

Emotional Wellness

**A Biblical Recourse to
Mental and Emotional Well-Being**

Other titles by

Dr. Michael O. Ojewale

The Sun Will Rise Again

Comfort, Hope & Healing

Even a Caged Bird Sings!

The Caring People

Distributors wanted. Contact Sunday Publishing, Inc.
P.O. Box 150581 Brooklyn, NY 11215-0851

Sunday Publishing, Inc.

P.O. Box 150581
Brooklyn, NY 11215-0581

Michael O. Ojewale

EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

A Biblical Recourse to Mental
and Emotional Well-Being

Sunday Publishing, Inc.

New York

Emotional Wellness

Copyright © 2004, Michael O. Ojewale Ph.D.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the author.

Scripture quotations are from the New King James Version of The Holy Bible, copyright 1992 by Thomas Nelson, Inc., unless otherwise indicated. • Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Holy Bible. • Scripture quotations marked NRSV are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible (NRSV). Copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Used by permission. • Scripture quotations marked TEV are taken from THE HOLY BIBLE, TODAY'S ENGLISH VERSION (TEV). Copyright © 1992, by American Bible Society. Used by permission of American Bible Society.

The Kuti's story is used with the family's permission.

“Healing Circle” by Virginia Baker. Used by permission from *Guideposts* magazine. Copyright © 1997 by Guideposts, Carmel, New York 10512.

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Ojewale, Michael O. (Michael Olufemi), 1952-

Emotional wellness : a biblical recourse to mental and emotional well-being / Michael Ojewale.

(Pastoral care and biblical counselling series)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-9741745-0-5.--ISBN 1-55306-755-X (LSI ed.)

1. Suffering--Biblical teaching. 2. Suffering--Religious aspects--Christianity. I. Title. II. Series: Ojewale, Michael O. (Michael Olufemi), 1952- . Pastoral care and biblical counselling series.

BV4905.3.O34 2004

248.8'6

C2004-902560-0

For more information or to order additional copies, please contact:

Sunday Publishing, Inc.

P.O. Box 150581

Brooklyn, NY 11215-0581

www.sundaypub.spreadtheword.com

TO MY NEPHEWS AND NIECES

Seun Oluwawalemi

Tobi Oluwawalemi

Yemisi Oluwawalemi

Oluwafeyikemi Oluwawalemi

Segun Adesola

Tope Adesola

Bolutife Adesola

Damola Majekodunmi

Deji Majekodunmi

Akin Akinbode

Simi Akinbode

Timileyin Akinbode

Mayowa Adebisi

Mayokun Adebisi

“In these troubling times of persistent anxiety and fear, terrorism and international conflicts, Reverend (Dr.) M. Ojewale has provided some insights into spiritual approaches and biblical answers to resolving these and many other life’s daily vexing challenges. With a style that makes for easy reading, this book belongs in every home and every library.”

A. Olusegun Fayemi, MD
Clinical Associate Professor of Pathology
Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, New York, New York
Author of *Voices From Within*

• • Table of Contents • •

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>Foreword</i>	11
<i>Preface</i>	13
<i>Introduction</i>	17

• PART ONE •

1. Fear Not (<i>I'm Scared</i>)	23
2. Facing the Unknown (<i>I'm Anxious</i>)	51
3. Coping with Disappointments (<i>I'm Hurting</i>)	73
4. From Despair to Hope (<i>I'm Fed Up</i>)	97

• PART TWO •

5. God Is Bigger Than Any Disease (<i>I'm Dying</i>)	121
6. Healed, Though Not Cured (<i>I'm Afflicted</i>)	133
7. Transitions and Terminations (<i>I'm Grieving</i>)	145
8. A Loved One Passes On (<i>I'm Crushed</i>)	165

<i>Bibliography</i>	189
-------------------------------	-----

• • Acknowledgments • •

I am deeply indebted to Jeannie Lockerbie Stephenson of Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (ABWE) for her interest in this work and, to Kristen Stagg, also of ABWE, who, on Jeannie's recommendation, heartily provided free editorial services for the first draft of this work.

I also wish to thank Dr. Adebisi Omotosho, Yolanda Ruiz, and Taba Cookey for their helpful criticism of the book. I am profusely thankful to Julia Van Huizen, the editor who turned this work into a book, for her hard work and attention to details. Finally, but by no means the least, my profound gratitude goes to Stephanie VanderMeulen, my project editor at Essence Publishing.

• • Foreword • •

by The Rev. Dr. Bisi Orebayo

This book is straight from a caring shepherd's heart. It uncovers and touches a whole range of (sometimes buried) emotions and focuses biblical truths on them so that the individual may grow in an emotionally healthy manner. Dr. Michael Ojewale has the unique combination of education, training, insight, temperament, and life experiences to write this book: *Emotional Wellness*—a great title, too. Since his first book, which was published and distributed by the (Nigeria) Every Home for Christ in 1984, his pen has touched many hearts and brought untold blessings to individuals and families.

As a hospital chaplain in the heart of New York City, the Rev. Michael Ojewale did not leave his patients, or their troubled family members, the way he met them—his ministry moved them on to the next level of emotional and relational healing. I believe the same will result for every reader.

I heartily commend this book to all: pastors, counselors, counselees, teachers, study groups, hospital patients and care providers. The questions at the end of each chapter call for individual reflection, and they will also be found helpful to stimulate discussion in small groups. This is not a sensational book that fades away with

time. For, as long as there is life, there will be physical and emotional pains, and *A Biblical Recourse to Mental and Emotional Well-Being* will remain a “medicine” in demand. I see the book a good tool for discipleship, pastoral care, bereavement classes, crisis counseling, and hospital ministry. It is a book that belongs to every home and family.

The Rev. Dr. Bisi Orebayo, Ph.D.
Former Director of Missions: Foursquare Gospel Church in Nigeria
National Director: Every Home for Christ (Nigeria)

• • Preface • •

"A Pastor Was Here"

"You need to tell your readers how you ministered to these patients," noted two friends who critiqued this work. I knew what they meant or what they expected to see. Many of the patients' stories I used for illustration sound inconclusive. But the hospital ministry is most often "a gift of the moment." It is that ministry which occurs in the time and space when human interaction between pastor and patient (or patient's family members) blends with the divine. This may happen with or without the symbols and rituals, such as prayer and Scripture, often associated with ministry.

The sacredness of the moment is such that cannot be duplicated, so much so that even the follow-up is a different dynamic. Sometimes the patient has been moved or discharged before the next visit. At other times the patient may not be in the mood for a conversation beyond saying, "Thank you for your visits. I feel better now." Also, when a patient is angry with God, the chaplain may be the agent to which the anger is directed. In longer hospital stays, however, a relationship often develops between the chaplain and the patient or patient's family.

So, how did I minister to these patients? In *few* cases I read a portion of Scripture. In *most* I offered a prayer at the end of the

visit. In *every* case I brought to the room a pastoral presence. This “presence” is larger than and goes beyond what I do; it is who or what I represent to the people. In its purest form, it is transcendent by its blindness to color of skin, gender, religion, or race. On the professional angle, by encouraging patients or their family members to speak, I empowered them to voice their feelings and talk about their illnesses as separate and distinct from themselves. This helped them reclaim their own identity and a measure of control over the disease.

The kind of ministries a chaplain often offers patients and their families

- *Presence*
- *Listening*
- *Prayer*
- *The Word*
- *Friendship*

The timeliness of a pastor’s visit is a powerful symbol and reminder of the divine presence, and it is a means for the healing of the brokenhearted. Sometimes a pastor is unaware of the impact of a visit until the family members begin to thank the chaplain for the visit and share what it had meant to them and their loved one.

While a chaplain’s presence brings comfort and infuses hope, he or she does not go about giving false hope or dabbling into the medical side of healing. For example, if a patient asks the chaplain, “Will my hair grow back?” or “Will I be able to use my leg again?” The chaplain may respond with, “What does your physician say about it?” “Have you discussed it with your physician?” “That is a good question to ask your doctor,” or “Let’s hope for the best and leave the rest to God.”

I often found myself in the shoes of those I interviewed on their hospital beds. I sincerely believe that I received from them as much as—if not more than—I gave them. When I thought I was searching for answers and comfort for others, I did not know I was actually looking for help for myself. I hope these pages will minister to every reader, as the experiences did to me.

So, what’s this book all about? It is about asking you to take my

• • Preface • • 15

hand and letting us walk together that we may provide companionship and community to one another in our search for healing, and comfort for our pain and woundedness. Here is my hand. Will you take it, please?

• • Introduction • •

The Cry of the Human Soul

When visiting people in the course of my duty as hospital chaplain, patients and family members often communicate nonverbal messages. Their faces or body language tell me: “I’m scared,” “I’m anxious,” “I’m fed up,” “I’m hurting,” “I’m dying,” or “I’m crushed.”

The period of hospitalization is the first time many people are left alone with their own intimate thoughts and confronted with a sense of helplessness. It is a time some ponder deeply about God and religion, while others think about the meaning and purpose of life.

And it’s no wonder. Hospitalization isolates and takes a person away from his or her familiar environment. When patients say good-bye to family members and visitors, and their gazes fall back to the bed, floor, or ceiling, a sudden, chilling loneliness descends. It dawns on many that this is for real: *I am in the hospital*. They realize their world has suddenly been reduced to a single bed and four walls, their vocabulary limited to one word... *Why?*

A pastoral caregiver is trained to decipher the unvoiced concerns. The hospital system affords chaplains rare opportunities to meet with individuals and their families, giving them the privilege to hear the heart stories not usually discussed with medical personnel. Falling sick, growing old, and dying are inevitable but fright-

ening realities. Paradoxically, a chaplain is helpful in those circumstances, simply because he or she lives with the same anxiety, fear and pain.

These cries of the heart are not limited to those in the hospitals. As I look over the Table of Contents to this book, I have to ask myself, *Which of these is the cry of my own heart?*

All of them, I hear my heart answer. In fact, I am sensitive to those feelings in others because they resonate with some part of my own story and experience. Sometimes, I experience more of one than another, or with more intensity than the others, but I, too, have breathed those cries.

Even when the patients and their families did not voice it out, I could read the words on their faces as I walked into their rooms:

- *I'm scared*
- *I'm anxious*
- *I'm hurting*
- *I'm fed-up*
- *I'm dying*
- *I'm afflicted*
- *I'm grieving*
- *I'm crushed*

It was the cries of my patients' hearts and the cries of my own—and the revelation that God, through his Word, has a definite response to the cries of our souls—that convinced me to write this book. Often, when working with patients or their family members, I wanted to give them a ministry resource to provide something that answered the question: *Where is help or hope to be found?* This work is an effort to provide that resource which speaks to diverse situations and offers God's provision when life hits hard.

I use several cases within the hospital system as illustrations. The examples I have used come from my dialogues with patients and their loved ones, which I presented during my clinical pastoral education (CPE)

training. To conceal the identities of the cases, I gave fictitious names to patients and omitted hospital names in most. Each chapter begins with pastoral interviews, followed by a theological reflection, which, in most cases, highlights biblical characters. My focus

is not on the *presentation problems* that brought the patients to the hospitals, but on the *preconditioning problems* (Adams, 1970; p.148) that might still be present, like a recurring decimal, if unattended to, even after their discharge.

My goal for this work is twofold: to encourage and educate. First, I would like to examine how we can find help from God’s Word when life grows tough, and then would like to provide a broad-based, biblically-oriented education—the truth that sets one free—on everyday problems that plague humanity.

Jesus says, “*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*” (John 8:32). This, then, is not strictly a book about hospitals or the sick. It is about everyday life. For this reason, efforts have been made to make its scope and application larger than hospital ministry. Nevertheless, I hope it will be useful when, by some strange turn of events, the hospital walls become the familiar.

PART ONE

*Yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with Me;
Your rod and Your staff,
they comfort me.
(Ps. 23:4)*

1

• • Fear Not • •

(I'm Scared)

*Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You
(Ps. 56:3)*

Anila

Anila is a thirty-four-year-old Indian Hindu woman spending her fourth day in the hospital. She is lying in a private room and is attached to IV and oxygen machines. She has tubes attached to her nose and arm, and another in her side. She looks childlike, worried, and scared. I was the first pastor she ever talked to, just as she was the first Hindu I ever encountered. After some hesitancy on her part, she finally let me visit with her.

“Who sent you here? Were you asked to visit me? Are you sure you are not in the wrong place?” Anila bombarded me with questions, uncertain of my purpose and my role in the hospital. When I had assured her I was a chaplain intern on the floor and had been visiting with other patients, she slowly began to open up to me.

To some patients, a chaplain’s visit is ominous and foreboding. They think of the chaplain as the angel of death and suddenly fear the case must be life-threatening.

Anila told me, “My doctor said I have a serious nasal problem and problems with my stomach. I couldn’t digest my food. My husband took me to the emergency on Sunday morning because I had an upset stomach. I was treated and discharged in the night.

“I saw my doctor the next day. He told me I had to be admitted, and I was admitted here that same day.

“I had surgery yesterday,” she continued. “I haven’t eaten any food since I came. I have never been on admission in any hospital all my life, and this is my first time of sleeping in a hospital bed.” She paused, saddened. “Look at all these things attached to my body.”

“That could be frightening,” I responded.

“It really is,” she answered. “I have never been sick like this before. I am a healthy person.”

“So it was shocking,” I said.

“Yes, it was,” she agreed. “It makes me totally dependent on others. I cannot do anything by myself. It is just today I am able to do some things for myself.”

I looked Anila in the eyes. “I hear you saying that strange things are happening to your body and to your life. You’re helpless and you don’t like being in this condition. It feels like you are thrown off balance.”

“Exactly!” she fired back emphatically. Then she was silent again.

“What’s it like for you to have all these things happening to you all at once?” I asked.

“I’m confused,” she said in a soft tone.

“Meaning that...?”

“I don’t know what’s going on.”

I pondered for a moment. “Hmm. It *is* hard to know.”

There was a lapse in our conversation, and though I knew I shouldn’t bring something from outside the room to fill the void, I yielded to the urge to “break the silence.”

“How is your family,” I heard myself inquire.

“My family is in India. My husband has stayed with me. He took some days off from work so that he can be with me. He even sleeps here. It helps me to know that somebody cares for me.” She paused, and then continued, “My family has phoned to wish me

well. It is nice when you know that people care for you.” She looked me in the eye.

“My husband and I have been planning to go home for Christmas. We’ve been making plans and saving up for it for the past two years. But now we can’t travel.

“The doctor said I need some time for post-op recovery and I may still need to be under observation for a while to be sure the problem will not recur. I have been asking ‘Why? Why me? Why now when we were planning to go home?’”

“It’s sad,” I agreed, sympathetic.

“My husband and I have been struggling to be able to make ends meet and just when we seemed to achieve some balance and thought we could finally take a vacation and visit our families...this happened! Everything is now thrown back. Why does it have to happen this way? This is what I was thinking about before you came in.”

“Seems like your life has been disrupted.”

“Yes.”

It was at this time that the nurse came in to take her away for another test. I felt “saved by the bell,” for I had come to the limit of my skill and was not sure what feelings to explore with her. Before leaving, I asked if I might pray with her. She showed no objection, so I asked the nurse to excuse us for a minute. I prayed,

*To some patients,
a chaplain's visit
is ominous and
foreboding.
But to others, it
brings hope*

Dear God: Life is spinning away from routine and the familiar for Anila and she is asking “Why?” I am asking the same question: “Why?” Even when answers are hard to find, I pray that you will grant her the comfort of Your presence. Thank You for a caring husband and family who are supporting Anila and sharing her pains at this time. How much harder it would have been without them! I pray for peace for Anila, her husband, and family in India. Especially, I pray that You will guide every step of the test or procedure she will be going through. Bless the hands and

minds of those who care for her that her life may soon return to normalcy. I pray in Your name. Amen.

What was going on with Anila? Fear! The story is the same for many whose lives are suddenly destabilized and their sense of security shattered by the unexpected. Is the world still safe? Can Anila trust her own plans? Can she again be confident that she is a healthy person? Why would her plans for Christmas end in ruins? Why would the family finances and savings be spent on medication and hospital bills? Will her view of life still be the same as before? Who knows what might happen next?

Chris

Lying in bed in the hospital is Chris, a sixty-six-year-old white male. But his gray head, toothless mouth, and frail body make him look much older.

The capacity for fear is God-given and necessary for our existence.

We do not seek to be rid of this God-given ability, but rather to be freed from the negative fear that interferes with our effectiveness.

As soon as I introduced myself to Chris as a chaplain, he cried out, “That’s what I need now. I need the Lord now more than ever before. Help me, God! Oh Lord, help me!” He began to sob violently.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’m in pain. I have infections,” Chris said, still sobbing and crying. “They don’t know what it is yet. Only God can help me. Lord, I need You now like I never needed You before. I don’t talk to You regularly, but please help me.”

“I hear you crying out in agony for help; it must be very serious,” I

said, not knowing what else to say.

Chris removed his thick glasses. The left eyelid was closed, the sockets sunken. I didn’t even know if the eye was still there. “It’s

been like that for years,” he tells me before continuing. “Lord, help me. Help my faith, Lord! I believe, Lord, help my unbelief. Help me, Lord, I’m scared. For the first time in my life, I’m scared.” Chris continued to sob.

“What’s it like for you to be scared?” I asked.

Chris suddenly stilled and looked me in the face. “You *don’t* want to go there with me,” he stated flatly.

“I’m willing to if you want to talk about it.”

“Help me!” he continued, sobbing to God, apparently disregarding my offer. “Help me, Lord. I need You now. I have never needed You like this before. I don’t talk to You often, but help me, Lord.”

“Sir, I find that if I’m able to talk about my fears and anxieties, I don’t feel alone and isolated any more in that problem. I would be glad to listen to you if you want to talk about what scares you. I’m a good listener and I care.”

“Only God can help me. Help me, Lord. I need You, Lord...” he continued with his “sob song.”

“What can I do to help you?” I asked again.

“Lord...Lord...help me...only You can help me, Lord,” he kept sobbing.

“Would you like me to pray with you?” I offered.

Chris reached out and grabbed my hand, gripping it tightly as if it could pull him out of bed. Holding on to my hand, he continued to cry to God and ask Him for help. I had no idea what was locked up in his mind or body, but I cried and prayed with him.

“You don’t want to go there with me,” Chris had said to me on my first visit when he turned down my request to hear his story. That sentence has remained with me. Even after three visits, I still could not “go there” with him. As I walked away after the first visit, I wondered what was “there” that Chris could not trust me with. I also questioned what I may have projected in that brief moment when he first fixed his eyes on me, something that must have led him to believe I wouldn’t want to “go there” with him.

Then the truth dawned on me. We all have such places—places in our lives that we cannot or will not take others into. I also know we all have moments when we are vulnerable—moments when the

Fear is crippling.

- *If you are rich, the fear thieves and envious neighbors may give you many sleepless nights.*
- *If you are healthy, the fear of the possibility of a sudden sickness may keep you edgy.*
- *If you have a family, the fear of losing a member may rob you of the joy of living with them.*
- *If everything is going on well, fear may torment you that it won't last.*
- *Even if you are poor, the spirit of fear may flood your mind with tormenting thoughts that things could get worse.*

So, whichever way you turn, fear short-changes you.

whole world seems to be caving in, when—as it were—we “can’t take it anymore.”

So, may I ask you, what scares you? Is this a time when things are falling apart? When you “just can’t take it anymore”?

GOD’S WORD SAYS, “FEAR NOT.”

Whenever we read of a divine encounter between a person and an angel of God, a human’s first reaction is fear. God’s visitations or the appearances of His angels to men and women in the Scriptures were usually sudden—sometimes with dramatic and spectacular events such as earthquakes, fire, strong winds, lightning, or thunder. But most times, God appeared without fanfare (Ex. 19; 1 Kings 19; Judg. 6:11-24; 13:2-23; Matt. 17:1-8; 14:22-33; Luke 1:5-23; Acts 10:1-8). It was the Word from the Lord, “*a still small voice*,” (1 Kings 19:12) that calmed the fears. God’s Word is still the surest antidote for fear.

Fear has both positive and negative connotations. Positive fear is displayed as respect, reverence, or holy awe. Of this type of fear, the Bible says, “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*,” (Prov. 9:10; Ps. 111:10). “*The secret of the LORD is with those who fear*

Him” (Ps. 25:14). This holy awe of God is defined in Proverbs 8:13 as “to hate evil.” The blessing of this respect of God is described in Psalm 25:12-14:

Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses. He himself shall dwell in prosperity, And his descendants shall inherit the earth. The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, and He will show them His covenant (Ps. 25:12-14).

“The fear of the Lord” is the “fear” that overcomes all our negative fears.

Negative fear believes in other things or persons more than God. It shows doubt in God’s ability. It leads to anxiety and worry. Negative fear has greater belief or faith in evil or the devil than in God and it leads to distrust and suspicion. Whatever and whoever you fear eventually controls you. That is, the object or person curtails your actions, movements, and plans, especially in that area of your life where the fear holds you captive. Believe it or not, the thing or person you fear has indirectly become your “object of worship” because that thing or person has “a hold” on your life.

The capacity for fear is God-given and necessary for our existence. We do not seek to be rid of this God-given ability, but rather to be freed from the negative fear that interferes with our effectiveness.

There are about 365 “Fear not” and “Do not be afraid” injunctions in the Bible. That means there is one “Fear not” for each day. Daily, God says to you, “Fear not. Do not be afraid.” Make it your daily pill to fear not!

Phobias and Fears

We are told that there are two types of fear that a human child is born with: the fear of falling and the fear of loud noise. A little child responds to fear only in these two areas. As we grow up, however, we add hundreds of other fears and phobias.

Technically, a phobia is a neurotic disorder in which there is a strong and persistent fear of objects and situations, which is not

justified by any danger that what is feared pose. The sufferer herself is aware that the fear is irrational, but she makes strenuous attempts to avoid the feared situation.

