the judgment that might bring them to repentance and eternal life. But why should not a child of God be healed when he prays for healing with a sincere desire for the glory of God and the advancement of God's work in this world?

\* \* \*

### III

We should be brash indeed to suppose that we could answer completely questions that have puzzled the best minds through the centuries. But there are some suggestions we might well consider.

First, salvation does not exempt us from the common lot and life of humanity. We may be saved from sin and cleansed from carnality and still be victims of ignorance, our own foolishness, and a human heritage which has not only the accumulated assets of our civilization but its liabilities as well.

You see, we do not live to ourselves alone. We are part of two families, and we still live in two worlds. We are part of the family of God. But we are also part of the family of humanity. We are citizens of a heavenly world. But we also live with our feet on earth.

Being part of the human family means that we inherit both its advantages and its burdens. We could not have the one without the other. Living with our feet on earth means not only to tread smooth sidewalks, but sometimes to walk on thorns and sharp stones.

Suppose, for a moment, it were not so. Suppose, for a moment, being a Christian automatically meant complete health, total happiness, prosperity, and immunity to the injuries which come from other people's sins. There would then be no faith, love, and obedience to God implied in becoming a Christian. It would simply be a matter of selfish prudence, getting a bargain in health and happiness insurance at a low rate.

**Second, healing may be withheld because of lack of faith. To say that all lingering sickness is evidence of unbelief is a wrong and cruel accusation made only by those who are well. Yet in divine healing there are multitudes who have not because they ask not.**

**Faith, for healing or anything else, does not come simply by wishing for it. Faith, the condition upon which we receive all of God's blessings, is itself subject to other conditions.**

**One of these is obedience, which is always the counterpart of a true Christian faith.**

**Another is the reading and study of the Word of God, for faith always "cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17), as Paul said of faith for salvation.**

**A third means of faith is continued prayer -- not anxious, fretful, petulant prayer, but submissive, adoring, patient prayer. Prayer both expresses faith and increases it: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief" (Mark 9:24).**

**Third, the Bible clearly and constantly promises an ultimate and perfect healing for all the people of God in the resurrection. The final healing of all our diseases and infirmities comes in another world. But it certainly comes.**

**For this reason it is possible to say that prayer for divine healing is always granted, although the answer may be, "Wait awhile." It is a sad commentary on our earthiness that we tend to exalt the healing of the present and ignore the greater healing of the resurrected life.**

**If heaven were as real to us as it ought to be, we should not find it so hard to wait for what will surely come when God wipes away all tears from our eyes, "and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain" (Rev. 21:4).**

**Fourth, even here if we are not immediately healed (because of our ignorance or folly or because of conditions in our human lot we do not fully understand), let us be bold and believing enough to see that God has something better for us. After all, the true life we live is not the life of the body alone but the life of the spirit as well.**

**To say this does not minimize the reality or importance of the physical, but it does call on us to look beyond it to where our true existence is. There have been many who have had excellent health and rugged physiques through most of life who have been querulous, complaining, discontented, and miserable. And there have been a great many others who have suffered much but in the midst of their**

affliction have found a peace and contentment which has put them among the truly happy.

Such was the Apostle Paul, afflicted with a "thorn in the flesh," praying three times for its removal, and coming to the place where he learned the sufficiency of God's grace and the strange and wonderful strength which was made perfect in his weakness.

Paul then said in utter sincerity, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (II Cor. 12:9-10). Only the most utterly earth-bound would deny that Paul's prayer was answered with something better than the taking away of the thorn would have been.

Sickness and suffering are not the purpose or intention of God for His people. Although He may permit them, He does not "will" them. He works through Christ and His Spirit not only to replace sin with holiness but also to change ignorance and folly to wisdom, and sickness and suffering to health.

We need not therefore imply that we are ever going against the ultimate will of God when we pray for healing. This we tend to do when we say, "If it be Thy will."

We are privileged to pray rather, "According to Thy will" -- assured that God is on the side of health and wholeness and will heal if He does not have something better for us.