Fear is not the same as anxiety. In fear there is a specific known stimulus. In anxiety, the source of danger is vague. A phobia is an irrational, stubborn fear, one that has crossed realistic boundaries, of specific kinds of animals, people, things or situations.

There are two general approaches to explaining phobic disorders and these two are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Psychoanalysis tends to see phobias as symbolic representations. Namely, that the situation or object consciously feared represents an unconscious wish that has been repressed. The actual fear is that one will act on a forbidden impulse contained in the forbidden wish. Thus, a fear of heights might be a protective mechanism against an adolescent's wish to commit suicide by leaping from a tall building.

Behavioral psychology tends to see phobias as having a learned basis, generalizations from prior experiences. This view holds that phobias are caused by faulty links and that they usually develop in times of vulnerability: childhood, times of stress, poor physical conditions, sickness, grief, depression, or sleep loss. For example, a person is afraid to ride a bicycle, to cross narrow bridges, to eat fish, etc. because of an unpleasant childhood experience. Later on as the person approaches the object or activity, the body system sends out mental signals that parallel the initial experience. The person is again paralyzed by fear, so to speak.

Many fears and phobias plague humanity. The following is a partial listing:

Fear of human beings. Fear of other people often has to do with our own assumptions and prejudices, or what in psychology is called *transference* (and *counter-transference*), a dynamic that operates at the subconscious level. Transferences often have to do with authority figures in our life—a parent, teacher, pastor, or boss. For example, when someone reminds us of a particular authority figure, we immediately transfer our pattern of relationship with that authority figure to the person we are relating to in real life. We

either respond with fear or love, depending on our relationship with the authority figure.

Transference can either help us to connect quickly with new people, or to avoid them, even when they have not done anything to warrant either treatment. We stereotype people according to our assumptions. Though we might meet a police officer who exudes courtesy, professionalism, and respect, the ghost of a former police officer who has not been kind to us suddenly re-emerges in our subconscious. Our treatment of the officer has nothing to do with *him*, only with our prejudice, assumption, stereotype, and transference. We fear certain persons and are not able to relate well to them, not for what they have done, but for what they remind us of in our subconscious. In such cases, it is not *their* problem; it is *ours*. *They* are not the patients needing a doctor's attention; *we* are.

What you fear indicates where your trust is. If your confidence is in the Lord, you will be able to say with the Psalmist, "*The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*" (Ps. 118:6). God wants us to respect and honor all people—especially Him. The apostle Peter exhorts, "*Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king*" (1 Pet. 2:17).

Fear of not getting well. This fear has plagued everyone from kings to peasants down through the ages. When Abijah, the son of Jeroboam, king of Northern Israel was sick, Jeroboam asked his wife to disguise herself and go to the prophet to inquire what would happen to the boy (1 Kings 14:1-3). Jeroboam was concerned about the outcome of his son's disease. Yet another O.T. king, King Ahaziah

Human fears and phobias include, the fear of

- *Human beings*
- *Not getting well*
- *Death*
- *The future*
- *Danger*
- *Failure*
- *Success*
- *Witchdoctors and voodoos*
- *Evil*
- *Darkness*
- *Nothing*
- *Enemies*

sent messengers to ask an idol if he would recover from his sickness (2 Kings 1).

We read also of Benhadad, a Syrian king who sent a messenger to the prophet Elisha to inquire from the Lord about the prognosis of his illness (2 Kings 8:7-15). Fear of the unknown is especially strong during disease or sickness.

Fear of death. One humanist says, “Man is the only animal who knows he will die.” All animals run from deadly situations, but do not live under the constant dread of death.

The Bible tells us that Jesus experienced death to conquer its power:

[Jesus] *Himself likewise shared in the same [flesh and blood], that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage* (Heb. 2:14-15).

God addressed this fear of death in humanity. Scriptures make it clear that Jesus, by His death and resurrection, conquered Satan and death, and thereby delivered those who put their trust in Him from a lifelong bondage to fear of death. The Bible rings with hope for the believer:

So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’

‘O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?’

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

The bee stings only once. It expends all its venomous substance on its victim and can do no more harm. Like the bee, death lavished all its lethal power on the Lord Jesus and can now no longer harm those who belong to Christ. Jesus’ death for our sin, His victory on the cross, and His resurrection removed death’s sting.

Jesus' life of obedience and His death not only atoned for our sin but also credited righteousness to those who trust in Him as Savior. Law and sin, the forces behind the dread of death, have been overcome. Physical death is now no more than a passage to heaven, a graduation day for those who have a Savior at the right hand of the righteous Judge of the Universe. Hallelujah!

The hope of resurrection is the distinctive hope of the Christian message. The unsaved person, however, lives in constant fear of death. A whole chapter of the Bible distinguishes the Christian's hope of resurrection from the pagan's view of death (1 Cor. 15). The Savior assured His followers that He was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:1-6) and that He would come again to take them with Him. As hard to understand as the book of Revelation may be, no reader can fail to appreciate its clear and emphatic message about heaven, and God's ultimate triumph over evil.

Fear of the future, of the unknown, of the unseen tomorrow. We don't like groping in the dark and not knowing what is in the way. That is why many newspapers and magazines devote a whole page to horoscopes, just to give readers their cup of comfort for the day.

I read of a preacher who divides the world into three kinds of people: those who are afraid, those who don't know enough to be afraid, and those who know the Bible. In a world of advanced telecommunication technology—computers, Internet, e-mail, mobile phones, cable TV, etc.—we will always be bombarded with enough information to strike fear in us. But, as the preacher suggested, those who know their Bible will be confident in the promises of a faithful God.

Fear of danger. Excessive fear of danger prevents a person from attempting anything. How often do you say or hear someone say, "I am scared to death"? Life is full of risks. Only those who venture out in faith, believing God, eventually make headway in life. When the eternal God is your refuge, underneath will be God's everlasting arms (Deut. 33:27).

Fear of failure. This may be used positively to help us prepare well and reduce the risk of failure. Negatively, however, it can paralyze us and lead to inaction, killing all our zeal for life. *Why try*

when you may fail and be ridiculed by others? Unhealthy competitiveness, insecurity, and lack of self-worth lie behind this fear. When someone fears failure, they believe that to fail is to be “a nobody,” a loser. But this is not so. To fail does not mean that one *is* a failure. Failure is a learning experience to those who do not quit or give up. One may not *achieve* anything significant but still *be* a person of significance because a sense of worth springs from how you understand or perceive yourself. Your identity is more a function of *whose* you are than *who* you are; more of what is *inside* than what is *outside*.

- *Negative fear tends to believe in other things or persons more than God.*
- *Negative fear shows greater belief or faith in evil or the devil than in God. This leads to distrust and suspicion.*
- *Whatever and whoever you fear eventually controls you.*
- *The thing or person you fear has indirectly become your “object of worship” because that thing or person has “a hold” on your life.*

For example, a child who is the heir to a great inheritance is considered a person of worth and feels the same way without having done anything worthwhile as a person. The feeling of significance is conferred by virtue of the relationship to the inheritance. It is the same with Christians. Our significance is derived from our relationship to the God of the universe, who loves and accepts us unconditionally. Our worthiness has nothing to do with what we achieve or become in life. All our effort at growth and maturity is to actualize what we have been endowed with by virtue of God’s free gift of salvation.

Fear of success. Those who are scared of success often fear that rapid promotion in the office may result in enmity, bad blood, and jealousy from others. Others fear they may not be able to cope with the demands of a higher position, may not perform well in the lime-

light, or that they may suddenly fall from the top. Still, others fear that the ugly side of one's life may receive public attention, that their popularity and success may not last, or they fear that their spouse who makes the news and is in public limelight, would become unfaithful and may leave them to marry another person.

Fear of gods and idols. We should not dabble into the occult or live in denial of its reality, but we don't have to live in fear of it. The Bible says, "*He [Christ] who is in you is greater than he who is in the world*" (1 John 4:4). Gideon (Judg. 6:10, 25-32) would shame us today because he, not having the Holy Spirit or the Word of God as we do today, dared Baal, the god of the land, of which his father was custodian, on the encouragement and instruction from the angel of God.

Fear generated by dreams. God's Word, not dreams or visions, is supposed to rule your life and be your guiding principle. Don't be excessively bothered about the meanings of dreams. The Bible does not say, "the just shall live by his dreams" but "*by faith.*" (Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:38). Because we all naturally want to know what the future holds, it is tempting to find ways to unlock the future by interpreting our dreams. But, most dreams are just that—dreams—the unwinding of a tired mind and body.

In the time of the Old Testament judges, Gideon had 300 soldiers with whom he faced 135,000 Midianite soldiers. The battle was decided in favor of Gideon because the Midianites submitted to fear engineered by a dream one of them had, which another soldier in the camp interpreted as a bad omen. Before they ever went into the battle, they had already accepted defeat, in spite of the size of their army. It was the dream and its strange interpretation that turned the tide (Judg. 7:9-23). No matter what you have in your favor, once you give in to fear, you always lose.

Today, business is booming for dream interpreters, palm readers, and psychics who camouflage themselves in different costumes. When they are not in leadership positions where they can exercise power in a local church, some of these "spiritual" persons have been able to exercise influence or take control through the exercise of certain questionable spiritual gifts. They may preface their state-

A more contemporary illustration is the aftermath of the terrorists attack on September 11, 2001, which brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The tragedy has changed the ways New Yorkers and Americans live in many ways both positively and negatively. One thing New Yorkers did not need was to surrender to fear. It took all the wits and energies of the leaders at every level of government to urge and encourage Americans to defy fear and live their lives as before. Many agreed that this was the force that quickly moved New York forward on the road to recovery.

ments with, “The Lord told me...” when in fact God hasn’t said anything to them. Often, their vocabulary is rich with dreams, visions, and revelations, and on these they “cut and paste” scripture portions to give an appearance of credibility to the undiscerning.

Never submit the leadership of your life to a dreamer, prophet, or “visioner,” even if he or she is a Christian and claims to be operating under the gifts of the Holy Spirit. If you are a child of the Father and a sheep of His pasture, God will communicate His will to you in a manner you will best understand without the help of any interpreter or medium. I believe God does guide us through the gifts and ministries of other believers only as a confirmation of what He already deposits in us. If someone periodically brings you revelations, dreams, and visions—be careful. While God can speak to us through dreams (Job 33:15-16; Joel 2:28; Matt. 2:12), we know also that dreams do come from “*the multitude of business*” (Eccl. 5:3; KJV).

Sometimes a dream is a playback of our activities, or a reflection of our fears, “*For a dream comes through much activity*” (Eccl. 5:3; Ps. 3:5-6). Some nightmares are the product of some ailments (such as

high fever), unsettled minds (anxiety), sleeplessness, or the influence of certain prescribed drugs used for medical purposes; or they may result as a symptom of withdrawing from drugs.

Fear of evil. This fear makes a person's ears attentive to evil or to evil reports. God has given us His precious promises for our protection and safety, and we should live in the confidence that no evil will befall us.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me. No evil shall befall you, Nor shall any plague come near your dwelling. The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul (Ps. 23:4; Ps. 91:10; 121:7).

Believing God and His Word helps us understand that God will take care of us, and that He is bigger than any mishap that could happen to us.

Fear of nothing. This supposed fear is reported in Psalm 53:5: "There they are in great fear Where no fear was." Indeed there are those who worry even when there is nothing for them to worry about. The Bible says, "The wicked flee when no one pursues, But the righteous are bold as a lion" (Prov. 28:1). This fear may indicate the presence of an unconfessed sin. In fact, God prophesied that the Israelites would be cursed with this terrible fear. If Israel persisted in sin, God warned,

Your life shall hang in doubt before you; you shall fear day and night, and have no assurance of life. In the morning you shall say, 'Oh, that it were evening!' And at evening you shall say, 'Oh, that it were morning!' because of the fear which terrifies your heart, and because of the sight which your eyes see (Deut. 28:66, 67; See also Lev. 26:36-38).

Fear of enemies (both real and imaginary). People with such fear will not drink water at their neighbor's house. At a more critical level, such people may, for example, be afraid to go to the bathroom because they fear someone is hiding there to harm them, or they may be afraid to cross a twig or step on a piece of rope across

the road because, to them, it is an enemy's trap. This is paranoia. Some of these problems are real medical conditions, which counseling therapy or prescription drugs may help alleviate. But, we must also acknowledge and learn how God prevails over all fears. David said in the Psalms, "*I sought the LORD, and He heard me, And delivered me from all my fears. The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?*" (Ps. 34:4; 118:6; See also Heb. 13:6).

Fear of darkness. Darkness is deceptive. When you are in the dark, you may suddenly see a figure or an outline of something weird and dreadful. But when the light comes, it vanishes because it exists only in your imagination.

Fear as an escape or defense mechanism. Sometimes people use fear manipulatively to control others and have their way. To avoid being asked to take responsibility for something, some people attach a phobia to it. In this way they win the sympathy of others, their defense is justified, and their excuse is rationalized. To avoid being sent on an errand, for example, a child may develop a fear of strangers, a fear of being alone, or a fear of darkness. Or, an adult may claim he is phobic because of an unpleasant childhood experience.

As long as the claim to the phobia exists, irrational though it is, no one will pressure him or her into accepting the responsibility for the task. This is not uncommon, but it does not rule out the presence of real phobias. Used repeatedly over time, this kind of manipulative fear may lead to a real phobia. If you say or hear anything long enough (even if it is untrue or nonexistent), you may end up believing it to be true. You then have crossed the line between illusion and reality.

Fear of objects, animals, places, and things. Some fears may be legitimate if they come from a truly fearsome object. Coming across a big pit bull's path can be frightening. A fast-approaching vehicle driven by an obviously reckless driver can send signals to our involuntary system to get out of the way as quickly as possible. Avoiding a dangerous neighborhood or being on guard as you walk through it is a wise plan. Such fears are not paralyzing because they help us take precaution and remain safe. Besides, the fear is over as soon as

the fearsome animal is out of the way, the car has zoomed past, or one is safely out of the dangerous neighborhood.

There are many more fears, too numerous to mention right now. The famed Mayo Clinic and stress experts have long asserted that fear and other negative emotions, such as worry, anxiety, and depression, are responsible for over seventy percent of diseases and ailments of humankind. If fear is the belief in the power of the devil, then faith is the belief in the power of God. Fear results from elevating a circumstance above God.

One of the first missiles the enemy of our soul sends is fear. Fear weakens your faith and dampens your spirit. Fear makes you doubt God and doubt yourself. Therefore you always lose the battle when you give in to fear, no matter how well-equipped you are.

Some Bible Facts About Fear

Fear is first mentioned in connection with sin. (Speaking of the principle of first mention.) After Adam sinned, we read,

And they [Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, ‘Where are you?’ So he said, ‘I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself’ (Gen. 3:8-10).

What a sad confession: “*I was afraid...I hid myself.*” Fear was the result of sin. Fear led Adam and Eve to resort to hiding from God. If you are willfully living in sin, you will naturally be fearful of judgment and of meeting God. In the same way, if you have sinned against a neighbor, or wronged someone and have not sought reconciliation through repentance, confession, and asking for forgiveness, it is natural to have misgivings about meeting the person.

Fear is a spirit. Fear is more than a feeling, even though it shows as an emotion. The Bible says, “*For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind*” (2 Tim. 1:6-

7). Paralyzing fear is not of God. The spirit of fear can possess, attack, live in the human soul, and can hover over a whole community. For example, what we may call “Aniniphobia,” the fear of Anini, the dreaded leader of an armed robbery gang, held Bendel State and the whole country of Nigeria in fear for a long time in the 1980s. While the Anini saga lasted, the fear of him and his gang so gripped the whole of Bendel State that residents observed a self-imposed curfew. Even many churches canceled the evening services for fear that Anini and his armed bandits might show up.

The Bible indicates that fear is

- *First mentioned in connection with sin*
- *A spirit*
- *A tormenting spirit*
- *Leads to bondage*
- *May lead to destruction*
- *A self-fulfilling prophecy*
- *Contagious*
- *Can be cast out or resisted*

A more contemporary illustration is the aftermath of the terrorists attack on September 11, 2001, which brought down the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. The tragedy has changed the ways New Yorkers and Americans live in many ways both positively and negatively. One thing American people did not need was to surrender to fear. It took all the wits and energies of the leaders at every level of government to urge and encourage Americans to defy fear and live their lives as before. To do otherwise was construed as conceding victory

to the terrorists. Many agreed that this was the force that quickly moved New York forward on the road to recovery.

Fear is a tormenting spirit. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

Fear can be crippling. If you are rich, you may fear thieves, robbers, and envious neighbors. If you are healthy, you may fear the possibility of sudden sickness. Fear may not let you enjoy your chil-

dren and family for fear of losing them to death. If everything is going well for you, the tormenting spirit of fear may rob you of the joy of your peaceful home and secure job for fear that the blessings may not last. Even when you are poor, the torment of fear will not allow you to be content with your poverty for fear that it may get worse. Whichever way you turn, fear shortchanges your life.

Fear brings the bondage of a lifetime. Fear of death enslaves millions. In spite of the salvation available in Christ, there are still many “*who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage*” (Heb. 2:14-15). The Bible says that death is an enemy and the last enemy to be destroyed, but its sting has been removed by the resurrection of our Lord (1 Cor. 15:26). The sting of death is sin, and the curse of sin is the law. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law and freed us from the power and bondage of sin. Death has thereby lost its dread. For the Christian, the fear of death is past.

Fear, in the end, leads to destruction. It can keep a person from committing his or her life to Christ and therefore can damn the person to hell. “*But the cowardly [fearful, KJV], unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death,*” (Rev. 21:8). The pinnacle of distrust, fear does not take God at His word. Fear robs a person of all assurance. In the end it leads to “*the lake which burns with fire and brimstone*” because the spirit of fear is from the devil. It is the opposite of faith which leads to salvation.

Fear is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Job confessed, “*For the thing I greatly feared has come upon me, And what I dreaded has happened to me. I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; I have no rest, for trouble comes*” (Job 3:25-26). Job was living under the constant fear of “What if this happens?” and “What if that happens?” Eventually the “this” and “that” that he feared happened to him.

“*In the name of the Lord Jesus*” a believer can resist fear. We have the authority to resist the devil and all that belongs to him, to cast out ungodly spirits and influences. “*And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons.*”

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Mark 16:17; James 4:7). This resistance is not limited to an activity we do in prayer; it is to be manifested by our way of life, by godly principles and practices.

Fear is contagious (Deut. 20:8; Judg. 7:9-23; Num. 13 and 14). Ten of the twelve spies, who were leaders of Israel, brought an evil report (to Moses and their brethren) that poisoned the minds of the multitudes. Their report was factual. They reported the situation as it was and as they perceived it: there were giants in the land and the land was flowing with milk and honey. What then made their report evil? They left God out. They looked and saw only with natural eyesight. They belittled God, who had fought for them and had delivered them thus far in their journey. In spite of the efforts of the two spies who put God in the picture, Joshua and Caleb, fear spread and weakened the Israelites’ resolve. As a result, the children of Israel suffered defeats and wandered aimlessly for nearly forty years before a new generation eventually possessed the land.

Train yourself to avoid people who are infected by fear. Instead, cultivate friendships with people of faith. If you cannot escape a negative environment, always vocally counter the negative sayings with a positive declaration. When they say, “It won’t work,” declare, “It *will* work by the grace of God.” When they say, “There is no way,” counter with a positive confession, “God *will* make a way somehow.” When they say, “It is impossible,” affirm, “With God all things are possible.”

One way a person may overcome a specific fear or phobia is to confront the fear in the company of friends or a support group who entertains no such fear. The support of others is helpful to overcome unwarranted fear. Armed with Scripture, prayer, and the understanding that such fear is unhealthy, one can then make the attempt to confront or do what was feared. Go at it immediately or gradually, but don’t fail to attack the fear that binds you.

Segun, a man who was at one-time the president of the Student Christian Movement of the University of Ife in Nigeria, couldn’t tolerate many of the local staples and delicacies without throwing up. He therefore had limited items of food on his menu from childhood.

While in the university, he didn't eat a number of foods and snacks which other students enjoyed. This was embarrassing for him when he went to camp or to conferences.

One day, Segun sponsored an "eating spree" with all the items of food he detested included in the menu. He stated his intention to devour the food without throwing up. He admitted that he had been in bondage to the narrow choice of foods he allowed himself to eat, and that it was infecting his ministry and effectiveness for the Lord. He claimed John 8:32,36 and

some other Scriptures. Segun asked for prayers for him and over the meal. He then ate the "forbidden" items and conquered his fears.

Fear, being a product of wrong and irrational beliefs, can be countered in a counseling session by literally talking out the fear with the individual, until they see the light of reason. A Christian counselor has the resources and authority of the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, prayer, and the community of a Christian fellowship or local church to aid the counseling.

How Mary Overcame Her Fear

Mary, the mother of Jesus, also encountered fear when the angel Gabriel came to tell Mary that she would conceive and bear a son, to be named Jesus, who would be the Savior of the world. Six months earlier, the same angel had given a similar message to a priest named Zacharias, whose aging wife, Elizabeth, was barren. On seeing the angel, Mary's and Zacharias' first reaction was

- *The source of biblical faith is the Word of God, for "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17).*
- *Faith is also a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:9)*
- *Likewise a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).*
- *God has given to each one of us "a measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3)*

- *"Perfect love casts out fear" (John 4:18).*
- *Therefore the antithesis of fear is love.*
- *Fear is self-centered; love is others-centered.*
- *Fear builds walls between individuals; love builds bridges between them.*
- *Fear thinks, What will she do to me? Love thinks, What need in her life can I meet?*
- *Love moves toward the solution; fear retreats.*
- *Love acts from a sense of worth and acceptance; fear acts from a sense of insecurity.*
- *Love acts in faith, confidence, and trust; fear is suspicious, doubtful, and vacillating.*

fear (Luke 1:29; Luke 1:12).

Fear is often people's first reaction to both good and bad news. But heaven's first response is to calm down our fears. The angel of the Lord told both Mary and Zacharias, "*Do not be afraid*" (Luke 1:30; Luke 1:13). Until their fears were calmed, they could not receive anything from the Lord.

Fear naturally leads to questioning. "*How can this be, since I do not know a man?*" Mary asked the angel (Luke 1:34). Zacharias, too, questioned the news given to him and looked at the circumstances of his life: "*I am an old man, and my wife is well advanced in years*" (Luke 1:18). Each stated the facts and pointed out the impossibility of the proposal.

There is nothing wrong with stating the facts, for to close one's eyes to the facts would be presumptuous. Faith, however, recognizes the facts of the situation but elevates the counsel of God above the situation. We can fight facts with the truth with faith in God's Word and God's ability: "*For with God nothing*

will be impossible" (Luke 1:37). We all know it's unreasonable to expect a virgin to give birth to a child, or, for menopausal women like Elizabeth to have children in their old age. Those are the facts,

but the truth still remains that “*with God nothing will be impossible.*”

Fear does not necessarily lead to doubt. Mary, despite her initial fear and questioning, responded in surrender and faith: “*Behold the maidservant of the Lord!*” (Luke 1:38a). “*Let it be to me according to your word,*” Mary declared (Luke 1:38b). All that Mary had to hold on to were the promises and assurances given to her (Luke 1:35-37). She believed and surrendered, unlike Zacharias who doubted (Luke 1:38b).

“*According to your word*” is the secret of the Christian’s life. God’s Word is His will. His Word is power. “*No word from God shall be without power or impossible of fulfillment* (Luke 1:37; see also John 1:1-3; 14; AMP).

Love, the Antithesis of Fear

Since fear is the result of original sin, receiving God’s free gift of salvation will immediately address the root of the problem and will arrest the spirit of fear (Gen. 3:8-10). Sin’s cure is the cross. “*There is therefore NOW no condemnation [no guilt, no need to hide] to those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 8:1; emphasis mine). The most important discovery for a Christian is knowing that Christ is sufficient for all our needs, here and in the hereafter. Unfortunately, we often limit God’s plan of salvation to the forgiveness of our sins, not realizing that pardon is only the doorway to all that God, in His riches and mercy, has in store for us through Christ. Experiencing God’s forgiveness and justification has the potential to overpower the human paralyzing fear beyond anything else.

Because fear is a spirit of the devil, we can cast it out (Mark 16:17) and appropriate a right spirit in the name of Jesus. While God has not given us the spirit of fear, He *has* given us the spirit of power, love, and a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7). These are the things we need to cultivate in our lives. “Sound mind” and “fear” are opposites that cannot live together.

First John 4:18 tells us that “*Perfect love casts out fear.*” The antithesis of fear is love—not human love but supernatural love.

Fear is self-centered; love is others-centered. Fear builds walls between individuals; love builds bridges between them. Fear thinks, *What will she do to me?* Love thinks, *What need in her life can I meet?* Love moves toward the solution; fear retreats. Love acts from a sense of worth and acceptance; fear acts from a sense of insecurity. Love acts in faith, confidence, and trust; fear is suspicious, doubtful, and vacillating.

In the Garden of Eden, by Adam and Eve running away from God, they moved away from help, peace, and security. But God moved toward them in love. God sought them out, spoke to them, confronted them with their sin, judged their actions, clothed their nakedness, dealt with their deceiver, and promised them a Savior (Adams, 1973; p. 413-425).

• *Because fear is a spirit of the devil, we can cast it out (Mark 16:17) and appropriate a right spirit in the name of Jesus.*

• *While God has not given us the spirit of fear, He has given us the spirit of power, love, and a sound mind (2 Tim. 1:7).*

• *"Sound mind" and "fear" are opposites that cannot live together.*

Until Jesus came, the world thought of love only in terms of what could be gained from a relationship and not what one could give or sacrifice for it. The world couldn't imagine loving the unlovable and the unloving. But Jesus taught and demonstrated that this was possible through Him.

The New Testament writers had to invent a new word to describe this unconditional love for the unlovely. This word, not found in secular literature, is the Greek word *Agape*. *Agape* love casts out fear because it is rooted in and breeds security, peace, trust, sacrifice, faithfulness, care, patience, and joy. Until one falls in love with the greatest Lover (Jesus), one cannot know or have the *agape* love that casts out fear (Rom. 5:5).

Faith, the Counterforce to Fear

Although fear is contagious (Deut. 20:8), so is faith (Acts 4:13; 2 Tim. 1:5). Therefore, one sure way to overcome fear is to befriend people of faith and avoid negative people as much as possible. The greatest faith community is a local church where the Word of God is taught. A small fellowship group or support group may be equally nurturing and affirming.

A word of caution: Some preachers confuse faith with a branch of psychology that emphasizes man's potential and will power. Faith is more than positive thinking, even though faith thinks positively and has a positive attitude. Although it motivates us to action, biblical faith is more than motivational speech. Biblical faith is rooted in God's Word, has God as its object, and the glory of God as its focus. Many erroneously construe faith as the means to get what they want from God, rather than as a way to please and glorify God. "*Without faith it is impossible to please Him [God]*" (Heb. 11:6).

Fear often comes through association of the five senses. For example, the Midianites *heard* a dream and its interpretation; thereafter they *heard* the noise of broken pitchers, *saw* flashes of torches, *heard* the blowing of trumpets and *felt* the vibration of the ground. Then they jumped to a conclusion that had no relevance to reality. You may not be able to help what you hear, but you can help how you react to it. How? By putting God in the picture.

Faith also comes by hearing (Rom. 10:17). We are oftentimes not helpless and can choose what to listen to. What you hear or see will become the content of your thoughts. If you hear, see, or are exposed to "something" for a long while, that thing, whatever it is, will become the meditation of your mind. And if you think about it long enough, it will show up in your behavior. Your thoughts and feelings will color what you speak and how you act. Jesus says it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out. He taught His followers that how we live and what we say reveal the condition of our heart:

Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are the things which defile a man (Matt. 15:17-20; see also, Mark 7:15-23).

The source of biblical faith is the Word of God, for “*Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*” (Rom. 10:17). Faith, at a different level, is also a gift of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:9) and a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Fruit is the result of growth and maturity. As we grow in Christ and become rooted in Him, the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of faithfulness in us. In case you think you don’t have sufficient faith, we are assured in Scripture that God has given to each one of us “*a measure of faith*” (Rom. 12:3)—that is, the measure of faith we need to cope with the challenges that come our way.

Four Bulwarks Against Fear

The four bulwarks that should fence away our negative fears are: God’s promises, God’s presence, God’s personality, and Jesus’ prayers.

God’s Promises: The promises of God are all-embracing, covering all our needs. Christians should make every effort to know what God promises in His Word, to know that He promises them provision, protection, and peace.

God’s Presence: Again and again, God assures us of His presence. Like a little child who is no longer afraid of the dark when an older person is holding him or her, God says in Isaiah 41:10,13,

*Fear not, for I am with you;
Be not dismayed, for I am*

Four walls to fence out fear are

- *God’s promises*
 - *God’s presence*
 - *God’s personality,*
- and*

your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand. For I, the LORD your God, will hold your right hand, Saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'

Jesus is Immanuel, which means “*God with us*” (Matt. 1:23). Believe that God’s presence is with you.

God’s Personality: Who is God and what is God like? When it comes down to it, God’s personality—His power, mercy, faithfulness, love, nature, and other attributes—boils down to our knowledge of Him. God is as big and as powerful, as kind and gracious, as you take Him to be. Put in kindergarten language: if your God is big enough to kill grasshoppers, He will; if He is big enough to kill elephants, He will; if He is greater than your fears and is able to deliver you from them, He will. Unbelief limits God, but faith taps God’s power.

Jesus’ Prayer: Scripture assures us that Jesus is praying and interceding for us right now. “*It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us*” (Rom. 8:34b). Distance is no barrier to Jesus’ prayer. God always answers the prayers of His Son (John 11:41b-42a).

George Mueller, a man of prayer, recorded thousands of answered prayers. When Hudson Taylor, a missionary to China, heard that Mueller was praying for him, it made his day. But Jesus’ prayers are more efficacious than that of all the prayer warriors of old put together. God could refuse Moses and Samuel—giants in prayer though they were (Jer. 15:1)—but God will not refuse His Son, Jesus. Jesus saves us by His blood, which is always efficacious, and keeps us by His prayer, “*Therefore He [Jesus] is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them*” (Heb. 7:25).

If you knew that the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, was praying for you in the next room, would it make any difference to you? Know that Jesus is praying for you right now.

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. What do you fear most?
2. How does this fear control your life—positively or negatively?
3. The greatest fear, which helps to master all other fears, is “the fear of the Lord.” What does “the fear of the Lord” mean to you?
4. Anila said at one point, “Everything is now thrown back. Why does it have to happen this way?” Do you know that feeling? What has been helpful to you when things don’t turn out as planned?
5. If you need to work on a specific negative fear or phobia, write an action plan that includes specific things and people that may help you overcome the fear or phobia.
6. In what area(s) of your life can you apply the “Four Bulwarks Against Fear”?
7. If faith is the counterforce to fear, itemize three things or practices that will feed your faith and three things or practices that will starve your fear.

2

• • Facing the Unknown • •

(I'm Anxious)

*Cast your burden on the LORD, And He shall sustain you
(Ps. 55:22a)*

Janet

Janet is a forty-two-year-old, black Hispanic female. On her second day in the hospital, I stood at the door of her fully-occupied room, and knocked. The room was crowded, and people milled about in a bustle of activity, everybody minding their own business. Nobody even stirred at the sound of my knocking, nor did they respond.

Janet was in bed A, closest to the door. She was sitting on her bed and seemed to be busily writing. Since she did not even raise her head to look at who was at the door, I walked into the room and offered my ministry to the patients in beds B, C, and D, and finally, to Janet, in bed A.

I bent over and whispered to Janet, who now looked up at me. I introduced myself and asked her if I could visit with her. After a moment's hesitation she said, "Okay." I looked for a chair and drew it close to the bed.

“How are you today?” I asked Janet after I was seated.

“Not good. I’m not feeling well,” she admitted.

“Tell me what’s happening,” I whispered, conscious of the others in the room.

Certain problems simultaneously bombard us with a range of negative emotions, such as

- *Fear*
- *Anxiety*
- *Anger*
- *Frustration*
- *Helplessness*
- *Guilt*

“I’m sick but they can’t find what’s wrong,” sounding frustrated.

I nodded. “It’s frustrating not knowing what’s going on in your body.”

“It’s terrible. It started as urinary tract infection two weeks ago. I went to a doctor and the first test was clear. But I still don’t feel well. I’m normally a healthy person. I work out. I don’t know, maybe I got this from my exercise.”

After a short silence, I spoke. “I am so sorry. I’m sure it’s hard to make sense out of what’s going on.”

Janet looked sad, “I need my job.

I just furnished my apartment and I have to pay rent. Two months ago, I lost everything in my old apartment in a fire. It was the landlord’s fault. I told him of the problem with the electrical wiring in the bathroom, but he wouldn’t do anything about it. I lost everything. Now I’m just beginning to pick up the pieces. I *can’t* be sick now...it’s scary.”

“It’s scary, how?” I asked.

“I keep two jobs and I work hard. But my employers don’t pay health benefits, vacation, or sick days. You get paid when you show up. As well, my husband doesn’t have a job. I can’t afford to lose the apartment. I’m telling you, just when things are beginning to pick up, this happens. I feel like killing myself.” As she said this, Janet held the pen in her hand as if it were a dagger. She brought it down forcefully, repeatedly towards her abdomen, as if she were stabbing herself. But I knew she was not suicidal. She was just frustrated and wanted to get back to her life.

“This is not the way things should go. It’s so sad to hear all this is happening to you,” I empathized.

“I couldn’t believe two weeks ago that I would be in the hospital or that something like this would happen to me...I have suffered a lot this year...It is horrible.”

“Yes, it’s tough.” I struggled for words. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just pray for me.”

“I will. You’ve been through a lot recently. I hear you saying that this year alone you’ve lost property through fire, you’ve been unfairly treated by a landlord, you’ve been forced to move out of an apartment because of a fire accident, and now you’re losing your health. But I also hear you saying, though not in words, that you are not despairing of life; you want to get back into life, be on your feet and at your post again. Is that correct?”

She nodded. I then asked if she would like me to pray with her, and she agreed to it. While I prayed, Janet sobbed quietly.

Dear God, this is a difficult time for Janet. It is so overwhelming to have to deal with all these issues at the same time: her health and not knowing what is going on, the recent loss of property to fire, the concern over her new apartment, lack of health benefits from her two jobs, her husband’s unemployment, the financial need, and the urgency of getting back to work. But You have promised to be our burden-bearer. I pray that You will help Janet through this ordeal and provide relief for the pain in her body and heart. I ask, dear God, that You shed light on the nature of her ailment and grant her doctors the wisdom to know what to do to hasten her recovery. I ask in Your name. Amen.

Three days later, Janet was a different person. The cause of her problem had been found, her body was responding to treatment, and she would be discharged the following day.

Is Janet’s story different from Anila’s in the previous chapter? Not really. Fear and anxiety pair well, like Siamese twins. While her

anxiety over the possibility of losing her apartment was of greatest concern, she was also battling with:

- (1) Fear of the unknown (Can she trust her own plans? Can she still say she is a healthy, energetic person who exercises and is strong?)
- (2) Anxiety (Will she lose the apartment? How soon will she be able to return to her job?)
- (3) Anger (She works at two jobs that do not care enough to provide her with health benefits)
- (4) Frustration (Why must this happen to her when she is just recovering from loss through fire and is just beginning to pick up the pieces?)
- (5) Helplessness (her husband being unemployed is not financially strong enough for her to lean upon)
- (6) Guilt (for overworking her body by keeping two jobs).

Janet's situation reminds of Job's in the Bible. While Job was just receiving the news of a tragedy, another would follow. Did Job deserve it? Did Janet? I did not know all the answers to give Janet, but tried to provide her with: silence, listening ears, a presence to share in the pain and grief, and pastoral prayer.

Frank

Frank, a fifty-seven-year-old white male, is lying in bed. This visit was my first contact with him. Frank readily agreed to my visit, so I drew up a chair and sat close to his bed.

"How are you today?" I asked.

"Getting better," he answered.

"Has it been pretty rough?"

"Yes," he nodded, looking forlorn.

"Tell me what's been happening."

Frank shifted his weight a bit in bed. "I have a rare problem

that enlarges the red blood cells,” he said in a measured tone. “I came in for treatment for infection.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, nodding my head in pity.

“But I’m not going to give up on life.” Frank sat up in bed with difficulty. Pausing after each sentence as if to gather strength, he continued, “I’m going to fight on. I mean, I’m a computer system designer. I designed the system in my office on Wall Street. They may have retired me, but they can’t take my brain from me.”

Frank looked me in the eyes. “They are paying fifty-five percent of my health insurance. My wife and I are planning to move upstate to live with my mother-in-law. She’s a nurse. The family has a farm—not big or well-managed for her age—but we can make something with it together.”

“This illness has altered your life somewhat,” I commented.

“Yes,” Frank paused, “but I’m not going to give up. My wife and I have co-authored a book. We can continue to write. And we’re planning to do more.”

“Are you angry with your employers for forcing you to retire?” I asked.

“They have *no* right to make me retire,” Frank sputtered, fighting back the tears. “You know how corporations operate—they use you to make money, then dump you. They call it ‘downsizing.’ So I am one of the pieces of dead wood. But they can’t retire my knowledge. I could consult for firms upstate or start my own consulting firm if I wanted.” He was quiet and after a pause added, “I had a stroke last year.”

I was surprised, for Frank was able to use all his limbs. “Stroke?” I questioned, “You don’t look like someone who’s had a stroke. You seem to be one hundred percent recovered.”

“My speech is slow and slurry.” This was true. I had some difficulty understanding him, but had imagined the problem was mine.

Frank was now fighting back tears. “You have to learn again the things you have known all your life,” he said. Frank began to

Every new day is an unknown. No one but God can tell what the hours of the day hold in store.

weep heavily. “I would have died but for my wife. I owe my life to her.” The tears streamed down his face.

I looked sympathetically at this broken man. “It’s been pretty rough for you. Tell me more about how you fought back.”

He took a deep breath. “It’s hard,” he admitted. “You wake up one morning and you can’t lace your shoes, can’t feed yourself. You can’t do the simple things you’ve done all your life. You become dependent all over again, like a little child...”

In Frank’s situation, there are two apparent issues going on: he must adjust to his losses, and he must face the unknown. Frank is leaving the glamour of Wall Street—the world of computers, peers, and professionals—for the dim prospect of managing a small farm. He will feel the loss of status, the loss of contacts, the loss of identity of the person he used to be and of the respect he used to feel. He now faces putting the pieces of his life together and tapping resources he never learned to develop. Starting life in a new environment, attempting a new vocation, living with your parents-in-law can all be frightening situations to face.

FACING THE UNKNOWN

The greatest part of our anxieties revolves around the unknown. How do we face or step into the unknown? Will someone or something hold us when we take the leap of faith?

Every new day is an unknown. No one but God can tell what the hours of the day hold in store. The unknown includes just about everything in life:

- getting to your office or school everyday
- starting your own business, hiring new employees
- making large purchases
- moving to a new community, church, or home
- the prospect of an illness
- new friendships, new tenants
- first dates, marriage proposals
- leaving your children in the hands of others

All of these, and a host of other experiences, take us on a journey into the unknown. Many situations in life are out of our control, and facing the unknown means that one is willing to pick up the pieces and navigate the future with what is left. When we step out in faith, we find that “*The eternal God is [our] refuge, And underneath are the everlasting arms*” (Deut. 33:27). Those everlasting arms, stretched out to humankind throughout the generations, are never tired and never fail. They supported Adam, Noah, Abraham, Job, Jeremiah, and Paul. And they will sustain any person today, as well.

The faithfulness of the living God is our guarantee for the unknown. As William and Gloria Gaither so fittingly wrote in their hymn “Because He Lives,”

*Because He [Christ] lives, I can face tomorrow
Because He lives, all fear is gone
Because I know He holds my future
And life is worth the living just because He lives.*

The second verse of the song reads:

*How sweet to hold a newborn baby,
And feel the pride and joy he gives,
But greater still, the calm assurance,
This child can face uncertain days
Because He lives.*

We’re all born into this world destined to “face uncertain days.” But because the Lord is faithful to the righteous (Ps. 37:25,26), and “*Because He lives,*” we can face every uncertain tomorrow.

Joshua Marches into the Unknown

After Joshua took over leadership from Moses (Josh. 1:1-11), he had to battle walled cities in Canaan, a place where giants lived. It was because of Israel’s fear of the giants that the previous generation, forty years earlier, could not possess the Promised Land.

Under Moses’ leadership, ten of twelve spies, elders of Israel, who scoped out Canaan returned with an unfavorable report. They

From the onset, without God in the equation, the prospects were not good for Joshua. But in spite of the unknown that lay before him, Joshua marched forward in faith.

described how the land had many strong and fortified cities, war-like people, and experienced armies.

A new generation faced similar challenges and the odds were against Joshua, the new leader. And in addition to the difficulties posed by the physical, social, and human infrastructure, the River Jordan had to be crossed at a time when the river overflowed its banks. As well, there was the possibility of a coalition of the city-states against Joshua.

I'm sure many questions whirled around in Joshua's head. Would the people of Israel keep their covenant with God? Covenant unfaithfulness was serious business (Josh. 7). Joshua could only speak for himself and his household (Josh. 24:15). Would the people rebel against Joshua's leadership? Many individuals had rebelled against the leadership of Moses, including those from the same tribe as Moses.

From the onset, without God in the equation, the prospects were not good for Joshua. But in spite of the unknown that lay before him, Joshua marched forward in faith. He remember what God had said to him after Moses' death:

Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel (Josh. 1:2).

“Arise, go over this Jordan.” This was Joshua's marching order from the Lord. And likewise, we have our mountains to climb, valleys to span, and rivers to cross. But God will not send anyone on an errand without giving him or her definite instructions. God's first charge to Joshua (Josh. 1:2) was for him to “arise”—to pick himself up, stop mourning the loss of Moses, to stop looking down.

“Go,” God said to Joshua. He seemed to be saying, *Joshua, stop procrastinating, stop living in the future; take the first steps in the direction of your destiny. Show your faith by your works. Go!*

God's instruction to Joshua was also specific—"go over this Jordan." God has not called you to do some vague thing. Nor has God called you to do everything that needs to be done.

When you are not sure of what God is saying to you or where He is leading you, it is easy to sway back and forth in indecision. But when you know where He is leading, you can turn your back on everything else and face what you are called to. That is why any amount of time spent discerning God's will is worthwhile. However, you don't have to spend your time trying to figure out what God wants you

to do tomorrow. Just be faithful and do to the best of your ability whatever He wants you to do today. I know personally what it means to feel like your life is "put on hold." But those times have turned out to be my most creative seasons, because I turned the "waiting periods" into "incubating periods."

The last word in the charge is "Jordan." The Jordan River seemed like the worst place to start for Joshua. Especially at that time of the year, the river was a natural defense for the Canaanites—the present occupiers of the land the Israelites believed God promised them. The Canaanites were certain that the over-flooding of the Jordan alone was enough to stave off any invasion for the next several months. When, therefore, the river gave way to the Israelites, the result was a great psychological blow to the inhabitants. Whatever your circumstance, God says to you: "Arise, and go over *this* problem into the unknown. For the Lord Himself will go with you."

• *God's instruction to Joshua was specific—"go over this Jordan."*

• *God does not call a person to do some vague thing.*

• *Neither does God call anyone to do everything that needs to be done.*

The unknown is always with us. But possibilities also exist in the unknown.

There comes the time when the “Jordan” a person is called to cross is the border between this life and the hereafter. The process of death and dying is the ultimate act of stepping into the unknown. But we can be sure that when the time of our death comes, God’s grace and presence will be there. God has not promised grace in advance but in our time of need. Whoever said it, said it right: “the way a person lives is the way he or she will die.” Therefore, to die like a saint, live like one; to die in God, live in God; to die in faith, live in faith. To die well, live well.