\* \* \* \* \*

## 07 -- FEELINGS AND THE PHYSICAL

It is never safe to judge one's spiritual condition on emotions alone. Our relationship to God never depends on feelings. It depends on faith.

\* \* \*

George Muller of Bristol will always be remembered for his inspiring record of faith and dedicated service. What may not be so well-known is the fact that his faith was won through battle and fiery test.

Mr. Muller was converted from a life of out-broken sin in November, 1825. He had served time in prison, and the transformation of his life was sudden and dramatic.

Nearly four years later, in July, 1829, Muller was led into what he called the full surrender of the heart. He described it in vivid words:

**"The love of money was gone, the love of place was gone, the love of position was gone, the love of worldly pleasure and engagements was gone. God, God, God alone became my portion. I found my all in Him; I wanted nothing else. And by the grace of God this has remained, and has made me a happy man, an exceedingly happy man, and it led me to care only about the things of God. . . .**

**"I can say from my heart, God is an infinitely lovely Being. Oh! be not satisfied until in your inmost soul you can say, 'God is an infinitely lovely Being.'"**

**But there is another passage in Mr. Muller's diary quoted by Albert J. Lown in his valuable booklet entitled Mastering Our Moods. The entry, almost nine years after the full surrender, dated January 7, 1838, is as follows:**

**"This is the ninth day that I have been kept from ministering in the Word. My head is in a distressing state, and, as far as I can judge, as bad as ever. It seems to me more and more clear that the nerves are affected. My affliction is connected with a great tendency to irritability of temper; yea, with some satanic feeling, foreign to me even naturally. O Lord, mercifully keep thy servant from openly dishonouring thy name! Rather take me home soon to thyself!"**

**\* \* \***

**I**

**These words bring into sharp and clear focus the very close connection between the state of physical health and pervasive moods or feelings. The problems of which Mr. Muller spoke are not at all uncommon in our days of tension and pressure.**

**Moods may, of course, be the result of spiritual need -- an unsanctified heart, a disobedient life, walking behind light. Yet even the most saintly may experience the "tendency to irritability of temper" and the Satanic darkness alluded to here.**

**A very practical problem is to be able to distinguish the true cause of the negative moods in question. We must avoid the twin perils of excusing the carnal and condemning the purely human.**

**We want no compromise with selfish, explosive temper. Neither do we wish to join forces with the "accuser of the brethren" and point the finger of condemnation at one whose heart may really be pure.**

**In the quietness of one's own conscience, open before the Lord, there is a clue offered in Mr. Muller's words. The feelings that puzzled him, he said, were "foreign to me even naturally."**

**This was not the fruit of his own nature, either apart from or under the grace of God. This was an intrusion from without.**

**The devil, Thomas Cook said, is adept at throwing mud on the Christian's windows and then accusing him of being a poor housekeeper. But the mud is the adversary's mud all the time, and it is on the outside.**

**\* \* \***

## **II**

**There is one encouraging fact about feelings caused by the physical: they are temporary. They tend to change and fluctuate. They are the kind of experience of which, as pointed out earlier, it may be said, "It came to pass!"**

**Because feelings are affected by the physical condition, it is never safe to judge one's spiritual state on emotions alone. Our relationship to God never depends on feelings. It depends on faith.**

**Since faith is a human response to a divine promise, it may also vary in clarity and intensity. But faith is an act of the will far more than an expression of emotion.**

**Faith reflects the basic purposes of our lives. It is a commitment in confidence to the reliability of a Person who is eminently trustworthy. And because faith links us to a power not our own, it gains a strength that is not its own.**

**The very human but thoroughly sanctified Apostle Paul was tempted to discouragement and spoke of being weak, pressed beyond measure, troubled, and perplexed. Yet he never turned back, and he never wavered in his ultimate purpose to serve the Lord in the obedience of a conscience void of offense toward God and man.**

**\* \* \***

## **III**

**It is important that we learn, as much as we can, to "master our midnights," to borrow a phrase from the title of a book by Dr. R. V. DeLong. Even in the deepest darkness, there is light if we seek it aright.**

**The psalms reflect as no other portion of scripture the varied moods of life. The psalmists knew their high moments of joy and spiritual ecstasy. They also knew the gloom of the midnight hour.**

The prophet Micah expressed both his experience and his hope when he wrote, "When I fall, I shall arise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me" (Micah 7:8).