We will consider four basic truths for stepping into and exploring the unknown: (1) Possibilities Exist in the Unknown, (2) Resources Abound in the Unknown, (3) God Is Present in the Unknown, and (4) A Divine Compass Is Available for the Unknown.

Possibilities Exist in the Unknown

Be certain of this fact: the unknown has unfathomable possibilities. When you are on the threshold of the unknown, it feels like you’re in a straitjacket. But, if you dare to dream and to believe God, nothing can keep you bound. God said to Joshua, “*Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given you*” (Josh. 1:3). Until you explore the unfamiliar territories and regions outside your comfort zone you cannot fully comprehend the possibilities.

“Every” is an all-inclusive word. God said *every* place is yours if you will only move in. Unfortunately, the children of Israel did not possess all that they could have because they did not advance forward. They became complacent. They settled for the life of least resistance. They were intimidated. The cost was an expanse of land that could have been theirs.

Has life handed you a series of losses? Note them. Then ask yourself what you can do in spite of the losses or because of them.

One of the saddest regrets of life, especially in old age, is the thought of what a person could have become if only an opportunity had been seized earlier in life. If you knew you couldn’t

fail, what project would you undertake? The Israelites could have had the entire land, but they failed to move in. Don't let your music die in you; sing it!

When God mentions, "*the sole of your foot*," it's as if He's saying, "Get ready to move." God does not work when you refuse to move, because God desires to work in and through us. Many Christians who daily desire "the overcoming life" and claim promises of victory are unprepared to get into the battle of life. But how can you overcome without a struggle? "*Sole of foot*" signals a readiness to touch dirt, to be realistic. Our task is not going to be easy, but it *can* be done.

Just as the Israelites determined the extent of their inheritance, you, too, also determine your own inheritance: "Every place you move in to possess is yours," (Vs. 3). If you don't move, you don't possess. You are limited by *your own* vision and willingness. God cannot be blamed. God makes a way, but we must be willing to move. As the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 1:18-19), reminded: "*If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land*" (Isa. 1:19).

Has life handed you a series of losses? Note them. Then ask yourself what you can do *in spite of* the losses or *because of* them. Make new plans and set new priorities; bring closure to activities, relationships, or a lifestyle that you can no longer continue with. Plunge yourself into the unknown that beckons you with the assurance that possibilities *do* exist.

The promised possession for the Israelites was a geographic, physical, piece of land—"the land of Canaan." This land, originally inhabited by the Amorites, was promised to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 12:1-4; 15:7-21). Israel would eventually displace the Amorites and possess this land, not on the strength of their army, but by God fighting for them. In this land they would have rest, and from there they would discharge their God-given mission to reach out as God's ambassadors to other nations. It was described as the land that "flowed with milk and honey" because it was naturally rich and endowed for agricultural purposes. And it was called the "Promised Land" because God promised it to Abraham and his descendants even before Israel became an entity.

Today, each one of us has a promised possession from the Lord. Unlike the biblical Israelites, our promised possession is not physical or geographical, but spiritual. However, our own promised possession is still a place or state in life we attain, not by our strength or power, but by God fighting our battles. Coming into our promised possession makes us the temples of God: God lives in us, our souls find rest, and from this position of God living in and amongst us, we fulfill our mission to touch other lives as God's witnesses and His channels of blessing.

Resources Abound in the Unknown

Here you are at the brink of a new experience. What does the future hold for you in this new territory? This is what God said to Joshua with regard to the inevitable military expeditions he had to embark on: *“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you”* (Josh. 1:5).

Today, each one of us has a promised possession from the Lord.

The unknown has untapped power. The unlimited power of God is available to make you an un-crushable person (vs. 5).

(1) *God's unlimited power*: Scripture says, *“the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him”* (2 Chron. 16:9). Here we are reminded of God's commitment to show Himself in the life of anyone who trusts Him. Joshua declared at the close of his life that none of the precious promises of God had failed; God had kept them all (Josh. 23:14). Unlike human beings who may make good and well-intentioned promises but lack the power or long life to carry them through, God has unlimited power and eternal existence to back up His promises.

(2) *Untapped power within*: The power and qualities that Joshua did not know he possessed were released as he stepped in to take over the leadership of Moses. Joshua discovered that the same

God who had worked in and through Moses was willing to do the same for him as well. Opportunity for enlargement often comes clothed in some hard and arduous tasks, and only those willing to perform the service enjoy the advantage of growth.

A Harvard trained medical doctor, William James (1842-1910), also renowned as a philosopher, psychologist, and professor said,

Compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake. We are making use of only a small part of our physical and mental resources. Stating the same thing broadly, the human individual lives far below his limits. He possesses powers of various sorts which he habitually fails to use...the average person develops only ten percent of his or her latent mental ability.

From the law of averages, you could be using only about ten percent of your innate ability. But what if life takes away what is in the ten percent where you have developed competence? The reality of life may now force you to think in undeveloped areas of your mind that hold potential for new experience for you.

Have you ever come out of an interview or examination and felt you could have done better if you had put in a little more effort? That the result of the examination or interview did not reveal your true ability? I once promised my high school principal that I would do my best in an assignment he gave me. But he corrected me. He said he was not looking for my best, but for all I could do with the resources of time, talent, material, and money available to me at that particular time. My performance might not be my best, but it would be all that was within my power and means at that time. The impression I got was that I shouldn't settle for my "supposed best" because I could always "better my best" if I

Resources for the unknown include

- *God's unlimited power*
- *Untapped power within you*
- *God's unfailing promises*

pushed myself a little harder or rearranged my resources more prudently. The challenge is to do all you possibly can within the human and material resources available.

(3) *Unfailing promises*: There is power in a little promissory note or memo, depending on whose authority and integrity is behind it. All who walked with God had nothing to hold on to other than God's promises. But that was all they needed. God promised Joshua, "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life" (Josh. 1:5), meaning Joshua would be able to surmount every obstacle in his way when he trusted in God. Note also the scope of the promise: "...all the days of your life." Victory for Joshua and for us is not once, but lasts for all of life. In Joshua 23:9-10,14, we have the testimony that God's promise came true. We must believe that God's promise to Joshua is still His promise to us today.

Victory or success, in biblical terms does not mean one never experiences failures along the way. Only God never fails. Victory or success for a Christian is a testimony that in spite of, or because of, or through all our failures, God *is* with us, has been and will be our *help*. Even if the ship is battered or broken by the storms, it will finally come to harbor by some divine undergirding.

Simply put, victory is when we can look back and say that God's will has been done and His Kingdom has been established "through it all" (Andraé Crouch). Or, better still, victory is when we can stand still, look forward, and affirm that the will of God *will* be done and His Kingdom established *through it all*.

How can we have the power that makes a person un-crushable? The presence of God is the answer! (Isa. 40:31; Ps. 46:1; Isa. 41:10, 13; Matt. 28:18-19).

*God promises,
"My presence
will go with you,
and I will give
you rest"
(Ex. 33:14).*

God Is Present in the Unknown

God is transcendent, timeless, ageless, and eternal. In one breath, God perceives and comprehends the past, present, and future and He works out His will for each of our lives with His

understanding of the past, present, and the yet-to-be. Unlike nature and humankind, God is not subject to the constraints of space and time. He exists and acts simultaneously in the undated past, the present, and the unborn future.

God is not only present in the unknown, but all that is unknown to us is a familiar territory to Him. God gives us the same promise He gave the saints of old. It is the promise of His presence. God told Joshua, “*As I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you*” (Josh. 1:5b).

“I will be with you, I will not leave you, I will not forsake you.” Isn’t that comforting news?

God’s presence makes the difference in any situation (Isa. 43:1-4; Ps. 34:19; Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5; Rev. 3:20). Why or how? Because the Scriptures assure us that God’s presence is an *active* presence, not a helpless one:

‘The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace. ‘The angel of the LORD encamps all around those who fear Him, And delivers them. ‘God is our refuge and strength, A very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear’ (Ex. 14:14; Ps. 34:7; 46:1,2).

God mentioned His presence with Moses as a reference to help Joshua grasp the scope of God’s commitment to him as the new leader of His people. God assured Joshua, “As I did not fail Moses, I will not fail you. As I did not forsake Moses, I will not forsake you. Just think of Moses and remember my faithfulness to him. That is what you can expect.”

God’s faithfulness to Moses was demonstrated in a number of ways that Joshua could recall. At the Red Sea, God was present and proved Himself; no one but God could have made a highway in the seas (Ex. 14).

By the water of Marah, God was present. The Israelites had just witnessed the parting of the Red Sea, but suddenly another problem arose: the people were thirsty. Along the journey, they saw a body of water and ran to the spot. The water, however, was bitter. They cried out, and God had a solution. Moses was to throw a piece of wood

into the water, and the water would be drinkable. God used that occasion to reveal another attribute of the Godhead to the Israelites: He is the Lord who restores, the Lord who heals, and the Lord who transforms the bitter. He is *Jehovah-rapha* (Ex. 15:22-26).

And how about feeding millions of people in the wilderness? God rained down manna from heaven for forty years (Ex. 16). In spite of their rebellious nature, God continued to feed the people of Israel with this angel's food.

There were many more occasions that God provided for Moses while he was in leadership. And Joshua knew that. That is why, whatever happened, Joshua could rest assured in this little phrase from God: "*As I was with Moses, so I will be with you.*"

A Divine Compass Is Available for the Unknown

All is set for the journey. Possibilities exist, resources abound, and God is present. But which *way* does one move forward? There is a divine roadmap and compass for the journey. The unknown has an unfailing divine program.

God's program is not complicated. It is usually very simple to follow—so simple that we often discount it. How was Joshua to navigate his course into the future? We find some guidelines for Joshua to follow in Joshua chapter 1.

(1) *Be strong and of good courage* (Josh. 1:6,7,9). God said this repeatedly. If God has to repeatedly challenge someone to be bold and courageous, either the person demonstrates a serious lack of those virtues or the task at hand demands a dose of extra courage. Joshua must have felt unsure of himself stepping into the shoes of Moses. God encouraged him to be bold.

What is courage? George F. Pope, pastor of San Marino Community Church, wrote in *Guideposts*, following the September 11, 2001 terrorists attack and the collapse of the twin towers of the World Trade Center,

Courage is the basic virtue on which all others depend for vitality and life. Of what use is wisdom, if one hasn't

courage to act wisely? Of what value is love, if one hasn't courage to love? Of what end is truth, if one hasn't courage to speak it? Of what consequence is faith, if one hasn't courage to embrace it?

In the same issue, Chaplain Rick Kienholz wrote, "Courage is not the absence of fear. It is action in the face of fear."

Sometimes life forces us into a situation where our sense of confidence grows shaky, where feelings of inadequacy become glaring. At such times God's Word reminds us that our strength is in the Lord and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8). We are to be strong in the Lord, and in the power of His might and are to put on the whole armor of God (Eph. 6:1-11). Since Jesus is the fullness and completeness of the armor of God, we are to put on the Lord Jesus (Rom. 13:14) and are to "*be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus*" (2 Tim. 2:1).

(2) *Believe that God is at work in you.* "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). God said to Joshua, "*To this people you shall divide as an inheritance the land*" (Josh. 1:6). God was saying to Joshua, "You are able. You will do it." God believed in him and God believes in you. Why? Because God knows what He has put in you. Since you have God's Spirit in you, God is your teammate in the unknown.

It has been said that there is nothing a person cannot do successfully if people who believe in that individual surround him or her. I can attest to this statement firsthand.

In Nigeria, a fresh graduate, thirty years or younger from any tertiary institution of learning, is obligated to serve the country for one year, in any part of the nation that is different from the student's State of origin. This program, named the National Youth Service Corp (NYSC), is voluntary and stipendiary, but one cannot be employed by a government agency or reputable organization without producing the NYSC discharge certificate as a testimony of good citizenship. Participating in the scheme is an expression of patriotism and serves as a transition from student life to work life, also helping to connect students from many campuses and States.

Each cycle of the program starts off with an orientation camp that features man-o-war and paramilitary type of training exercises.

During my National Youth Service Corp orientation camp, there was a big log of wood on two tall walls. Only the instructors and

Guiding principles for the unknown

- *Be strong and of a good courage*
- *Believe that God is at work in you*
- *Live by the Word*
- *Aim for "good success"*
- *Have a positive attitude*
- *Be ready to act; stop procrastinating*
- *Have a working and workable plan*

paramilitary officers could scale the log. Many male corp members repeatedly tried to climb it, but failed. I did not make any effort because I was sure I would not be able to climb it, for I am not naturally athletic by any means.

But a lady corper standing by me looked at me and told me, "You can do it." She had already seen many macho men try and fail. Why she believed I could do it, I did not know.

Somebody believed I could do what no other person had done! And, believe it or not, all the adrenalin in my body roared into action, and I scaled over the log!

All eyes were on me. The lady said to me again, "I told you that you could do it." The first time, I hadn't landed too well, so I tried again and I did it again, this time with a better landing.

I was able to scale the log because someone believed in me. You may not find people around you who believe in you, but God believes in you. He knows that you are up to the task because He knows and believes in Himself, and you are made in God's image and likeness, reborn by the Spirit and being fashioned into the image of God's dear Son through the Holy Spirit.

Our confidence in God should and does lead to confidence in ourselves. The apostle Paul says,

I have strength for all things in Christ Who empowers me [I am ready for anything and equal to anything through Him

Who infuses inner strength into me; I am self-sufficient in Christ's sufficiency] (Phil. 4:13; Amp.).

God believes in you. And God is greater than all the forces against you combined. You and God form an unbeatable team.

(3) *Live the Word.* Learn the Word. Understand its principles and live by its precepts. Never underestimate it, (Josh. 1:7, 8). That is God's compass for your journey. God's simple program is interwoven into His law:

Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go (Josh. 1:7).

To live the Word means having it as your companion (Josh. 1:8). The difference between a successful Christian and one who is not, may very well be in their different priorities to the Word of God. All that God intends to do for us, and how God wants to fit us into His eternal program, will be revealed as we faithfully study and live by His Word.

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh. 1:8).

To live the Word implies meditating on it continually or habitually. Reading the Bible is like grazing; the animal bites and swallows, then the animal sits quietly and chews the cud. It regurgitates: brings what it has eaten up again, and chews it again and again. Swallows it and repeats the process several times. Meditation is like chewing the cud. One ruminates on the Word, brings it up in one's mind, and turns it around—asking questions, probing God on the meaning and daily application of the passage, praying over it, and seeking insight from the Holy Spirit and from available study guides.

Secular pastoral care emphasizes the importance and benefits of meditation, relaxation techniques, breathing exercises, guided imagery, body scan, and visualization techniques. Christian meditation is different from transcendent or Eastern meditation primarily in purpose and practice. The object of Christian meditation is the Bible—God’s inspired Word—and God Himself. Unlike Eastern meditation, the Christian does not strive to empty herself, or discover a god in herself. The Christian fills her mind with God, His Word, and she meditates on attributes of God and themes that connect her to God through the Holy Spirit and the Word. The more connected she is to this objective, personal God, the more she understands Him and His Word.

To live the Word is to expect results (Josh. 1:7,8). Joshua 1:8 tells us that if we meditate on the Word and obey its commands, we can expect to be prosperous and successful.

(4) *Aim for “good success.”* Christians need a radical understanding of success and failure. Our glossary of these words must reflect who we are as a people of God. “Good success” implies that God’s definition of success is not the same as the world’s definition. One may succeed in the eyes of the world but be a failure in God’s eyes. The world uses dollar power, political influence, talent, brainpower, and achievement, as a yardstick for measuring success, but God counts more on character, integrity, motives, faithfulness, and sacrifice. You may not be popular or famous, all eternity will bear testimony to your faithfulness.

(5) *Have a positive attitude.* Remind yourself of God’s charge to Joshua: “*Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go*” (Josh. 1:9). Keep your focus on the Lord. The fear that overcomes all fears is “*the fear of the LORD*” which is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10). Walk tall, chin up, because you are coupled to God.

(6) *Be ready to act.* Immediately following God’s instruction to Joshua, we read the phrase: “*Then Joshua commanded the officers*” (Josh. 1:10). Having received from God, Joshua swung into action and took charge. You also can take charge and move forward. You may not have all the answers, but if you wait until all

the pieces fit together before making a move, you may have to wait forever. Acting on a little light will shed more light along the way.

Things don't just happen without action. It is a law of physics that every action causes a reaction. But first, an action is needed to set things into motion. Newton's first law of motion states that an object will remain at rest or move at a constant speed in a straight line unless it is acted on by an unbalanced force. In science, nothing changes unless there is an outside force or a change agent introduced into the system to produce the change.

According to Newton's first law of motion, my computer will remain stationary in the same place it has been day and night, unless something or someone moves it. In real life, history is made, success is recorded, and circumstances are changed, only because there is an initial action that sets the ball rolling and some ongoing action that sustains the momentum. If you want to see change, then act. Do something. Stop procrastinating. Stop living in the future and wishing for a better time; the future is now! And there may not be a better time to act than now.

(7) *Have a working and workable plan.* Nothing gets done successfully without a plan or schedule. Have a plan, even if you continually review, adapt, or change it. Don't be a slave to your plan, but also don't discard it until you have given it a chance. Work your plan meticulously and conscientiously.

Above all, pray. God knows the appropriate strategy for every struggle and conflict we are engaged in. To ensure our victory, God is willing to give the plan to us if we will wait on Him. God knows the way through the wilderness of life. As we wait on God in prayer, He will enlighten our minds, kindle our spirits, and produce creative ideas in and through us to accomplish the goal.

Joshua was not a one-man army. He got the job done through people. In the process, both he and the people experienced growth and shared the joy of accomplishment. Joshua gave definite instructions to the officers to pass on to the people. In preparing the people, Joshua instilled confidence in them because he himself had been encouraged. Let your plan connect you to people. People are your best resource.

For every combat that we are engaged in, God has a simple program. It is for us to live in and by the Word, and let the Word live in us. Let the Word rule your life (John 15:7). It is still your attitude to the Word of God that determines true success in life.

Put your life in the hands of the One who sees, knows, holds, and controls all your unseen tomorrows. As you read the Word, it is more important to let the Word also read you.

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. Is there an unknown in your life that frightens you?
2. How may you better handle your anxieties in the light of what you have just read?
3. If, for whatever reason, you are prevented from performing in those familiar areas of your life where you have competence and expertise, how may you begin to navigate your course into the unknown?
4. Janet: "I couldn't believe two weeks ago that I would be in the hospital or that something like this would happen to me...I have suffered a lot this year." Frank: "You know how corporations operate—they use you to make money, then dump you. They call it 'downsizing.' So I am one of the pieces of dead wood." Have you ever been in Janet or Frank's shoes with regard to these statements? What helped you move past the experience? What did not help?
5. Identify two skills or abilities that you are convinced you possess which have not been developed because there has been no opportunity or pressure to use them.
6. How do you measure success? What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?
7. If you had to choose between God's presence and God's power, and could have one but not the other, what would be your choice? Explain.

3

• • Coping with Disappointments • •

(I'm Hurting)

*And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors
(Matt. 6:12)*

Nicholas

I visit with Nicholas, a well-educated Spanish man who speaks fluent English. Nicholas is in an isolation room in the hospital, so I have to wear a mask to visit with him.

After our exchange of pleasantries, Nicholas shares with me his story: “They still don’t know the problem”, he tells me with a sigh. “There is no infection, but I’m told I have a minute percent chance of TB. That’s why I’m put in isolation, just to be on the safe side.” He looks at me, a grave expression in his eyes. “I have had an elevated temperature...I know it’s the devil. I wouldn’t have come to the hospital, but they insisted at work that I should see a doctor.”

He pauses and then continues. “I had one year of theology but abandoned it. I was a member of a congregation before I moved to my present place in New Jersey. I’m still with that congregation in my heart,” he says sadly.

I was curious. “What keeps you from joining the worship again?”

I see Nicholas fighting tears. He wipes his eyes. “My wife thought I was looking at other women in the congregation. I always had to look straight ahead in church. If I looked sideways, she would say I was looking at someone. I couldn’t talk with any woman in the church...It was too much. So I stopped going to church, and now I listen to Christian programs on the radio.

“My wife likes her rock music,” he continues, “but I don’t think a Christian should listen to rock...I’ve started listening to rock music with her, hoping that she’ll listen to my Christian radio programs. But she’s always offended no matter how low I keep the volume.” He apologizes for his tears, but I reassure him that it’s all right.

“I believe God wants me to preach,” Nicholas says with some emphasis. “Before I moved to New Jersey, a friend invited me to preach in his church. I’m telling you, I don’t know where the message came from. It was the Lord who gave me the words to speak. It was amazing. Many souls came to the Lord when I gave the invitation. Later, the pastor said he would like me to work with him...” Nicholas’ voice breaks up. “Please excuse me.” He weeps silently.

“Nicholas, you made a big sacrifice to save your home; for the sake of your marriage, you left the church and your ministry. Do you think God was disappointed in you?” I believe this is the heart of the matter, so I take the risk to ask.

Nicholas begins to weep like a child. I refuse the urge to hold or touch him and just sit there and let him cry. Internally I feel his pain.

Nicholas finds his voice: “I found my way back to God two weeks ago, and I believe that it was genuine. I promised God I’d get back to church as soon as I leave the hospital. You see, I believe the sickness is a spiritual matter. It’s God chastising me...Maybe it’s the only way God could get my attention.”

Besides the medical diagnosis, Nicholas has other ailments buried in the deep recesses of his heart. Disappointment. Anxiety. Doubts. Fear. Shattered dreams. Unfulfilled goals. Unrealized potentials.

Michael

Michael is a forty-nine-year-old, single white male who had recently been admitted for alcohol detoxification in a program. Approximately one week before his latest admission, Michael was sent home, and immediately he started drinking vodka again. Two days prior to admission, he had woken up with pain in his left shoulder. However, Michael's pain worsened, so he was brought to the Emergency Room. The doctors surmised that Michael might have fallen out of bed in his sleep, injuring his shoulder and arm. But Michael could not recall any details of a fall, or how much he drank.