But these midnights can be mastered. The temptation of such an hour is to give way to self-pity, to surrender to the mood. Even to express it in words except in the cleansing breath of prayer -- is to strengthen it and root it deeper in the soul.

One way to master the midnight is to turn one's attention to others. Scores have testified that release came to them as they forgot themselves in intercession for others.

Work is often effective medicine for the "blues." To do something creative, to see oneself as an active, contributing member of society, brings a sense of worth that overcomes depression.

Sometimes a change of scenery helps. To get away, even for a while, from the pressures under which one may have to live often casts a new light over the whole of Life.

Physical relaxation, even extra sleep, may be helpful. Midnight hours usually come when physical, mental, or emotional powers are depleted.

A recognition of the "pendulum effect" in our emotional Lives is important. The deepest valleys lie just beyond the highest peaks.

Elijah won his greatest single victory in the excitement and exhilaration of Mount Carmel. But just beyond, he went into the deepest valley of depression and discouragement. The very surprise of the juniper-tree days caught him off guard. Had he known they were likely to be there, he might have been on guard against them.

But most of all, we master our midnights by setting our faces steadfastly toward the dawn that radiates from the face of our Heavenly Father. "When I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me."

\* \* \*

#### IV

There is a certain dogged determination to trust God whatever comes that can carry us through when everything else fails. It is based on the confidence that His promises do not fail and His resources are sufficient for all our need.

**It was Victor Hugo who said years ago, "Have courage for the great sorrows of life, and patience for the small ones, and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake."**

**That God is awake is really all we need to know.**

**More important, then, than fluctuating feelings are the posture of one's faith and the prevailing purpose of his life. In Martin Luther's oft quoted but ever helpful lines:**

**Feelings come and feelings go,  
And feelings are deceiving.  
My warrant is the Word of God;  
Naught else is worth believing.**

**Though all my heart should feel condemned  
For want of some sweet token,  
There is One greater than my heart  
Whose Word cannot be broken.**

**I'll trust in God's unchanging Word  
Till soul and body sever;  
For though all things shall pass away,  
His Word shall stand forever!**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **08 -- HOW TO MAKE LIFE WORSE THAN IT IS**

**Life does not have to be made worse. It can be made better . . . not by yourself alone, but by the grace and power of God.**

**\* \* \***

**An enterprising preacher announced as a sermon title "How to Make Life Worse than It Is." I didn't hear the sermon, so I have no idea what he thought would make life "worse than it is."**

**But there is a suggestion here to consider.**

**In many ways we cannot make life anything other than it is. We do not live in a world made of dream-stuff. It does not readily bend to our wishes or even our efforts. There is a stubbornness about fact and reality which we can't change.**

**"If wishes were horses, then beggars could ride," they say. But wishes are not horses, and sometimes we must walk when we would rather ride.**

However, in many ways we can make life other than it is. God has not made us to be pawns of chance, creatures of circumstance. He has endowed us with a bit of His own image. He has given us the gift of creativity. In the capacity to choose, we have the possibility of changing life, of altering its circumstances and making it other than it is.

Of course, even to state the topic as it is given -- "How to Make Life Worse than It Is" -- is to be well on the way to this doubtful goal. Life does not have to be made worse. It can be made better. You can make life worse by the attitude which expects any change to be for the worse. The very expectation helps bring it about.

\* \* \*

I

Pessimism, then, is one way to make life worse than it is.

Even Christians at times surrender to pessimism. There is a note of it in the words of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus who, though walking with the risen Christ, did not recognize Him at the time.

"We trusted," they said, "that it had been he which should have redeemed Israel."

"We had hoped He was the One," is what they were saying, "but it's all over now."

One can feel the gloom in these words, in spite of the reports even then beginning to come that Christ was raised from the dead.

Pessimism helps produce the very conditions it fears. Pessimistic church members create the atmosphere which defeats the purposes of God in the church. Pessimism quenches with its own darkness the little flicker of light there could be.

The cure is not a temperamental optimism which looks at the world through rose-tinted glasses. It has long been known that, while pessimism and optimism seem to be poles apart, they come out at exactly the same place. For pessimism says, "All is evil, defeat is certain, and there is nothing we can do about it." On the other hand, optimism reasons, "All is good, victory is sure, and there is nothing we need to do about it." But the result is the same. Nothing is done. Although in different ways, both pessimism and optimism help to make life worse than it is.

\* \* \*

II



**Worry is another way to make life worse than it is. For worry undermines faith and, like a spiritual parasite, destroys the soul it invades.**

**The very word "worry" means "to strangle, to choke." Worry chokes and strangles trust and confidence in God, and leaves only a futile, fretful anxiety.**

**How strongly Jesus spoke out against worry! In Matthew 6, the truth we hide behind the old English phrase "taking thought" is the hard but true saying that worry and trust cannot exist in the same heart at the same time.**

**He who trusts does not worry, and he who worries does not trust. "Why pray when you can worry?" someone has facetiously asked. But prayer changes things. Worry only cripples those who should help to change things by prayer and faith.**

**Jesus is not here talking about a sense of responsibility. In listing his burdens, Paul mentions "that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches."**

**What the Lord forbids is the futile fretting about that which is in the keeping and providence of God. He who orders the lives of lesser creatures -- the lilies of the field and the birds of the air -- will provide for those of infinitely more worth. Your Heavenly Father knows what you need. "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33).**

**Frances Ridley Havergal has put it in immortal verse for us:**

**Like a river, glorious is God's perfect peace,  
Over all victorious in its bright increase.  
Perfect, yet it floweth fuller every day;  
Perfect, yet it groweth deeper all the way.**

**Hidden in the hollow of His blessed hand,  
Never foe can follow, never traitor stand;  
Not a surge of worry, not a shade of care,  
Not a blast of hurry touch the spirit there.**

**Every joy or trial falleth from above,  
Traced upon our dial by the Sun of love.  
We may trust Him fully all for us to do;  
They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true.**

**"They who trust Him wholly find Him wholly true." This is the assurance on which we may rely. Whatever the future, the Christian knows that it holds nothing his Lord and he cannot handle.**

\* \* \*

### III

One of the sad facts of our day is that so many people go through life running from something that isn't after them. Ours has been properly called "The Age of Anxiety."

Anxiety is a kind of fear. It is, as has been said, a mixture of desire and dread. The curious fact is that anxiety does not grow out of adversity or hardship. It comes from blessings we want to keep and are afraid we may lose.

Actually, anxiety is at the root of many of the deepest problems in life that people have. It is like sand in a machine, grinding and destroying. It piles tomorrow's load on top of today's, and there are very few who are able to carry more than one day's burden at a time without breaking down under the weight.

While anxiety is a kind of fear, it differs from other kinds of fears in that it has no object. It makes some sense to have wholesome fear in the face of threats that are specific and real. But anxiety runs from nothing. It is a generalized fear that has no real basis in fact.

This makes anxiety all the more difficult to deal with. Since it is worry without a real cause, it cannot be cured by any sort of direct action. It comes from within, and very little that happens outwardly will relieve it.

It is not out of place to repeat Elizabeth Cheney's much quoted (and often misquoted) lines which she titled "Overheard in an Orchard":

Said the Robin to the Sparrow:  
"I should really like to know  
Why these anxious human beings  
Rush about and worry so."