Michael was lying in bed when I walked in.

“Good morning. I'm Michael Ojewale. I'm a chaplain who visits with patients in this unit and chats with them about their hospitalization. Is this a good time to visit with you?” I asked.

“No!” he said flatly, holding up his arms. “It is *never* a good time to be visited by a chaplain.”

“Which means what, sir?”

“I'm an atheist.”

“Well, I talk to people of all religions and no religion. If you don't mind my visit, it doesn't bother me that you're an atheist. May I still visit with you?”

He shrugged, apparently disarmed by my response which he was unprepared for. I found myself a seat.

Forgiving another means that I make a commitment

- *To no longer mention the matter to the offender,*
- *To no longer discuss the matter with anyone else,*
- *To no longer recall the incident with bitter feelings;*
- *That I will not continue to nurse the pain,*
- *That I will not relish retelling or reliving the incident,*
- *But will be willing to put the matter behind me.*

“What’s happening?” I asked, making eye contact with Michael.

“Well, I have a lot of pain.” He paused. “And I’ve been treated wrongly by my doctor; those who take care of me have mistreated me.”

“Here?” I asked, cocking my head.

“Yes. I went to my doctor on Thursday, two weeks ago. He drew blood and did blood and urine tests. What he found was not good news, so he asked me to check into this hospital. But he has not come to see me yet.

“I came here yesterday. I paged him; he did not return the call. The hospital staff paged him; he did not return the call. I called my friends, and they paged him; he did not return the call! I feel abandoned by my doctor, my own professional of ten years.” He began to weep. “Is it something to do with me? Or, has he a personal or family problem?”

Michael’s voice grew in passion. “I came here through Emergency. I checked in at 11.30 a.m. I was brought from the Emergency to this place at 7.30 p.m. See my arms? Seven holes and IVs. I hate needles. They make me faint.

*Life is relational,
and hurt is
inevitable. If there is
no forgiveness, the
destructive forces of
an unforgiving
spirit will initiate or
compound health
problems. Bitterness
and resentment are
emotional drains
that weaken the
body's defenses.*

“The medical profession in America is fantasizing. It’s like religion. They believe in telling you what to do. Only those in the profession are experts. You’re not to question or use your own mind, even though it has to do with *your* body.”

I looked him in the eyes. “You seem to have a story of being abused or mistreated,” I said gently. I was glad he was opening up to me and I tried to stay with the theme he had brought up.

“My mother abused me,” he said with sadness in his voice. “When you’re a child you can’t question adults. You don’t have a voice. And

it's the same here. I have no power in this place.” The tears rolled off his chin. “I didn't have power to defend myself as a child, and my mother took advantage of me.”

His eyes locked into mine. “It has been my lifelong struggle to fight for people who have no power to regain their power—economic, class, racial, or whatever. It is my conviction that you shouldn't take people's power from them. And yet here am I; have no power over my life, and I believe a person should have power to control his life. I fight for people to regain their power in any arena, but here I am stripped of my power and abandoned!” He sobbed uncontrollably.

I visited Michael every workday and listened to his story as events unfolded with his treatment. Three recurring themes came up as Michael talked: denial, disappointment and abandonment. First, he was in denial as to the seriousness of his condition as an alcoholic. Second, he was disappointed and had difficulty trusting people. Then, after he eventually was forced by circumstances to begin to trust, it was as if he had been set up for another disappointment and abandonment. His primary care doctor, his employer, and a friend arranged for him to be discharged to a detoxification program with his reluctant agreement. These three were his friends of thirty years. His friends sought out a facility that had less emphasis on the Twelve Steps and Higher Power in its program because that was the only program Michael, an atheist, would consent to. After all that, the program would not accept Michael because at that time he still needed help walking and buttoning his shirt. The management of the facility made it clear it was not a nursing home and was only prepared to take Michael when he was fit enough to take care of his physical needs. That again shattered him. He felt he shouldn't have trusted his friends or consented to the arrangement in the first instance. But if he had not, he felt he would have hurt these long-standing friends and he had no other persons who cared for him like they did.

Emeka

Emeka, a desperate man from eastern Nigeria wrote to the Christian organization I worked for, seeking our counsel and

prayers. A girl by the name Ngozi had been engaged to Emeka, and he had been financially responsible for her schooling for about ten years at that time. They were to marry then, but Ngozi gained admission into a university and Emeka encouraged her to go for further studies. Here, too, he was financially responsible for her.

• *We are guilty of withholding forgiveness when we predicate our forgiving the person until he or she manifests certain behaviors.*

• *Any notion of granting forgiveness that is conditional— if, when, but, only if —is not good enough.*

Emeka's fiancée spent her holidays and vacations with him, with the knowledge and permission of her parents but things began to change in her third year. Ngozi no longer replied to her fiancé's letters as frequently as she had before. Then she began to give one excuse after the other for not visiting him during vacations. Emeka did not suspect a thing. He assumed her reluctance was caused by the rigors of academic studies. So he visited her on weekends.

On one such visit, Ngozi, now a young lady, told Emeka point-blank that she had doubts about their relationship and that she wanted to have some time off to herself to sort things

out. To make a long story short, Ngozi was in love with someone else at the university. She believed she was too young when she made her earlier commitment and was now mature enough to make her own. Before, she had gone along to please her parents.

Just before Ngozi graduated, she became pregnant by her new lover. Emeka was shattered. Hopes and dreams he had nurtured for ten years went down the drain. He wanted Ngozi back. He had waited so long for her, had been committed and devoted. *How was he to start again with another girl at his age?* he wondered. He had made so much investment in terms of money, time, and his very life. *What was he to do to win back his bride? How would he put his own life that was now in disarray back on track? If he eventually lost Ngozi, could he trust another woman again?*

Philip Yancey concludes his book *Disappointment With God* by calling attention to the fact that life is full of disappointments. He says that the choice is not to avoid disappointment, however, because there is no such option. The choice is either to be disappointed *with* God, or to be disappointed *without* God.

Of these three persons—Nicolas, Michael and Emeka—who can you relate to the most?

COPING WITH DISAPPOINTMENTS

To Forgive and Be Forgiven

Life is relational, and hurt is inevitable. How can we heal when we're hurt by others? Through forgiveness and reconciliation. If there is no forgiveness, the destructive forces of an unforgiving spirit, bitterness, and resentment will initiate or compound health problems. Bitterness and resentment are emotional drains that weaken the body's defenses, leading to further complications of health problems. Many patients are in mental institutions and on hospital beds for the simple reason of guilt and unforgiveness; they withhold forgiveness or refuse to forgive themselves or others.

We are commanded to forgive one another "*as God in Christ forgave*" us (Eph. 4:32). God, in Christ, forgave us totally, completely, unconditionally, and with no strings attached. And that is how we should forgive, too.

We are guilty of withholding forgiveness even when we are willing to forgive but predicate our forgiving the person until he or she manifests certain behaviors and actions. Any notion of granting forgiveness that is based on conditions such as, "I will forgive if...", "I will forgive when...", or "I forgive but..." is not good enough.

Dare to Be a Joseph

Anytime I think of Emeka, the man who wrote to us about his heartbreak over his fiancée, I am reminded of Joseph, the foster father of our Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Emeka's story helps me

better understand the situation of Joseph. Joseph also had his personal dreams shattered, only this time by none other than God.

Shattered Dreams

Before we can understand Joseph's situation, it is important that we understand Jewish marriage during Bible times. There were three steps in a Jewish marriage at the time of the birth of our Lord. First, the two families of the husband and wife-to-be agreed to the union. The parents often did this while the pair was still very young. After this agreement, the man and woman became betrothed. A public announcement was made that the woman was espoused to the man. This commitment was stronger than our present-day engagement because, even though sexual relations were not yet permitted, the betrothal could only be broken by death or a legal divorce. Unfaithfulness at this point was treated the same way

as fornication or adultery, and it carried a sentence of death by stoning. Finally came the wedding, at which time the couple would begin to live together.

Joseph had known Mary, his betrothed, for many years. All arrangements with the two families had been settled. His friends and colleagues were aware of he and Mary's plans. Joseph worked hard to save money for the wedding. He was proud of his fiancée and looked forward to the time when they would begin their life together.

It was at this time that Mary returned from her visit to Elizabeth, having been away for three months (Luke 1:56). She

- *Anger is not necessarily sinful.*
- *If a relationship has caused you pain—and you are frustrated, hurt, and angry—admit it. It's okay.*
- *The capacity to be angry is God-given.*
- *Even God shows anger.*
- *However, God's anger is not the same as ours (James 1:20).*

conferred privately with Joseph and informed him that she was three months pregnant, since an angel of God told her she had been favored to give birth to the promised Messiah. She could not tell Joseph before she left because she partly doubted the whole thing and needed the confirmation. By this time, Mary had had three months of solitude, away from family to meditate. Mary's visit with Elizabeth and Zacharias, who were now expecting their first child after a similar angelic visit, had helped to confirm her experience.

Joseph was hearing the news for the first time. His espoused wife reappeared after three months with a story that broke his heart: she was pregnant! *What would happen to the wedding plans? Why didn't the angel choose someone else, for goodness' sake?*

Joseph's world had ground to a halt. He had trusted Mary. It was a shame for her to be pregnant before marriage. And then this story of the virgin birth? What nonsense! He'd have to dissociate himself from the pregnancy; otherwise he'd share in the blame. Though he cared for Mary, he resolved to divorce her quietly to relieve her from public humiliation.

Joseph couldn't sleep for many nights after he heard Mary's news. As he tossed and turned on his bed, he remembered the furniture he had made for their new home. Mary had made the suggestions about the kitchen counter and cabinets. The two had worked like a team in preparing for their new home. But now...

How did Joseph handle the confusion and hurt? What lessons do we learn from his life?

Handling Hurt and Disappointment

Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to

him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS. (Matt. 1:19,20,24,25).

Several biblical principles derived from Joseph’s response are applicable to situations where we hurt in relationships and when our hopes and dreams are shattered. Principles are truths that are applicable in many specific situations. You need to ask yourself how these principles or a particular one may be helpful in your present situation.

A SPIRIT-CONTROLLED
LIFE IS THE BEST ANGER
MANAGEMENT
RESOURCE

When we yield to the Spirit’s leading, we will be enabled to respond biblically to personal hurt.

In any situation, the Holy Spirit desires to produce in us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22,23).

The Principle of Honesty, Justice, and Mercy.

(1) *Joseph was a just man.*
(See Matt. 1:19).

“*Being a just man*” (Matt. 1:19), Joseph was honest about the issues he faced. He acted justly and mercifully in his reaction to Mary’s “wrongdoing,” making a decisive step to keep Mary’s best interests in mind, even though he was confused and hurt. However, he could not deny his feelings, either. Understandably, Joseph was upset and angry. Angry enough, in fact, to call off the entire wedding!

We must understand that anger is not necessarily sinful. If a relationship or an event has caused you pain—and you are frustrated, hurt, and angry—admit it. It’s okay. The capacity to be angry and to passionately desire a change is God-given, for we know that even God gets angry. In fact, the Old Testament is replete with examples of God’s anger and wrath (Ps. 7:1);

and we know that Jesus, too, expressed anger, especially when He saw how the Temple was being abused (John 2:14-17).

However, God's anger is not the same as ours (James 1:20). His anger is a holy and righteous response to sin, and it works for our own good. Though it gives us brief discomfort, it may bring us to repentance. In addition, His grace and mercy surpass and outweigh His anger. The Bible tells us, "*But You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love*" (Neh. 9:17b; NRSV). "*For His anger is but for a moment; His favor is for a lifetime*" (Ps. 30:5a; NRSV).

Anger is not the same as rage. The Bible does not say we cannot get angry; it does say, however, that we should not be quick to anger (James 1:19-20) or to let our emotions get out of control. The Bible tells us, "*Be angry, and do not sin: do not let the sun go down on your wrath*" (Eph. 4:26); meaning: do not be consumed and preoccupied by your anger.

Some erroneously believe that it is wrong for a Christian to be angry. Thus, they hide, conceal, or deny their anger. The fact, however, is that we all get angry at one time or another. But the issue is not our anger, but what we do with our anger.

So what *do* we do with our anger? According to H. Norman Wright in his book *Communication: Key to Your Marriage*, there are at least four ways we can handle anger: we can suppress, repress, express, or confess it. However, expressing and confessing our anger are the healthiest ways to deal with it.

So how do we do that? The key is in submitting and surrendering to the Holy Spirit so we can be filled, led, controlled, and empowered by the Spirit of God (Eph. 5:18). By giving ourselves over to the Spirit's leading, we will be enabled to respond biblically to personal hurt. Possessed by the Holy Spirit, we thereby are empowered to bear, or produce evidence of the Holy Spirit, which is: love, joy, peace, longsuffering or patience, gentleness, goodness, faith or faithfulness, meekness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22,23).

This fruit or product of a Spirit-controlled life is God's provision to keep our anger from turning into sin. The Bible warns against unchecked anger, commanding us to deal with it:

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.... But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth (Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8).

- *Sometimes the people who hurt us really deserve to be paid back in their own coins.*
- *But as children of God, we need to take a different line of action.*
- *What if God would get even with us?*

Unchecked sin causes much grief to both the person sinning and to those who come in contact with him. Thus, when we see anger in ourselves or others, we must deal with it head-on with the help of the Holy Spirit, and by following God’s example of justice and mercy.

Joseph, “*being a just man*” (Matt. 1:19), pursued justice with honesty and mercy. Justice is doing unto others as you would desire them to do to you in the same situation. It speaks of fairness and seeks to right a wrong in the spirit of grace and mercy. And Joseph did just that in his dealings with Mary. To

demonstrate that we are truly God’s children, we must be seen as honest people who show justice and mercy, even at our own expense and cost, and in spite of our anger and hurt.

The Principle of Sensitivity and Self-Examination

(2) *Joseph was a just man with a sensitive conscience.* (Matt. 1:19.)

Joseph was just and righteous, but he was also sensitive, and so was able to bear with the supposed failure of Mary.

Joseph shows that it is not enough to be a just person. Sensitivity and vulnerability are important ingredients to communal living. A person who pursues justice but lacks the capacity to feel or empathize is a dangerous individual. It is this lack of sensitivity that causes self-righteous people to deal harshly with those who have problems and

moral failures that they do not. Without a sensitive conscience, it is easy to draw the conclusion, “That can never happen to me! Robbery? Fornication? Murder? Not me! Not in this life. I would never stoop to that level.” But the truth is, while you may not be *guilty* of the “big” sins, the *seed* for those sins, the *tendency* toward those big moral lapses is present in you as it is present in all of us.

Look at King David, the Psalmist, “*a man after [God’s] own heart*” (1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22). David never imagined that he could in one night commit adultery with the wife of one of his faithful soldiers, plot the murder of the woman’s husband, and in broad day light, add the woman to his harem. But he did. Everyone is capable of huge moral failure.

It is easy to keep a sensitive conscience, however, if your righteousness is truly of Christ. You cannot remain sensitive to others if you forget what and where you were when the Lord found you, and what you could have been had it not been for the Lord’s grace and mercy.

When someone hurts you, examine your own heart and ways and be willing to leave room for human frailty and failure. It is human to err. Have the integrity to admit that there are ways in which you, too, have failed or sinned against other people and need their forgiveness. Besides, you owed God a bigger debt, which He forgave you through Christ. Thus, we, too, must be ready to grant forgiveness to others—even before they ask or ever will.

The next time someone hurts you, be sensitive and take account of your own failures. Dare to be a Joseph!

The Principle of Selflessness

(3) *Joseph clothed his right under law with a selfless concern for another.* (See Matt. 1:19.)

Mary was Joseph’s wife, according to the biblical description of their relationship. But she had been found with child, and it was not Joseph’s. She had supposedly cheated on her husband. And the law stipulated that she should be stoned for such an act. (Deut. 22:23,24). But Joseph was willing to put his own interests aside. Joseph, “*not*

wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly” (Matt. 1:19).

- *We cannot neglect our God-given responsibility to take care of our physical body and inner life and claim to do God's will.*
- *If you don't nourish yourself, who will?*

Sometimes the people who hurt and disappoint us really deserve to be paid back in their own coins. They deserve to be shown that the law is on our side in the matter. We feel justified that they need to know that we are not fools and cannot be taken for a ride. It boils down to this: commit not to seek revenge.

As children of God, we need to take a different line of action. What if God would get even with us? What if God would mark iniquity or keep our sins ever before Him? As

the Psalmist says,

If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, That You may be feared (Ps. 130:3,4).

Like Joseph, we need to temper justice with mercy. We need to sacrifice our right for love’s sake and go the “extra mile.”

If we are selfless and mature, having inner fortitude and a sure sense of security, we can let go of our personal rights when tempers and reason dictate otherwise. By God’s grace we can do it.

The Principle of Self-Care

(4) *Joseph looked out for himself, after his own interest and good name* (See Matt. 1:19.)

Joseph “*was minded to put...away*” Mary (Matt. 1:19), if only to protect his own image and credibility. He was, however, going to do so secretly to protect her.

Joseph sought a balance between his own needs and Mary’s. He was authentic because, even in his marital life, Joseph was impor-

tant to *Joseph*. He had a responsibility to protect and take care of himself, and he made sure he did this.

Jesus, too, instructs us to take care of ourselves. When the pressure of ministry was so high that Jesus' disciples didn't have time to eat, Jesus called a "time out" and instructed them to take a break:

Then the apostles gathered to Jesus and told Him all things, both what they had done and what they had taught. And He said to them, "Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while." For there were many coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. So they departed to a deserted place in the boat by themselves (Mark 6:30-32).

"Come aside... and rest a while." This is self-care; it is the other side of selflessness. While we must shun selfishness, self-absorption, and narcissism—and strive for selflessness—as a general rule, we must be cautious not to pursue selflessness at the risk of our own selves. We cannot take lightly our God-given responsibility to take care of our physical body and inner life (soul, mental, and emotional health) and claim to do God's will. Generally, first and foremost, you are responsible for you—the person in your mirror. This is what self-care is about.

Self-care takes different forms, depending on a person's circumstances and needs. For some it may be as simple as taking a walk, visiting a friend, or listening to music. For others, self-care may mean saying "No" and not feeling guilty about it, or it may mean choosing which battle to fight and which to let go of. Even Jesus had to do this. Luke's Gospel records an incident when Jesus refused to be involved in a matter that was not central to His mission: "*One from the crowd said to Him [Jesus], 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.' But He said to him, 'Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?'*" (Luke 12:13-14). Jesus refused to meddle into this man's family affair, because doing so would distract Jesus from His goal. Jesus knew His mission and directed His energy into fulfilling it.

The bottom line is: if your needs are not being met, how will you have the inner resources to take care of others? And if you fail to take

care of yourself, who will? People who need help will be better served by a person who shows respect and interest in his or her own life. It is a double loss if you lose yourself trying to “save” somebody else.

Take time to nurture your own spirit. Rest your body. Refocus your energy. You will be doing yourself and those you care for a big favor, because only then can you truly be there for them.

The Principle of Contemplation

(5) *Joseph did not act on impulse; he gave the matter consideration.* (See Matt. 1:20.)

When you have been let down or cheated, a natural impulse is to act in the heat of the moment, to strike back. The world says, “Trust your gut instinct.” Though this is often good advice, it’s not necessarily the best thing to do when you’re hurting. Wisdom often requires restraint, time to gather more facts and analyze your feelings

When you are hurting, remember the principle of

- *Honesty*
- *Sensitivity*
- *Selflessness*
- *Self-care*
- *Contemplation*
- *Openness*
- *Surrender*
- *Forgiveness*
- *Self-control*

honestly. When you find out what’s going on inside of you, you don’t have to act on it. Weigh the matter again. Sleep on it. Pray about it. What are your new insights from prayer? What is honoring to God? What will be redemptive to the person? What will promote “brotherly kindness”? Try and put yourself in the other person’s shoes and view the situation from his or her perspective.

The natural, human response is to hit back when you’re hit. It doesn’t take great strength to do that—even little children hit back. However, it takes a great deal of strength to hold back, or, as Christ taught on the Sermon on the

Mount, “to turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:39; Luke 6:29). Restraint is always a better virtue. For a moment, put your interest secondary and find a way to help your erring brother or sister. Don’t forget that whatever you sow will someday come back to

you. Someday you will stand in need of compassion, help, forgiveness, or mercy. Such seeds that you have sown may then return to you in a bountiful harvest.

It stands to reason that Job's immediate response to the tragedies that befell him couldn't have been out of impulse but was the result of contemplation and deep reflection. After Job had heard the sad reports of his losses, "*Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped*" (Job 1:20). He what? Worshiped? In no way was that a natural response to tragedy. Job could have reacted in a number of ways, one of which was to curse God to His face as Satan had insinuated (Job 1:11; 2:5), or to "*curse God and die*" as Job's wife counseled (Job 2:9) him to do. But Job knew that what he had lost would be nothing compared to what he stood to lose if he lost his faith. Job kept his mind focused on God and "*did not sin nor charge God with wrong*" (Job 1:22; see also 2:10). Then Job said, "*Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD*" (Job 1:21). Job illustrates to us that it is not what happens to us that matters most but how we internalize and respond to it.

The Principle of Openness

(6) *Joseph was open to the Lord.* (See Matt. 1:20-21,24-25.)

Mary's news of pregnancy caused many sleepless nights for Joseph. On one of those nights when Joseph finally fell asleep after tossing and turning, God sent an angel to Joseph to give him information and further instruction on the situation regarding Mary.

An angel! Joseph would have to be quite open to God's leading in order to believe that what he saw was real, and to believe that God was speaking to him through this celestial being.

God always has His own way of handling a matter. He may not send a message through an angel, but He does speak to us through His Kingdom workers on earth. Sometimes a friend or family member, a pastor, or even a complete stranger will come to us with a message that resonates with our hearts as divine or God-sent.