Said the Sparrow to the Robin:  
"Friend, I think that it must be  
That they have no Heavenly Father  
Such as cares for you and me."

\* \* \*

### IV

Defeatism is another way to make life worse than it is. A hopeless surrender to circumstances, giving up the struggle, losing the will to win, accepting defeat as inevitable -- this is the road to futility.

**"But should we beat our heads against a stone wall?" someone may ask. Surely not. There are better uses for the head than that. And one of them is the prayerful, believing study of the wall. There is wisdom in the prayer: "Give me the courage to change what can be changed, the serenity to bear what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference."**

**Above all, life is made worse than it is by "going against the grain" of the universe. This means ignoring the laws of God.**

**All of us should know by this time that man does not really break God's law. For the moral law has been written so deep into the very being of this universe that none of us can escape it. It is not only God's law; it is the law of our own being.**

**This is what makes sin ultimately self-defeating. It may seem to "work" for a while. But in a universe whose Creator is holy in His very nature, the way of the transgressor will always turn out to be the hard way. One cannot go against the grain without getting splinters that fester and become very sore.**

**But why trouble about making life worse than it is? Why not make it better than it is? No, not by yourself alone for untold generations of people have found out that this cannot be done -- but by the grace and power of God.**

**Be sure of your personal commitment to Christ -- your sins forgiven, and your heart cleansed by the sanctifying fullness of the Holy Spirit. Fix your faith on the unfailing promise of God's Word: "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?" (Rom. 8:32) Then by His grace go out to make life better for yourself, your family, your church, and your community.**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **09 -- GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY**

**People grow old in two ways. Some become querulous, demanding, and bitter. Others grow old with resilience and grace of spirit even after the muscles and joints have grown stiff, and bodily functions have begun to fail.**

**\* \* \***

**Growing old is something we all do -- if we live long enough. And in today's world there are more of us who are living longer than in any age of mankind since the days of the patriarchs.**

**It is not the mere fact of growing old that counts. If it were, the laurels would already have gone to Methuselah. None of us are likely to beat his record in terms of pure longevity.**

**But there is more to growing old than just adding to our years on earth. People grow old in two ways. Some become querulous, demanding, and bitter. Others grow old with resilience and grace of spirit even after the muscles and joints have grown stiff and bodily functions have begun to fail.**

**Physical powers do, of course, diminish with the passing decades. A man who had passed 65 was talking to a friend about his tennis game.**

**He said, "My brain barks out the commands to my body: Run forward rapidly! Start now! Slam the ball over the net! Run quickly back and get ready to do it again?"**

**"What happens?" the friend asked him.**

**"Then," said the older man slowly, "my body says, 'Who, me?'"**

**Perhaps it isn't just a matter of choosing how we shall grow old. In a sense we have been making that choice ever since we began to make any choices at all. Everything in life has helped and will help to shape us in our sunset years.**

**Yet there are some things we can expect the years to bring. The very anticipation of them will help us to realize them. One observer has summarized the rightful expectation of the years. It would include at least four elements.**

**\* \* \***

**I**

**The years should bring a sense of proportion. We ought to be able, with the passing of time, better to distinguish between the important and the unimportant.**

**This is not always the case. Sometimes spiritual vision suffers along with physical sight, and little things grow larger as great issues become less important. But it ought to be that the "sense of what is vital" grows more acute as we "grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:15).**

**One of the understandable limitations of youth is lack of perspective, simply because they do not have extended experience in the school of life. Experience can be the best teacher we have, provided we are willing to learn the lessons. One of those lessons is that issues which for the moment may seem world-shaking in reality may not be worth half the concern we are prone to give them.**

\* \* \*

## II

The years should also bring an increasing serenity. As William Barclay expressed it, "He must be a strangely unteachable person who does not discover from the years that feverish haste and restless anxiety never did anyone any good."

This is not to lessen the urgency of the tasks that are ours to do in a suffering and sinful world. It is rather to say that when back-sets come, and disappointments and frustrations intrude, one should have learned that, while the waves break on the shore and recede, the tide always wins. Christ builds His Church, preferably with and through us, but even in spite of us if need be.