What do you do when you have a problem? Perhaps you have not considered all the options. Sometimes you may need to pray for God to lead you to Scripture that speak to you. At other times, you may need to seek godly counsel. The writer of Proverbs tell us,

Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.... Without counsel, plans go awry, But in the multitude of counselors they are established.... For by wise counsel you will wage your own war, And in a multitude of counselors there is safety (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6).

When we are heavy-laden with problems, it is easy to blame God. We wonder why *we* have this particular problem, why *we* are suffering. 1 Corinthians 10:13 tells us that our problems and situations are not unique:

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

God has not promised to supply us grace or provision ahead of our need, but "in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Be open to God's solutions. Though you may feel that you "can't take it anymore," God says you will not be tempted beyond your ability. He has promised to strengthen you through the Holy Spirit. And He tells you He "*will also make the way of escape.*" We should understand, however, that God has not promised

to supply us grace or provision ahead of our need, but "in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

"*God is faithful.*" He will provide a solution, but perhaps not in the way you expect. Don't close your mind to options and possibilities that are out of your range of experience. Like Joseph, be open to His way.

The Principle of Surrender

(7) *Joseph was obedient to God and submissive to God's sovereignty.*

"Then Joseph... did as the angel of the Lord commanded him" (Matt. 1:24). Joseph obeyed. He surrendered. Though his action wouldn't necessarily meet popular approval, he was still going to do God's will.

We can learn from Joseph's example. Commit to obey God even when your natural instinct and common opinion point to the contrary. Commit to obey God even when doing so is painful. Don't say with Peter, *"Not so, Lord!"* (Acts 10:14). If God is Lord of your life, then say, "Yes, Lord!"

Think in terms of what Jesus would do. Jesus prayed, *"Not as I will, but as You will"* (Matt. 26:39b). Jesus taught His disciples to pray, *"Your kingdom come. Your will be done On earth as it is in heaven"* (Matt. 6:10).

I first developed this chapter when I was going through a hurtful experience. I had entrusted to another Christian a large sum of money that I borrowed, and I was made to regret my naïveté and pay dearly for it. It is possible that I could have been divinely shielded from this experience, for I know my heavenly Father is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and all-kind. He loves me so much and knows me so well that all the strands on my head are numbered and not one of them will fall to the ground without His permission. Because I know He loves me this much, I can believe that no hurt can come to me unless that which God allows for a purpose. Though I may be deeply hurt, I can take solace in the fact that God knows all about it.

Do *you* believe God is sovereign?

"Yes, Lord!"

Then surrender.

The Principle of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

(8) *Joseph risked involvement.*

Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife (Matt. 1:24).

Amazing. Joseph could have waited to reopen the marriage negotiations, but he believed the Lord's word and took the risk of involvement. Though some men would never have been able to love an "illegitimate" child, Joseph accepted both Mary and the son he did not father.

Sometimes our best prayer is simply, "Yes, Lord. Thy will be done. Amen."

Many Christians "forgive" too quickly, doing so simply because the Bible commands them to do it. Then they wonder why their acts of forgiveness do not seem to last, why old wounds readily surface when the offender comes to mind or sight, and why they have to keep struggling to "forgive." Why does this sometimes happen? It is because they forgive simply to take care of themselves, to rid themselves of guilt. They are not actually interested in the other party—only in themselves and their own needs—and they are not willing to invest in the relationship anymore.

The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation (Adams, 1973; p. 63-70; 1979; p. 184-232). The Bible tells us, "*If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men*" (Rom. 12:18). If reconciliation is not sought and pursued by the forgiver, the forgiveness granted is open to question.

God forgives us in an act of bringing us back into relationship with Himself. God did not forgive us and keep us at a distance. He adopted and brought us into His family as proof that we have been forgiven.

The test of forgiveness is how willing we are to be fully reconciled to the person, and how willing we are to work together to build a new relationship with the person. Building a relationship or working to restore a broken relationship involves a big risk, but we

must be willing to risk it if we are to be truly biblical in doctrine and practice. God knows we will still commit sin after being forgiven, but He does not act on that fact or let it prevent Him from seeking fellowship with us.

Forgiving another means that I make a commitment to no longer mention the matter to the offender, to no longer discuss the matter with anyone else, and most importantly, to no longer bring the matter up in my mind anymore. That is, I will not continue to nurse the pain; I will not relish retelling or reliving the incident, but I will be willing to put it behind me. It is when we take this approach that forgiving approximates forgetting.

Our Lord Jesus teaches us to put reconciliation before worship or service. At any time when we remember an offense, or when we are prompted by the Holy Spirit that we have offended a brother, the Lord puts the burden on us to seek reconciliation (Matt. 5:23, 24; 18:15-35; Luke 17:1-10). The Bible leaves no room for loose ends in relationships among God's people. The only option is love and reconciliation.

The Principle of Self-Control

(9) *Joseph exercised self-control.*

“And [Joseph] did not know her [had no sexual relations] till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name JESUS” (Matt. 1:25).

I know that some pre-marital counselors advise newlyweds not to have intercourse on the night of their wedding because the couple will be too tired from the wedding ceremonies. Personally, I do not give such counsel because I don't know how to ask two young Christians, who have saved their virginity for one another in obedience to God, to wait any longer once the “restriction” is off.

• *The goal of forgiveness is reconciliation.*

• *If reconciliation is left out of the equation, the forgiveness granted is open to question.*

However, we see Joseph doing just that. He waits. He decides to refrain from sexual contact with his wife *not only* on their wedding night, but even during the first weeks and months of their marriage! What kind of honeymoon is that? Why would he do that?

Joseph controls himself out of reverence for God and for the child—the Messiah—who was to be born. To him, the virgin birth was a shared responsibility. And he would respect that.

How we control our sexual drive and desires are often an indication of the measure of control we have on other areas of our life. Because God has made us whole people, a problem in one area of our life often affects attitudes in other areas of life as well. Ask someone their views and practices on sex, and it will tell you a lot about the person.

Unfortunately, many people have a warped concept of sex. And the misconception over sex has been further aggravated by the feelings-oriented culture in which we live, which tells us, “If it makes you feel good, do it.” Seeking to promote a new morality, it places a higher premium on unrestrained expression of feelings rather than responsible living according to standards. As a result, we have many “victimless” crimes, because all parties “feel good” about their acts.

But what would happen if I lived strictly on my feelings? If I go by my feelings, I wouldn’t report to work on time most days, or maybe some days I wouldn’t go to work at all! But if I didn’t work, what would happen to my family? Though I don’t always feel like going to work, I go to work out of devotion and responsibility to my family. The good feeling follows my decision to report for another day.

As volitional beings made in the image and likeness of God and capable of making moral judgments, we are not expected to gratify all the desires we have, but to put them under control. It takes resurrection power to resist the world’s pressures and urges, but through the help of the Holy Spirit, we can live in obedience to God.

Be a Joseph. Control your urges and desires out of responsibility and respect to those around you, and out of reverence to the Lord of your life.

Personal Commitment

I want to be a Joseph. I want to be a person of integrity. I refuse to be vengeful or repay evil for evil. I make a commitment to build and strengthen relationships with people, to honestly search my own heart for seeds of sin before pointing the finger at someone else. I commit to the sovereignty of God my Father, who loves me, and will do what is best for me and for His glory. I make a commitment to be reflective and not to act on impulse. I commit to seek and desire no intimacy that is unbiblical. I dare to be a Joseph. How about you?

Above all, I dare to make a commitment to Christ who has already made a commitment to me.

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. What memories do this chapter bring up in you? Are they matters that have been resolved, or are they still buried?
2. What new commitments are proper for you to make at this time in your life?
3. Nicholas: "I believe the sickness is a spiritual matter. It's God chastising me...Maybe it's the only way God could get my attention." Have you ever said similar words or felt the same way as Nicolas felt? How is your story similar?
4. What do you do with your anger? Do you express, confess, suppress, or repress it? How can you use anger creatively? (Read 1 Samuel 11:1-15 as an example. "The Spirit of God came upon Saul...and his anger was greatly aroused" (vs. 6).
5. The secular community offers seminars on "anger management." How is that different or similar to a biblical understanding of being controlled by the Holy Spirit?
6. Is there anyone you need to forgive or seek forgiveness from? How soon will you do that?

7. List at least three things you can do to promote caring for yourself.
8. How biblical and God-honoring is your sex life? What is your understanding of your sexuality? Discuss this with your spouse (if applicable).

4

• • From Despair to Hope • •

(I'm Fed Up)

*Why are you cast down, O my soul?
And why are you disquieted within me?
Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him (Ps. 42:5).*

It was just after New Years. I was a chaplain intern in a hospital in New York City. In my naiveté, I thought the beginning of the year meant chances for me to meet with many patients who would express their gratitude for seeing another new year. This, however, was not always the case...

Larry

I met with Larry, a seventy-six-year-old Jewish male. It was his tenth day in the hospital. He has a low hemoglobin, rectal bleeding, and burns on his lower abdomen from scalding water, and his forehead is covered by a bandage to protect the wound he received in a fall.

When I asked if I could visit with him, he dismissed me by saying, "I'm Jewish." I asked him if he was letting me know of our religious differences, or if he meant that he did not want me to visit.

But when I asked how he was doing, more on a social level than pastoral, Larry blurted, “I’m tired. I can’t fight anymore. Let me die, for the suffering is too much.” He paused. “It’s a bad world, you know. It makes no sense. There’s no meaning in this life.” Larry went on to tell me what had been happening to him. “It’s too much. I’ve had enough. Let me go. I know when I die I’m not going to heaven,” he concluded.

“You sound angry,” I said, trying to get Larry to talk about his feelings.

“I *am* angry! Everything makes me mad!” he retorted.

“You’ve really had it up to here,” I told Larry. “It seems whatever can go wrong is going wrong with you,” I said, trying to be as empathic as I could.

“Yeah. And I don’t want to make myself available for that kind of nonsense anymore. Let me die!”

Still trying to understand Larry’s emotions, I said, “Please correct me if I’m making a wrong assumption; the question I hear you ask as you look at your life is: what kind of life is this?”

“Yes. And I’m saying it’s meaningless, useless, empty—nothing! Not just my life but life in general. The whole purpose of life is an expensive joke. I don’t want anymore of it. It’s meaningless to continue to suffer like this...I only pity my wife. She’s the only one I’m sorry for.”

“No doubt you are very concerned about your wife. Do you want to talk a bit more about that relationship?”

“Well, it’s for her sake that I haven’t taken any drastic action. She’ll be lonely when I’m gone. I feel sorry for her. I know I’m not going to heaven when I die, but just let me die! Let me out of this mess!”

“It seems you’ve been thinking a lot lately about heaven, life, death, and the hereafter. Is that true?”

“Yeah! I’ve been battling with one problem after another and I’ve been losing every one. What’s the point in continuing to fight when you know you’re going to lose in the end? Confined to this place, I have been doing some soul-searching. It’s no use trying to deceive myself or fool anybody. I’m not religious! That’s the choice

I've made and I'm ready to live with its consequences.”

“You are honest and down to earth, Larry. What's it like for you to admit to yourself that you're not going to heaven?”

He looked at me. “It's the way I've laid my bed...but it doesn't matter anymore.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I've been a bad boy.” His eyes looked deadpan. “Heaven is not for my kind.”

“In my own belief system, there's room for change. Isn't there something like that in your faith?”

“It's too late for me,” he countered. “Change? From my former life? It's too late. I told you, I'm not religious. You cannot undo what you have done.”

“I agree with you in that. But in my Faith, God forgives you of the past, wipes it away, and gives you a clean, new start, as if you had never sinned. I believe Christianity and Judaism have a lot in common in our traditions, don't you think so?”

Larry's philosophy was clear. “If you have killed somebody and you say, ‘I am sorry,’ will that bring back the dead? No. You cannot undo the past. I know I'm not going to heaven, but it doesn't matter anymore. We can't make excuses for ourselves. The way a person lives is the way he will die.”

“I agree with you that saying ‘I'm sorry’ will not bring a dead person back to life. But it may bring the murderer back to himself or herself, and back to God.” I responded.

Larry and I talked some more before I asked him if he'd like me to pray with him.

“No, thank you,” Larry replied. “It won't help. I'm not religious.”

My heart bled for Larry when I left him. By the nature of hospital chaplaincy, I'm not supposed to be judgmental or bring in “my own agenda.”

But what religious leader can remain passive when a person is seriously contemplating the hereafter? While I tried not to impose my

Suffering has a way of blinding us and deadening our sensitivity to everything but our pain.

own beliefs on Larry, I pondered the power of God's forgiveness and what a difference knowing Christ makes in life and in death. In Christ, opportunity is available to Larry or to any other person. There is joy in knowing our sins are forgiven.

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit. "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more" (Ps. 32:1, 2; Heb. 8:12).

Elsie

Elsie, a fifty-six-year-old black woman, is on her third day in the hospital. Her eyeballs are bleached and bulging. She has applied powder generously to her left shoulder, giving her a ghostly look, like a shell of her former self. Medical charts indicate that Elsie was hospitalized in 1964, and has had serious health problems since 1992. Her present medical problems include dehydration, vomiting, weakness, and emphysema. On top of that, she has had colon cancer since 1992 and had chemotherapy several months ago. When I see her, she is lying in bed, covered to her shoulders in blankets.

"I'm fed up," she begins. "I want to die. There's no reason for me to live." She looks away. "My family says I shouldn't talk like this, but I don't have the will to live. I mean, is there any point to continue when your life is gone? This is no life! I'm helpless. I watch myself lose weight, and just wasting away..."

She shakes her head. "I have three grandchildren, and I love them. But now I can't help anybody. So I want to go home and die alone, but they want to pass a tube inside my stomach. I said 'no more.' I have lived a full life. There is no reason for me to live any longer...My job is done."

"It appears you're not happy with the treatment you're receiving, even from your family," I told Elsie.

She agreed vehemently. "I don't like being treated this way. I

know they mean well, but it is *my* life, and *my* body. None of them knows what it means to go through all this, and I pray they never will. They only listen to the doctor; they don't listen to me."

"That hurts."

"*They* don't see it that way. They side with the doctor."

"You want to be able to determine the treatment you receive but you're not given that control?" I prodded.

"Yes, and that's what pisses me off."

"I would be angry, too," I agreed, putting myself in her shoes.

She continued venting. "They want me to comply with anything the doctor says, but those procedures are tiresome. They wear me out." She sighed. "Look at me. This is not me! Now the doctor wants to insert a tube into my stomach for another round of, what?" She rolled her eyes. "Give me a break!"

"Are you saying you can't see any sense in what the doctors are trying to do for you?"

"Yes!"

"...That you'd rather not be treated than go through it again?"

"You got it! Why hasn't anyone seen it that way? What is the outcome of the tests I have done? No improvement...We will all eventually die. Why don't they leave me alone and let me die? Because maybe this is my time...I don't want to live like this. I don't have the will to fight anymore. There is no reason for me to live any longer. My job is done."

"What did you say?" I wanted to be sure I heard her.

"My job is done," Elsie repeated with a note of finality.

With her statement, "My job is done," I was reminded of the apostle Paul's writing at the close of his life:

...the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain (2 Tim. 4:6-8; Phil. 1:21).

I knew that Elsie didn't necessarily mean that she had "*fought the good fight*" of faith. She had never mentioned God. So I wondered what the "job" was that she believed was done. I had to ask.

"What job?" I asked.

Many great leaders of faith we read about in the Bible "hit the bottom" of their emotional roller coaster, including

- *Elijah*
- *Jonah*
- *Job*
- *Jeremiah*
- *Even Jesus*

"My children. I have six children, fifteen grandchildren, and many great-grandchildren. What more do I need? Let me go home and die alone."

I did not minimize the sense of purpose and "mission accomplished" that Elsie's children and grandchildren might have given her. But then I thought of Larry, and the conversation we had. I decided to find out about Elsie's perception of the afterlife.

"Are you sure of where you're going if you die?" I took the risk to ask. I knew that my evangelistic instinct had taken over.

"I don't care," Elsie answered.

"You mean you don't care if there is a heaven or hell?" I asked. Elsie responded, "This is hell enough!"

How do you answer a statement like that? I simply prayed with her for guidance for her grandchildren, as she had requested I do.

FROM DESPAIR TO HOPE

"*This is hell enough*," Elsie had said. Sadly, I have known many people, both patients and non-patients, refer to their pain as "hell." Suffering has a way of blinding us and deadening our sensitivity to everything but our pain. Even Larry, who said he was sure he wouldn't go to heaven, seemed to have less terror of hell than of continuing in his endless suffering. People in pain sometimes live in denial or entertain doubts about the certainty of hell in the afterlife,

and so hell seems more appealing than their present physical agony. Even in ordinary, everyday matters, the pain of the familiar may be more frightening than that of the unknown. It is this situation that drives some to suicide.

Thankfully, someone who feels despondent one day may turn the emotional corner the next day. As humans, we are all subject to emotional highs and lows. We may be emotionally high one day, and down the next. Even the great leaders of faith we read about in the Bible “hit the bottom” of their emotional roller coaster. You are not alone.

Elijah Hit the Bottom

In a bid to prove whose god was true, Elijah, a lone prophet of God, called for a contest with the prophets of Baal. Elijah laid the goal out, “*The God who answers by fire, He is God.*” (1 Kings 18:24).

The prophets of Baal had first shot. They cried all day to Baal, but fire never fell. Then came Elijah’s turn. To convince the followers of Baal of God’s amazing power, Elijah asked them to drench the sacrifice with twelve barrels of water before he prayed. And in answer to Elijah’s prayer, we see God’s work:

Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood and the stones and the dust, and it licked up the water that was in the trench. Now when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, “The LORD, He is God! The LORD, He is God!” (1 Kings 18:38,39).

Elijah witnessed a revival of the Israelites’ interest in God. As a result of this victory, the people rallied around and killed the prophets of Baal. As well, Elijah prayed for rain, and a three and a half year drought suddenly came to an end as the heavens burst open with heavy downpour. It seemed nothing could be better for him; Elijah was emotionally and spiritually high.

The following day, however, after Queen Jezebel, the high priestess of Baal, heard the report of the contest on Mount Carmel

and how her prophets had been killed, she swore by the gods to issue the same fate to Elijah. Hearing this, Elijah's spiritual thermometer plummeted below freezing. The man whose prayer had been publicly answered on Mt. Carmel became paralyzed by fear.

In fear, Elijah fled and escaped into the wilderness "*and came and sat down under a broom tree. And he prayed that he might die*" (1 Kings 19:4).

"*It is enough! Now, LORD, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers!*" he cried (1 Kings 19:4). Only a day after he had witnessed God's amazing power, Elijah was already discouraged and losing faith.

But God did not judge or condemn Elijah for this slack in faith. Rather, He gently nursed him back to faith and readiness for ministry. While Elijah lay down despondent in a sleep of depression, God sent an angel to comfort him and bring him food and water for the journey ahead of him (1 Kings 19:5-8). Then God led Elijah "*as far as Horeb, the mountain of God*" (1 Kings 19:8). (Mount Horeb was a very significant place in the life of an Israelite because it was there that God entered into a covenant relationship with Israel.)

At Horeb God listened to Elijah's self-righteous ramblings and complaints about the people's faithlessness and how he was the only worshiper of Jehovah. Instead of berating Elijah, God once again showed His presence and power to Elijah. He then tenderly confronted Elijah and sent him back work, assuring him that he was not alone because God had seven thousand faithful ones in Israel who had not bowed to Baal (1 Kings 19).

And Elijah bounced back. In fact, Elijah called down fire from heaven two more times (2 Kings 1:10,12), he installed two kings and he consecrated Elisha as his prophetic successor all before the end of his life when he rode on a chariot of fire into heaven itself (2 Kings 1 and 2).

How comforting it is to know that "*Elijah was a man with a nature like ours*" (James 5:17). He was like us—subject to sudden mood swings and emotional ups and downs like you and me. Happily, there is always room for improvement. Although deep valleys may follow our mountaintop experiences, we can climb the mountain again.

Jonah Hit the Bottom

Jonah, another Old Testament prophet, in what could be described as the peak of his prophetic career, said he would rather die than live. Not many prophets witnessed social and spiritual changes, conviction, conversion, and revival as the result of their preaching and ministry, but Jonah did. And yet he was unhappy. He was angry with God because God had spared the people of Nineveh and had not destroyed them as Jonah had hoped.

Obviously, Jonah was more concerned about his own reputation than the repentance of the Ninevites. Jonah seemed to have forgotten that God had forgiven his sin of disobedience and had spared his life, too.

Mournfully, Jonah prayed, *“Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!”* (Jonah 4:3). To this, God ministered personally and tenderly to Jonah, using nature to teach him a lesson. But Jonah was slow in getting the message, and still desired to die.

God could have destroyed Jonah for his defiance, but He did not. God is, as Jonah well knew, *“a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness”* (Jonah 4:2). So instead of destroying Jonah, God tenderly led Jonah out of his apathy, self-pity, and discouragement.

*“Elijah was a man with a nature like ours” (James 5:17).
Elijah was like us—subject to sudden mood swings and emotional ups and downs like you and me.*

Job Hit the Bottom

The story of Job is well known to many. Job, a man of God, lost all his family and possessions to tragedy. Although he did not understand why God would allow this to happen to him, he still did not curse God. He did, however, feel great pain, and he wished he

had never been born. From the anguish of his soul Job said,

“May the day perish on which I was born, And the night in which it was said, ‘A male child is conceived.’

“Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?

“Why is light given to him who is in misery, And life to the bitter of soul, Who long for death, but it does not come, And search for it more than hidden treasures.

“Oh, that I might have my request, That God would grant me the thing that I long for! That it would please God to crush me, That He would loose His hand and cut me off! (Job 3:3,11,20,21; 6:8,9).

Though despondent, Job still chose to trust God:

Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him. He also shall be my salvation.

For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God (Job 13:15,16a; 19:25,26).

Job demanded an answer from God. It was not the answer Job expected, but it gave Job a “wake-up call.” In the end, Job confessed,

“I know that You can do everything, And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You. Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:2,3,5,6).