Really, "feverish haste and restless anxiety" hinder, rather than help, in the long-range outcomes of life. It is the thorough and thoughtful worker who makes the greatest contribution in the long run.

\* \* \*

## III

The passing of the years should also bring to us a larger compassion for others. We have lost the greatest value suffering can have for us if we do not learn from it to sympathize and understand when others pass through fire and flood.

If we have come in any measure to know and understand ourselves, we can the more easily forgive the offenses of those who sin against us. When we see others in trouble, we can say with greater charity, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

\* \* \*

## IV

Finally, the years should bring a growing sense of the complete adequacy of the grace of God. Ours should be the mood of John Newton in his lines:

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,  
I have already come.  
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,  
And grace will lead me home.

God, who has been "our Help in ages past," is "our Hope for years to come." Whatever we have known of toil and tears, of labor and sorrow, can but give us confidence for the unknown path ahead.

**Charles H. Spurgeon tells of riding home after a long week's work, bone-weary and a bit discouraged. Suddenly there came to his mind the words of Jesus to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for thee" (II Cor. 12:9). It came with the emphasis laid upon two words: "My grace is sufficient for thee."**

**Mr. Spurgeon's heart echoed the words. "Doubtless it is. Surely the grace of an infinite God is more than sufficient for such a mere insect as I am," and he laughed, and laughed again to think how far the supply exceeded all his needs.**

**He said, "It seemed to me as though I were a little fish in the sea, and in my thirst I said, 'Alas, I shall drink up the ocean.' Then the Father of the waters lifted His head sublime, and smilingly replied, 'Little fish, the boundless main is sufficient for thee.' The thought made unbelief appear supremely ridiculous, as indeed it is."**

**Well may we ponder these words. Sooner will the seven oceans prove inadequate for the needs of one small fish than the boundless grace of God fail to meet the needs of a trusting soul.**

**Someone has wisely observed, "The devil has no happy old men." The Lord does have many. Each of us may aspire, by His grace, to add to the number who wear the "hoary head" as it should be indeed, "a crown of glory."**

**\* \* \* \* \***

## **10 -- THANKFUL FOR THE THORNS**

**God helps us to do what we can, and endure what we must, even in the darkest hour. But more, He wants to teach us that there are no rainbows without storm clouds and there are no diamonds without heavy pressure and enormous heat.**

**\* \* \***

**George Matheson is probably best known for the words of his hymn "O Love, That Will Not Let Me Go." Writing from the depths of deep disappointment with a human love, the blind Scottish poet and preacher expressed his deep faith in the goodness of God:**

**O Joy, that seekest me through pain,  
I cannot close my heart to Thee;  
I trace the rainbow through the rain,  
And feel the promise is not vain,  
That morn shall tearless be.**

Less well-known are lines Matheson wrote on another occasion. They are in the form of a prayer:

"My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorns. I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but not once for my thorns. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross: but I have never thought of my cross as itself a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross: teach me the value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow."

\* \* \*

I

Most of us have learned to endure heartache, affliction, and suffering. Not many have learned to use that suffering redemptively.

Yet we dimly sense the truth of the Arab proverb, "All sunshine makes a desert." We see as from afar that there is glory in the cross itself, and that tears can make a rainbow.

How it happens, we do not really know. What we know is the grace that makes the difference, the Presence that brings light into the darkness.

William Sangster, who himself suffered a great deal, once wrote: "If there is some alchemy of the spirit which really transforms [suffering] . . . it must be very deep. The nature of pain is not altered by a metaphor. If pain refines one soul, it embitters another. It cannot be suffering as suffering which works a blessed work in the soul of the saint. It must be suffering received in the meekness of the Holy Spirit: suffering willingly accepted in the belief that God can do something with it. At least a little bit of heaven must mingle with these stresses of earth. Only God Himself could beget such triumph in the soul of man" (The Pure in Heart).