Job had now experienced God for himself and could talk about God’s faithfulness and presence in a personal way. And God blessed Job with even more than he had before. Though he had lost everything, his life had now turned around for the better. (Job 42:7-17).

Jeremiah Hit the Bottom

Jeremiah is another biblical example of a person who experienced discouragement. Jeremiah, despite his faithful tenure of prophetic ministry and thought-provoking sermons, did not see the changes he desired. Rather, he witnessed the destruction of the nation of Israel, the Temple of God, and the deportation of his people into exile. He had faithfully proclaimed God's Word, but all he received in return was imprisonment, persecution, rejection, and heartbreak.

In the depths of his despair, Jeremiah unburdened his heart to God, expressing the way he felt deep down. He said,

O LORD, You induced me, and I was persuaded; You are stronger than I, and have prevailed. I am in derision daily; Everyone mocks me.

Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me!

Let the man be cursed Who brought news to my father, saying, "A male child has been born to you!" Making him very glad.

Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, That my days should be consumed with shame? (Jer. 20:7,14,15,18).

Jonah was more concerned about his own reputation than the repentance of the Ninevites. In his self-righteousness, he seemed to have forgotten that God had forgiven his sin of disobedience and had spared his life, too.

Somber and melancholic as these words are, they have sandwiched between them (vs. 11-13) words of praise to God and testimony of God's presence, protection, and victory:

But the LORD is with me as a mighty, awesome One. Therefore my persecutors will stumble, and will not prevail.

*They will be greatly ashamed, for they will not prosper.
Their everlasting confusion will never be forgotten.*

*But, O LORD of hosts, You Who test the righteous,
And see the mind and heart, Let me see Your vengeance on
them; For I have pleaded my cause before You.*

*Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! For He has
delivered the life of the poor From the hand of evildoers
(Jer. 20:11-13).*

Though he experienced utter discouragement, Jeremiah, by understanding the true nature of God, was able to “bounced back.”

Even Jesus Hit the Bottom

When situations drag you down, remember that you are not the first to experience such moments. In fact, you are in the company of great people. In His humanity even our Lord Jesus experienced low emotions, which He confessed to God and His disciples, asking help from both. Some hours before His arrest, Jesus said to His disciples, “*My soul is exceedingly sorrowful, even to death. Stay here and watch with Me*” (Matt. 26:38). In the same context He prayed, “*Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour*” (John 12:27).

*When situations
drag you down,
remember that you
are not the first to
experience such
moments.*

*In His humanity
even our Lord
Jesus experienced
low emotions.*

Not long after Jesus’ agonizing cry from the cross, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” (Matt. 27:46), He was soon to pray before His death, “*Father, ‘into Your hands I commit My spirit’*” (Luke 23:46). This latter prayer signified that despite feeling forsaken by God, Jesus had the calm assurance that His Father was in control.

Jesus’ last words on the cross were not “I am finished.” His last cry was *Tetelestai*, meaning, “*It is finished*”

(John 19:30). *Tetelestai* is an everyday word signifying total victory, sound completion, nothing more can be added or taken away. Jesus' work of salvation, which He had come to accomplish, was finished. He could die in peace, with a sense of fulfillment. He bounced back from despair—even on the cross!

The Bible identifies Christ as “*a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*” (Isa. 53:3). But Christ did not view life from the dark side. Jesus did not stay on the cross, or remain buried in the tomb. He rose again and is alive forevermore. The resurrection of Christ, which guarantees our own resurrection, is the reason we hope!

Are You at Your Lowest?

If the experiences of life have pushed you to your wit's end, or if you are tired and fed up with a relationship or your service for Christ, let the stories of Elijah, Jonah, Job, and Jeremiah encourage you to hope and “hang in there” a little longer. If you “hold on to God,” and “hang in there,” deliverance will come your way. Pray with the Psalmist, “*When my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I*” (Ps. 61:2). In the same token, affirm your trust in the Lord: “*You [Lord] are my hiding place; You shall preserve me from trouble; You shall surround me with songs of deliverance. You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in Your word*” (Ps. 32:7; 119:114).

By the grace of God, “*a righteous man [or woman] may fall seven times And rise again*” (Prov. 24:16a). Therefore, “*do not rejoice over me, my enemy; When I fall, I will arise; When I sit in darkness, The LORD will be a light to me*” (Micah 7:8). Repeat these words, “*I will arise,*” for you will!

When you are feeling down and out, remember that life is seasonal. We need sunshine and rain, summer and winter, ups and downs, in order to have a complete picture. So don't interpret life from the “season” you are experiencing. Be encouraged that God has a purpose for the darker season you may be experiencing:

To everything there is a season, A time for every purpose under heaven:

A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck what is planted;

A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up;

A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance;

A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing;

A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away;

A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak;

A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace.

What profit has the worker from that in which he labors?

I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end (Eccl. 3:1-11).

God's twenty-four hour day is a mixture of sunshine, shadows, sometime rainfall or snow, and darkness. If every hour were sunshine and no shadows, every place would be arid, desert and dry; no crop would survive. If every hour were rainfall and snowfall, the whole place would be flooded or waterlogged and crops would die. And if every hour were darkness and no sunlight, no plant would grow and life would almost be impossible. But a mixture of sunshine, shadows, rainfall, moonlight, and darkness is what keeps physical life going. In like manner, you would not grow if you only had high times; we need valley experiences so we can be stretched and strengthened in our walk with God.

Think of Elijah, Jonah, Job, and Jeremiah, a company of people who experienced it all—the good and the bad days, the mountaintops

and the depths of the valley experiences. And they lived to tell their stories. Be encouraged by their example to keep the faith, remembering that through God's grace and help, you will someday climb out of the dungeon and bounce back as they did.

The Disease Triangle

There are times, however, when people do not have the ability to "bounce back" because they are parked in the depths, or they insist on interpreting life from the shadows. It is in this state that people open themselves up to disease, causing serious concern.

When I was in my undergraduate studies, my plant pathology professor discussed three conditions a plant must have before it will become diseased. First, he explained, the plant must be a *susceptible host*—meaning the plant has to be predisposed or prone to the disease-causing organism. Sometimes viruses have the ability to infect one plant, but they cannot infect a different one. A parasite's ability to infect is dependent on whether the plant is susceptible to it or not.

Second, for a plant to become diseased, there must be a *virulent pathogen*—an infectious agent that can cause disease. If the pathogen is in an inactive phase, it cannot bring disease, even if it is on a susceptible host.

Finally, the host must be in a *vulnerable condition* in order to be infected. If the pathogen is virulent and the host susceptible, and yet the host is not in a vulnerable stage, then there is no possibility of harm.

Jesus' last words on the cross were not "I am finished." His last cry was Tetelestai, meaning, "It is finished" (John 19:30). Tetelestai is an everyday word signifying total victory. Jesus died in peace, with a sense of fulfillment of His mission.

Any one of us may become depressed, even to a pathological level, under acute and prolonged stress.

Interestingly, these three “disease conditions” of a plant must similarly be present before we as humans fall sick to despair and depression.

To fall prey to depression, we must first be *susceptible* to discouragement. We must realize, though, that because we are human, we are *all* prone to discouragement. However, discouragement at a deep, sustained level can lead to depression. And any one of us may become depressed, even to a pathological level, under acute and prolonged stress. So, we can do little about our susceptibility because we are all susceptible in one way or another.

Unfortunately, there is also little we can do about the *virulent pathogens*, or *stressors*, in our lives. Anything from work, to relationships, to pleasant surprises can often disrupt the rhythm of our lives and throw us off balance. Often, we just don’t know what life is going to throw at us, or when something will strike. These everyday stressors are just a part of living.

And so we may not be able to change our susceptibility or the stressors in our lives, but we do have a measure of control over our *vulnerable conditions*, for we can prepare for and build up our defenses against stress-producing factors. How do we do that? We *become aware* of times or experiences when we are *most prone* to discouragement, despair, and even depression:

(1) *We are most prone to discouragement after a huge success.*

I know that when I am involved in planning a big program, all the adrenalin in my system skyrockets and sustains me through all the tasks, stresses, and late nights. Once over, however, my adrenalin level drops to normal, causing my energy level to decline. The excitement is gone and I feel rather directionless and empty.

Discouragement is a normal, physiological response to “highs” in our lives. We must be prepared, however, for the “lows” that will ensue. Being unprepared can leave us vulnerable to moral and spiritual battles.

Jesus’ baptism illustrates this point. Right after Jesus’ baptism—a joyous occasion which signaled Jesus’ divine position in the Godhead and the beginning of His public ministry—Jesus was led into the

wilderness to be tempted by Satan. Alone and hungry for forty days in the wilderness, Jesus experienced an intense period of spiritual battles. Similarly, after our joys and successes, we, too, can expect our own wilderness experience—a time when we are vulnerable to Satan’s attacks. The object, then, is to be prepared for these moments.

(2) *We are prone to depression before a big victory.*

If we acknowledge that all life is spiritual, then we can expect a form of discouragement before any major endeavor. This is particularly true in spiritual endeavors. Just look at Jesus. Before He went to the cross, all hell broke loose: Judas gave Him up to the authorities; Peter betrayed Him. His disciples weren’t there for Him in His hour of need; His own people persecuted Him. All this before Jesus’ greatest victory on the cross: to conquer sin, Satan, and death.

Today, Satan is trying to discourage, discredit, and weaken the children of God. Anytime you take a step forward toward victory, be assured that Satan will be right there beside you, trying to forestall your progress. Be aware of these times, and spend time in prayer, intercession, and spiritual warfare.

(3) *We are prone to depression during a long (losing) battle.*

Human beings, even great leaders, lose heart when reports remain negative and there is little or no sign of success or change in sight. If an employee continually hears nothing but negative comments from his boss, he will soon be inclined to give up. Why keep trying when it’s no use?

Vulnerable seasons of life, which often prelude depression, are

- *After a huge success*
- *Before a big victory*
- *During a long (losing) battle*
- *After a tragedy or a major loss*
- *When the physical body is weak or diseased*

The Israelites felt this way. For forty years, they wandered in the wilderness. It was easy to become discouraged when nothing ever seemed to change. Would they ever be delivered?

Satan loves to nab us when we're down. And we are in a very vulnerable position to his attacks if we allow ourselves to trust our experiences and situations, rather than trust the God of our lives.

(4) *We are prone to depression after a tragedy, defeat, major loss, disappointment, betrayal, or failure.*

We can take comfort that there is no mistake, loss, failure, disappointment, or defeat we experience that is beyond redemption, by the grace of God.

It goes without saying, that we would be prone to depression or discouragement after things such as these. We are only human. God knows we will be upset in these “down” seasons; He doesn't expect us to jump for joy when life hurts.

However, as people of faith, we need a radical understanding of tragedy, failure, and defeat. We need to have a different glossary for these terms than what the world gives us,

because God does not see things the way we do. God tells us that “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28; emphasis mine), and He asks us to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7). Sometimes our failure is God's greatest teaching method. Our defeat can be God's backdoor to victory. A major loss may close some doors, but God may use it to open up a window of opportunity for us. We can take comfort that there is no mistake, loss, failure, disappointment, or defeat we experience that is beyond redemption, by the grace of God. So, get up and get going, one more time. Try, try, and try again, because “quitters don't win and winners don't quit.”

(5) *We are prone to depression when our physical body is weak or diseased.*

All of life is an integrated whole. The physical affects the emotional, and vice versa. When the spirit is low, it sends negative

energy to the body, and the physical body easily succumbs to diseases. Likewise, when our physical body is weak through stress, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, or disease, the intangible part of our being: spirit, soul, emotion, etc. becomes vulnerable and susceptible to different attacks. I know that when I am down with a nagging cold, if I am not careful, I soon lose interest in other important things of life. Therefore, anytime I get the blues or am tempted to despair, I watch my body signals and ask myself: What is going on? Most of the time I realize I am melancholic because of one of the five reasons discussed above. Just knowing why I feel the way I do is the first step to recovery.

“Hanging in There”

In ministering to patients, I often try to help them access their strengths and what has provided meaning and support for them in their struggles. To patients whose life rhythm and schedule has been suddenly and dramatically altered by a disease, I might ask, “Is there something that has been helpful to you in the past to cope with a situation you couldn’t control or change?” Or, if the patient has battled for a long time with the disease, I might ask, “What has helped you to maintain a good spirit all the while this problem has persisted?” “Why have you kept fighting?” The purpose is to help patients recall past victories, enabling them to confront their present crisis.

- *Remember that life is seasonal.*
- *Don't interpret life from the "season" you are experiencing.*
- *Be encouraged that God has a purpose for the darker season as well.*

Patients identify their source of hope and strength in a vast array of things and persons. Many have located hope and strength in the love and support of family, or a network of caring friends. Some have drawn daily strength from the competence of a doctor, from confidence in a medication or treatment

plan, the possibility of a breakthrough in research, the support group which has been recommended to them, or the testimonies from those who suffered the same fate and still enjoy a full life. Others draw their hope and strength from a religious community, their personal relationship with God, prayers, a job they love, or personal goals and ambitions. For others, it is their relationships and responsibilities to children and other dependents, and there are those for whom a personal fighting spirit gives them the will to persevere. All these anchors of hope allow us to cope with the hard situations of life. But I have found out that *“Those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint”* (Isa. 40:31).

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. In what areas of your life are you presently facing discouragement or combating despair?
2. Larry: “I’ve been battling with one problem after another and I’ve been losing every one. What’s the point in continuing to fight when you know you’re going to lose in the end?” Elsie: “We will all eventually die. Why don’t they leave me alone and let me die? Because maybe this is my time...I don’t want to live like this. I don’t have the will to fight anymore.” How would you respond to these people if they were your friends?
3. How did you feel when you read about giants of faith like Elijah, Jonah, Job, and Jeremiah who hit the emotional bottom to the point of wishing for death?
4. “To everything there is a season.” If life is seasonal, how can you help a friend who says he/she is “going through hell” avoid interpreting life from the down side of one season? What comfort would you offer from Scripture?
5. The “Disease Triangle” gives five reasons why we are most prone to discouragement, despair, or even depression. Which of these most closely describe your life? Explain.

• • **From Despair to Hope** • • 117

6. How can you help a sick person feel more alive as a human, even if the sickness gets worse?
7. If you are unwell yourself, what new decision(s) and attitude(s) may help you relate better to those who care for you?

PART TWO

*Surely
goodness and mercy
shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell
in the house of the LORD
Forever.
(Ps. 23:6)*

5

• • God Is Bigger Than Any Disease • •

(I'm Dying)

*For the Lord GOD will help Me;
Therefore I will not be disgraced;
Therefore I have set My face like a flint,
And I know that I will not be ashamed (Isa. 50:7)*

Clara

I was always welcome in Clara's room. Despite the fact that Clara was first admitted for infection, she remained positive. Our conversation often centered on her church activities (which she missed by being hospitalized), her faith in God, and her interest in prayer. Clara's face always beamed with a smile, and her cheerful attitude helped her block out pain. Prayer at the end of the visit was always uplifting.

When Clara was finally discharged, she was re-admitted again the following day for the same infection. This time I saw a bit of anger and frustration in her face, but they were quickly masked by our "church talk." And though her request for prayer was more personal and emotional, the positive talking still took over.

I failed to explore the deeper issues, partly because of Clara's reluctance to discuss them and partly because I assumed the feelings

were temporary—anybody would be upset by such developments. We both chose to stay with the pleasant and comfortable zone: “God is good; all is well.”

Again Clara was discharged but was again re-admitted two days later for the *same* infection! After this third admission, Clara was a different woman from the person I had known previously. She was angry with the doctors and was trying to prevent her anger from growing into bitterness.

Clara said, “From now on I refuse to obey any discharge order!” She was waiting to see the senior doctor to give him a piece of her mind. (Later she was happy that the doctor did not show up in the heat of her anger.)

Clara burst into tears and cried most of the time she talked with me. She confessed she was angry with God, but she didn’t want to dwell on it. She confessed her love for God and pledged her commitment not to doubt God while at the same time wrestling with the unfairness of the whole episode and the fact that God did not seem to have come through for her. Clara believed in a God of power and miracles, a God who heals. She and her church had been doing “their part,” but God did not seem to be doing His. She couldn’t reconcile herself to this, yet she did not want to question or doubt God.

Clara told me she knew that her husband was unhappy but that he wouldn’t show it. She was convinced that he wept after leaving her. Clara’s brother had died a year earlier and her mother worried she might lose Clara as well. Clara talked to her mother from the hospital and had tried to assure her that everything was under control. But she knew her mother was in tears at the other end of the phone. Clara herself had broken down after hanging up the phone. Everybody was worried about the recurrence of Clara’s admission to the hospital.

It was during this emotion-laden visit that I learned that Clara had no children of her own. She was in the process of adopting a child whom she loved and who loved her, but she was afraid if the agency learned of her illness she would lose the child. As a Christian, Clara was not happy she had not given the true picture of her predicament to the agency.

Through this relationship with Clara, I learned that the smiles and “church stories” could really mask deep pains within the souls of God-fearing people. Sometimes, we share such stories as a defense to escape the deep pain inside, or to keep us from discussing the “uncomfortable.” And sometimes, it is our own way of “taking care of God” so He may be obliged to take care of us.

Clara often prayed, “that I may get well soon” prayer requests. But with repeated readmissions for the same infection, she felt let down by the hospital system and by God. While she was able to articulate her disappointment and frustration with the hospital system, she hadn’t developed the language to do the same with God.

Clara’s frustrations and struggles are in no way uncommon with the people of faith. Christians are often experts at masking their anger at God with spiritual activities while they continue in denial. However, God wants us to have honest hearts. We have to admit that God and His ways are too complex for our understanding and that this is frustrating! David, “*a man after [God’s] own heart*” (Acts 13:22) spoke a whole range of “positive” and “negative” emotions in relation to God. And God was “big enough” to hear it all.

We know that God answers prayers and that miraculous healings and deliverances have occurred for certain people in direct response to prayer. Prayer works because things happen when we pray that would never have happened without prayer. Prayer is part of God’s providence.

Yet we also know that many others have remained in their condition or their situation has worsened, despite the intensity of

Christians are often experts at masking their anger at God with more spiritual activities while they continue in denial. However, God wants us to have honest hearts. We have to admit that God and His ways are too complex for our understanding and that this is frustrating!

prayer from concerned Christians. But this is no reason to stop praying or stop hoping for a miracle.

GOD IS BIGGER THAN ANY DISEASE

Why Pray for Healing?

Clara was angry and disappointed with God for apparently unanswered prayers. Does prayer serve any purpose when we are sick? Do such miracles still happen today?

As I write, I am thinking of the person sitting in the pew on a Sunday morning who cannot be attentive, even though he tries to listen to the sermon. He is distracted because he is concerned about his health. And here he is in the church, wondering if there is any help in this place for him, questioning within himself (for he dares not vocalize it) if Jesus really IS the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is wondering if the kind of miracles he has read in the Bible still happen today and, if they do, if one such miracle could happen to him.

*If Jesus of
Nazareth walked
into your local
church today, as
He used to enter the
synagogues in
Palestine some 2000
years ago, what
would He do?
Would Jesus, the
Son of God, save
sinners only and look
the other way from
the sick and
afflicted?*

I am also thinking of the person sitting in a park by 11.00 a.m. on Sunday morning, gazing into empty space. She has come to this place to let off some steam because she is worried about a sick relation and pondering what else the family could do. She remembers the bold claims of preachers on radio and television, and is wondering if she should send for the advertised prayer cloths, anointing oil, or commute hundreds of miles to attend a healing service. Is there any truth to all that she has heard about the healing power of God, or is it just another gimmick of the televangelists?

I am thinking of such persons who have gone from retreats to crusades and seminars, read books, and watched Christian video programs on divine healing. They have done all these in seeking ways to grapple with the issue of healing as believers in the God of miracles.

I am thinking of the woman who has on her nightstand a pile of books and tapes on healing brought to her in the hospital by concerned relatives. At each visit the relatives encourage the woman to keep trusting God by updating her with testimonies and news reports of what they heard or read God did for someone else, in a similar or worse situation, and which they are believing for their loved one.

I am thinking of that child of God on whom many believers laid their hands and prayed over and anointed with oil in the name of the Lord. But he is still waiting for the manifestation of the healing which the spiritual counselors urged him to believe he had received. He has been reminded time and again, “Don’t look at the symptoms—those are the devil’s lies. Believe the Word. *‘We walk by faith, not by sight.’* (2 Cor. 5:7).”

I am thinking of the mother who has been claiming and making confessions of healing and quoting Scriptures for her child, and both she and her child are still on the waiting line for divine healing.

I am thinking of the sick man who is getting discouraged because this faith healing thing does not seem to work as expected. He has refused to pay attention to the symptoms and has repeatedly told himself: “By His stripes I am healed, by His stripes I am healed, by His stripes I am healed,” for God only knows how long. But the sickness is still there. By faith he has claimed his healing and believes he has been healed; he is just waiting for the physical manifestation. When family members tell him he’s crazy, he gladly bears the ridicule as part of the price he must pay for his faith. It is just that the price is getting higher by the day and the healing is not forthcoming.

I am thinking of the young Christian who is adding the guilt of insufficient faith to his health problems because he was told, if he had enough faith, even as small as the size of a mustard seed, he would have been able to remove his mountain of cancer.

If you encountered some of these scenarios, would you encourage belief in God’s healing, or would you discourage such things as “crazy,” “fanatical,” or “going too far?”

I believe there is a way to approach the issue of divine healing that is less divisive and more inclusive. After all, we all pray to be healed when we are sick, don’t we? (During my first weeks in New York, I was pleasantly surprised to find the words, “We Pray for the Sick” on the billboards of some local churches. Wait a minute! Isn’t that one of the ministries of the church? And which religion doesn’t teach praying for the sick? It never ceased to amaze me, until much later that I learned why those churches put the information there.)