\* \* \*

II

That God is concerned with our suffering is beyond debate. He has proved it by sending His only begotten Son, who "hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows," who was "wounded for our transgressions" and was "bruised for our iniquities," and by whose "stripes we are healed."

God does not die when the clouds hide the sun. In all of life we must "trust God where we cannot trace Him."

**There is wisdom in the words of Fenelon: "If there is anything that can render the soul calm, dissipate its scruples and dispel its fears, sweeten its sufferings by the anointing of love, impart strength to it in all its actions, and spread the joy of the Holy Spirit in its countenance and words, it is this simple and childlike repose in the arms of God."**

**God helps us to do what we can, and endure what we must, even in the darkest hour. But more, He wants to teach us that there are no rainbows without storm clouds and there are no diamonds without heavy pressure and enormous heat.**

**It is no accident that the gates of the heavenly city of God are made from pearls. You know how pearls come to be. A grain of sand or some foreign substance lodges in the tender, living flesh of a little shell-fish. Quietly and unnoticed, the life processes bring healing and coat the source of the irritation with the smooth and beautiful substance that becomes a pearl, one of nature's loveliest gems. And the gates of heaven are made of pearls.**

**\* \* \***

### **III**

**William B. Ward recalls the legend of a youth who went with an old violin maker into a forest to cut wood for the instruments they were to make. The two left the protected valley, where the trees were straight and tall, and climbed to the crags of the mountainside, where "gnarled and knotty trunks were twisted by the gales."**

**The lad asked his mentor why they had not chosen the straight, smooth trunks of the trees below. The old violin maker explained that the wood which grew quickly in the sheltered valley would break under the pressures that must be used to shape the parts of a violin. But the trees that had been lashed and torn by the winds were tough, and when made into violins would give the sweetest music.**

**Frances Havergal, like John and Charles Wesley more than a century earlier, was born in a British rectory. Her mother died when Frances was 11 years old, and spoke as her last words, "Fanny, dear, pray to God to prepare you for all that He is preparing for you."**

**Part of that preparation was the impaired health and physical suffering that led to death in the early prime of Miss Havergal's life. But her spirit shines through clear and bright in the words she penned:**

**I take this pain, Lord Jesus, from Thine own hand;  
The strength to bear it bravely Thou wilt command.  
I take this pain, Lord Jesus; what Thou dost choose  
That Thou art watching closely my truest need;**



That Thou, my good Physician, art watching still;  
That all Thine own good pleasure Thou wilt fulfill.  
I take this pain, Lord Jesus; what Thou dost choose  
The soul that really loves Thee will not refuse.

\* \* \*

#### IV

Perhaps one reason why we have no easy answer to the question of why good people go through the deep valley of suffering is that we could not understand it if it were given us. It is enough for us to know that God can use what He does not directly send. We must repeat: It is not the "why" of pain but how we meet it and use it that counts.

Thornton Wilder has written a drama entitled "The Angel That Troubled the Waters."\* He pictures a man at the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem praying that God would heal his body.

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Finally, the angel came to trouble the waters. But the angel told the man that healing was not to be for him. Rather, he was to bring comfort to others in pain and anguish of spirit.

The heavenly being said, "The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve."

As the man stood in his disappointment thinking of the healing that went to another, an old neighbor approached him and said, "May you be next, my brother. But come with me first, an hour only, to my home. My son is lost in dark thoughts. I -- I do not understand him, and only you have ever lifted his mood. Only an hour. . . . My daughter, since her child has died, sits in the shadow. She will not listen to us . . ."

There is great insight in the words, "In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve." The Apostle Paul said it first when he wrote, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God" (II Cor. 1:3-4).

Not in some shallow "Pollyanna" way, but in deep and humble acceptance of the strength that can be made perfect only in our weakness, let us be thankful for the thorns. So shall we climb to Christ "by the path of pain." So shall our tears be made into rainbows.

\* \* \* \* \*

THE END