Maybe we should ask ourselves: If God really loves and cares unconditionally, and He is alive today with the same creative power that spoke the world into being, would healing the sick be a concern of such a supernatural, loving, and caring Being? If Jesus is the complete and full revelation of God, and if we go by the accounts in the Gospels of the diversity and magnitude of His healings, then our answer to that question is an emphatic “Yes!” Regardless of

Either with great faith or little faith, we cannot force anything from God’s hand. It is not faith or the size of it that brings healing, but God Himself who heals—“I am the LORD who heals you” (Ex. 15:26b).

how badly some charlatans have commercialized God’s healing power, our welfare and health are a concern to God (3 John 2). In the Gospels, when anyone came to Jesus for physical or spiritual healing, He said, “Yes, I will” each time.

If Jesus of Nazareth walked into your local church today, as He used to enter the synagogues in Palestine some 2000 years ago, what would He do? Would Jesus, the Son of God, save sinners only and look the other way from the sick and afflicted? Would He minister to one need with greater compassion than the other?

Is there a place in your theology to bless the Lord “*Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases*”? (Ps. 103:3).

The word “salvation” is so all-embracing that the writers of Scriptures often treat salvation from sin, recovery from sickness, and deliverance from dangers as though they came from “the same basket.” For example, when he looked through the prophetic telescope and previewed Calvary, Isaiah wrote, “*But He [Jesus] was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed*” (Isa. 53:5). Then, gazing back to Calvary, a specific point in history, the apostle Peter reechoed prophet Isaiah’s words, “*Who Himself [Jesus] bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed*” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Unbelief Limits God

While I do not subsist to the trend in the “health and wealth” movement in Christendom, I believe that a generally pervasive level of unbelief among God’s people needs to be challenged, or even rebuked. Jesus couldn’t do many mighty works in His own town, not because He didn’t want to, but because their unbelief limited Him (Mark 6:4-6).

Believe it or not, in practice if not in principle, many evangelical, Bible-believing pastors in the industrialized West have settled for a God “who can but who does not” perform the miraculous. The “almighty” or miracle worker in their mindset is state-of-the-art technology. This is a sharp contrast to the culture in many developing countries where most problems are believed to be spiritual in origin and prayers and spiritual exercises are therefore the only resort for relief. And, as they call on God, their

The Scripture says, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up.”

only lifeline, God hears and answers them, honoring their simple, childlike faith.

Many conservatives in our high-tech culture believe God once did, but He no longer performs miracles. And many liberal-minded people think God never performed miracles at all; those supernatural things we read in the Bible are simply Hebrew and Greek mythologies, legends and tales. Many conservatives and liberals believe God works providentially through human agents and nature. They explain that the *real* miracle of life is the rhythm in nature, which makes it possible to predict nature. Though this is absolutely correct, it is only one side of the truth. The result of this secular posture is that “God *can* but does not heal” describes the culture of many Christian communities. The impression is that God heals in certain instances but, for practical purposes, we should not expect Him to do so, especially now that we have advanced technology. To expect God to heal miraculously would be setting oneself up for frustration and disappointment. The logic is that God has given humanity wisdom and endowed medical doctors with the ability to diagnose, prescribe medicines and perform surgeries. “Why do we expect God to do for us what we can do for ourselves?” they ask. In those congregations, therefore, believing prayer is rarely offered for healing through *God’s* direct intervention, but rather for the attending physician in whose purview belongs the art and science of healing. Any theology that paints God with sympathy but robs Him of power is not true to the picture of God we see in the Bible:

Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:13-16; emphasis mine).

As this Scripture verse shows, it is indisputable that God has made provision for bodily and emotional healing through the ministry of the local church—the elders praying in faith, laying on their hands on the sick member, and anointing that individual with oil in the name of the Lord. The promise or the result of prayer, which indeed should be the expectation of God’s people, is *“the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up”* (James 5:15).

The motto of Lagos University Teaching Hospital in Nigeria is “We care, God heals.” As aptly demonstrated in this hospital’s motto, healing is God’s prerogative. Therefore, God cannot be manipulated to dance to our whims because we use certain faith formulas, or follow “the seven principles of supernatural healing and divine health” (whatever those are), or perform some spiritual gymnastics. God has a purpose in every situation of our life.

Sometimes, a sick person feels guilty and insecure because he feels he doesn’t have enough faith to “compel” God to perform healing. This, however, is the result of misunderstanding regarding prayer. It is true that *“the prayer of a righteous person has great power in its effects”* (James 5:16; RSV), but that does not mean that God is a vending machine. You can’t just say some words or press certain buttons and expect the answer to your request. Prayer is not ordering God. Only God, the mighty Almighty,

Healing is God's prerogative. Therefore, God cannot be manipulated to dance to our whims because we use certain faith formulas, or perform some spiritual gymnastics.

gives orders; He does not take orders from anyone. At best, prayer connects us (or should connect us) to God’s will and purpose.

“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights” (James 1:17a). Therefore all knowledge, science, technology, machines, and medical inventions, are God’s gift to humanity, and God can work healing through any and all of them. Divine providence is one of the mysterious ways by which God performs His wonders. The most adequate equipment,

the right time, the best environment, the most skilled professionals, are all acts of His providence. They are all God's gifts to society. In answer to prayer, God may perform healing through these avenues, yet He may sovereignly heal without them.

Since healing is an act of divine mercy, then we can claim many of the promises concerning prayer in the Bible (Matt. 7:7-11). And since God sends the rain on the just and the unjust, then we, too, may expect *healing* to be given to the just and unjust, for our God is our "*heavenly Father*" (Luke 11:13), "*the Father of mercies and God of all comfort*" (2 Cor. 1:3), "*the King eternal, immortal, invisible...who alone is wise*" (1 Tim. 1:17), "*Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think*" (Eph. 3:20).

The premise of this chapter is that, either with great faith or little faith, we cannot force anything from God's hand. It is not faith or the size of it that brings healing, but it is God Himself who heals. However, the healing may be in response to our faith—because God honors faith and He is merciful even when our faith wavers.

Faith Opens Door to Healing

This chapter is titled: "God Is Bigger Than Any Disease." Those were the words of a physician to a patient when medical practice had reached the limit of what could be done and there was no hope other than God. The patient, Virginia Baker, considered that reminder as one of the medical opinions and, when pressed to the wall, opted to try it. I read her story in the November 1997 issue of *Guideposts*, titled "Healing Circle."

Mrs. Baker came from a church background that did not practice laying hands on the sick. While she was in a coma, the church kept an unceasing prayer vigil, and her husband stayed with her and read Psalms over her. But her coming out of coma after three days was no sign of recovery, because her medical situation had not improved.

James 5:14,15 where it says,

Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil

in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven,

kept coming to Virginia’s mind and she decided to ask if her pastor would be willing to try something else—laying on hands and anointing with oil. The pastor was convinced this was biblical, even though his denomination did not practice it. In preparation, the pastor and the elders prayed and fasted. Six of them, including the pastor, came to the hospital room with oil, formed a circle round her, prayed, laid their hands on her, and anointed her with oil and left. Everything was brisk, not only because they couldn’t stay long, but also because it was all too strange to them all. However, that was the beginning of her miraculous recovery, which baffled even the medical practitioners. In the end, the hospital removed her name from the top of the list for an urgent liver transplant to the end of the line.

One Sunday, about a year later, Virginia celebrated the baptism of her youngest son, in the church. Halfway through the service, while she played the piano, a call came from the hospital. They had found a matching liver for her, and she was expected to report in the hospital within the hour for surgery. It was her third and last offer, having passed up the first two. She hung up the phone and promised to call the hospital in ten minutes. It was a tough decision.

*God is BIGGER
than any disease.*

Virginia and her husband called their pastor and the family doctor together. What should she do? All eyes were turned on her—it was her decision. As she held her husband’s hand and looked at the faces surrounding her, she remembered the scene in her hospital room a year earlier. Then she asked the internist what he would advise if she were his wife. The physician said he would advise his wife not to have the transplant. She, too, felt the same way. So she called the hospital, passed off her last chance for a liver transplant, and went back to playing the piano at the service. “Never forget that God is bigger than any disease.”

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. Do you think Clara would be helped if she admitted and expressed her true feelings to God, including her anger? Explain.
2. What helps you to keep faith when nothing positive seems to be happening?
3. If God is greater than your problem, what does that mean to you today?
4. Jesus said, “*And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons... they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover*” (Mark 16:17,18). Besides the promise of recovery through laying on of hands in Jesus’ name, what else do we communicate, or what other spiritual and emotional benefits and affirmations come through touching and laying on of hands? (Read Acts 6:6; 13:3; 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6).
5. Is it possible to “lay hands” and “pray” for the sick and do so without sensitivity and respect for the other person’s space or privacy? Discuss.

6

• • Healed, Though Not Cured • •

(I'm Afflicted)

And He [Jesus] said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You. Take this cup away from Me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will" (Mark 14:36)

Evan

Evan is a sixty-three-year-old black male. He is standing next to his bed and folding his sheet when I walk into his room.

"Good morning. I am Mike Ojewale. I'm a chaplain," I explain. "I visit with patients in this unit and chat with them about their hospitalization. Is this a right time to visit with you?"

"Sure, I'm just folding the sheets to get some warmth. It can be cold sometimes."

"The weather *has* been fickle," I agree, sitting in an empty chair. Evan sits on the bed closer to where I am seated. He looks at my nametag.

"You're a reverend. I'm a Pentecostal," he says.

"It's nice meeting you," I respond.

"My church is Miracle Pentecostal Church in Brooklyn," Evan tells me.

“I see. I’ve worshiped in PQR church,” I offer. PQR is another Pentecostal church in Brooklyn.

“I know the place. It’s a big church. I always see the long line of people waiting to get in.... So that’s your church.”

“No. I’ve only worshiped there two times. But that’s not where I normally worship.” I try to change the subject to refocus on Evan. “What brings you here?”

‘Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all’ (Ps. 34:19).

Evan pushes up the sleeve on his left arm, exposing the swollen, undulating surface—marks from years of dialysis. “No circulation,” he begins. “The doctors are trying to see what they can do. If they can’t do anything to restore circulation to the arm, they’ll transfer to the other arm. I’m just praying that the surgery will be successful and will

not have to be done again in another five or six months. Maybe they’ll transfer to the right arm.”

“That’s a lot going on. It’s going to affect how you function.”

“Well, we’ll see how things go. If they can’t fix the left arm, they’ll transfer to the right.”

I think about Evan’s situation. “I can’t imagine how unsettling it must be for you to be in a situation where you don’t have much control over what happens.”

“Well, it’s not easy. But they *have* been honest with me and have given me all the facts and options.”

“Facts?”

“The doctors say it’s a fairly routine surgery. I have to believe them and have faith in God. I pray that they’ll be able to restore circulation, but I’m just waiting to see how it goes. I believe God is in control.”

I look into Evan’s eyes. “Is there anything that helps you deal with situations like this? Something that keeps you from being anxious?”

“When I surrender myself for any procedure, I do it prayerfully, believing that I’m actually committing myself to God. I know that anything can go wrong. That’s why I need to bathe everything in

prayer. From that point, any hand that touches me is the hand of God.” Evan pauses to consider. “It’s useless to be anxious.”

Evan and I talk some more. I open up about myself and share with him a bit about my Christian experience, starting with the story of my own conversion to faith in Jesus. I was trying to build rapport with Evan to establish a basis for what I was going to say next.

“Evan,” I begin, “I have to admit that I’m concerned for you. From what I understand, the typical Pentecostal position on healing is that you claim healing, believe you have been healed, and then you will be. I guess you are claiming and confessing the Scripture, “*By His stripes we are healed*” (Isa. 53:5), and yet this is still happening to you. What is it like for you to be in this situation?” I know I am taking a gigantic risk in asking him this question. But I do not want to alienate him from myself, so I quickly reassure him, “You don’t have to tell me anything, if you don’t feel like it.”

Without a moment’s hesitation, Evan replies, “I will tell you, my brother. ‘*Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all*’ (Ps. 34:19). That is what I tell people. And that is what the Bible says. Many afflictions, but the Lord promises deliverance. God has not promised that we will not have afflictions.

“I gave my life to God in 1976,” Evans continues. “In 1985 I was rushed to the hospital, short of blood. The doctor told my family that I might not make it through the night. But they gave me blood and I survived the night. I later told the doctor it was a miracle, but he did not understand. He did not understand that I have a Father in heaven, the Almighty God. I have given my life to Him. I *belong* to Him. No sickness will take my life until God wants me home. *That* is what I believe. If God wants my death to testify to others—it’s fine with me. God can speak to others and touch souls through my death, you know? But until then, I’m going to give God praise and talk about Him.”

“Amen, brother!” I say, feeling a kindred spirit with Evan and trying hard to contain my excitement. “I believe the same. Jesus said, ‘*In the world you will have tribulations; but be of good*

Christians expect their faith to shield them from certain tragedies that befall others, but most times, what happens to the nonreligious often happens to the religious as well.

cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

“That is it!” Evan agrees. “The Bible does not tell us we will not have problems. Many think Christians are not supposed to be sick. Where do they get that? What does the Word say? ‘*Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the LORD delivers him out of them all*’ (Ps. 34:19). If I am on dialysis or in the hospital, I seize the opportunity to witness for Christ. That may be the purpose for

my being here. God can touch others and encourage them through my suffering. I tell people, don’t depend on a pastor to pray for you. Pray for yourself. Trust God with your situation. Without faith it is impossible to please God. That is what the Bible says.”

“Praise God. That is what I believe, too,” I tell Evan. “I’m glad to meet someone who has been able to reconcile things in this way. Many Christians cannot reconcile the tension between faith and experience in many areas of their life.”

Evan and I talk some more. Then I ask, “Would you like me to pray with you?”

“Sure!”

“What specific things should I pray for?”

Evan thinks for moment. “For God to be revealed to me more.”

Not many believers have worked out a peaceful resolution as Evan has been able to. The process is not always as easy or simple as it is often articulated.

HEALED, THOUGH NOT CURED

God’s Sovereignty in All Things

Some situations baffle the people of faith. Christians expect their faith and relationship to God to shield them from certain

tragedies that befall others, but most times, what happens to the nonreligious often happens to the religious as well. Ecclesiastes 9:11 reads,

I returned and saw under the sun that—The race is not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all.

Is God behind this “*time and chance*”?

Back in Nigeria, I once conducted the funeral of a young executive who had died suddenly in a ghastly car accident. During the funeral, Tade, a young evangelist just starting off in the ministry, came to see me. He had to sit through the service and wait until the burial was over to speak with me. Once over, Tade informed me that he was bleeding inside as I “performed” the funeral, for he sincerely believed it was not the will of God for the church to bury young people.

“Reverend, where is the faith of the church?” Tade asked me. Quickly he told me of dead people raised back to life in Jesus’ ministry and of contemporary cases he had read about in books authored by some American healing evangelists and faith preachers. Tade went on to say that he believed if he could get some men and women of faith to agree with him, we would not have had to bury the young man.

Tade’s position raises questions. What happens if (or when) people are not healed after much prayer and exercise of faith by the sick person and the church? And what of the Christians who died young of an ailment or accident? How about Christians who are serving God fervently, yet are plagued by diseases that remain unhealed?

In the Bible, we find that some Christians in the early church died young for their faith (Acts 7 and 12), and that many saints and church leaders—including the apostle Paul and some of his close associates—were afflicted with ailments.

At the time of his conversion and call to ministry, Paul was told that he was called to suffer great things for Christ’s name (Acts 9:16). It is without a doubt that Paul carried out his missionary

Believers have physical bodies, live in a physical world, and are subject to the physical laws that govern nature. God may suspend or overrule any of these laws, but He generally works with them. When God's people break some laws of nature—knowingly or unknowingly—they may expect to suffer the consequences, like everyone else.

visits in physical weakness. We find much evidence of this in the epistles (Galatians and 2 Corinthians), as well as the book of Acts (chapters 13-28), which records some of what Paul suffered to carry the gospel to the Gentile nations. We learn in Galatians 4:13-15 that Paul may have had an eye problem, and he definitely had an undisclosed problem, which he described as “a messenger of Satan,” “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Countless possibilities have been suggested for this undisclosed problem of Paul’s, and I believe the Holy Spirit meant it so. The “*thorn in the flesh*,”

therefore, is inclusive of everyone’s undisclosed problem for which sufficient grace has been promised.

Paul’s close associate and son in the faith, Timothy, had a recurring stomach ailment about which Paul advised, “*No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for your stomach’s sake and your frequent infirmities*” (1 Tim. 5:23). Epaphroditus, Paul’s companion in labor, and fellow-soldier, “*was sick almost unto death*” (Phil. 2:27). We also know that Paul left Trophimus sick in Miletum (2 Tim. 4:20). Did not these servants of God pray? Yes, they did. Did they lack faith? I don’t think so. Did God fail them? No, He did not. Then what happened? God “*works all things according to the counsel of His will*” (Eph. 1:11b).

Believers have physical bodies, live in a physical world, and are subject to the physical laws that govern nature. God may suspend or overrule any of these laws, but He generally works with them. When God’s people break some laws of nature—knowingly or unknowingly—they may expect to suffer the consequences, like everyone else.

When Physical Healing Is Denied or Delayed

Christians reveal what they are “truly made of” when things don’t go their way. We see this especially when they experience physical discomforts or emotional pains. Just look at the Israelites. Moses reminded them that one of the purposes of their wandering for forty years in the wilderness was for God to show them what lived in their hearts. God put them through situations that revealed their true nature and inner motives for service:

And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not....

Who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end (Deut. 8:2,16).

We can be sure that God will not lead us to places His grace will not first go before. Paul received grace to cope with his “*thorn in the flesh.*” And concerning Epaphroditus, Paul wrote, “*God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow*” (Phil. 2:27). In any situation, God’s mercy and grace will not fail to meet the need. Scripture also indicates that sometimes death, even premature death, may be a divine solution to a problem (Isa. 57:1,2; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Cor. 11:29,30).

Christians reveal what they are “truly made of” when things don’t go their way.

Individuals who remained loyal to God when healing, deliverance, or provision seemed to have been denied were listed among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:36-39. It is such men and women in the church today who have genuine *proof* of their faith. I believe theirs is the kind of faith that we should celebrate, and it is of such men and women that we should make heroes and heroines.

Satan insinuated that Job was serving God for the blessings of wealth and health, and that Job would put faith aside if these were taken from him. In a story that we know all too well (Job 1; 2), God allowed Satan to destroy Job's wealth and health. Job's wife lost faith. Job's friends complicated matters for him with their philosophies. Job had not been privy to the dialogue in heaven so he had no idea about the wager or why he was suffering. But he held on to God, even when he was convinced that God was unfairly crushing him. Job had his moments of doubts, anger, frustration, despair, but he maintained his trust. Even Satan could not fault Job's testimony. Job's faith had been put to the test and he came out shining brighter than gold.

Many of my heroes and heroines have been patients who suffered "unfairly" and yet who have been uncritical of God and have refused to blame Him. I once asked Jake, a patient with kidney problems and diabetes, if he was bitter towards God for his condition of health, and if he felt cheated that he could not eat what a "normal" person ate. Jake told me that he neither blamed God for his ailments nor himself. God did not put them on him and he did not bring them on himself. His physical body is simply responding and malfunctioning in some ways because of the presence of germs and his own genetic make up. Many such patients, like Jake have struck the balance between God's sovereignty, human responsibility, and the fact that we live in a fallen world.

*We can be sure that
God will not lead
us to places His
grace will not first
go before.*

I believe that the more we acknowledge the fallenness of creation, the better our sense of gratitude will be for the mercies we receive. We will also realize that the consequences of the Fall of the human race (Gen. 3; Rom. 8:19-23) are more far-reaching than we imagined them to be. Following the sin of our first parents, God declared, "*Cursed is the ground for your sake.... Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you*" (Gen. 3:17,18). Because of this curse on creation, "*The whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now*" (Rom. 8:22).

God is sovereign. We are dependent beings, who like to take charge. We like to think that we are in control of our lives, that we are the architects of our own destinies. But the truth is that we control nothing. Scripture says that we are like clay in the hand of the potter (Isa. 29:16; 64:8; Rom. 9:21). God is the potter; we are the clay. The clay cannot argue with or dictate to the potter what it will become. We have no control over our birth, our death, or the events between our birth and death.

We really have no claims on God for anything, apart from what God gives us in His grace and mercy. *“It is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy”* (Rom. 9:16). God works *“all things according to the counsel of His will”* (Eph. 1:11b). *“For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s”* (Rom. 14:8).

One of Paul’s attitudes to suffering is brought out in his letter to the Philippians. Paul, in prison for the gospel, chose to see the possible good that the sovereign God might bring from what He allowed. Paul saw in his imprisonment the spread of the gospel: an opportunity to witness to palace soldiers and the king, the boldness and courage of Christians to preach (Phil. 1:12-21). He strongly urged his readers to rejoice again and again (Phil. 4:4).

In Paul’s epistles to the Roman and Corinthian Christians, he urged them to view their present sufferings in the light of the glory that was to be revealed, and to know that what was awaiting them far outweighed and compensated whatever suffering they were experiencing (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; 1 Cor. 2:9).

When healing seems to have been delayed or denied, it should in no way make us doubt our Father’s love and concern. Now we know in part. Someday, we shall understand better (1 Cor. 13:9-12). In the mean time, let us thank God for His mercies.

Prayer and Inner Healing

We do not know why some people are healed in unexplainable circumstances other than the direct answer to prayer, and others are not cured of their ailments, regardless of the intensity and earnestness of

prayers. But we do know that even when prayers do not result in a cure, it often results in the emotional healing of the person praying or the one being prayed for. Prayer does bring peace and inner healing.

There is a connection between the physical body and soul, spirit, or mind. When one part is sick or healthy, it directly affects the other. Many of our physical illnesses are directly traceable to an emotional wound or a broken spirit. And the things that break the body may easily break the spirit as well. Prayer is helpful to maintain a healthy spirit, and a healthy spirit is like medicine to the body. King Solomon, the wise king, wrote in the book of Proverbs,

A merry heart does good, like medicine, But a broken spirit dries the bones.... The spirit of a man will sustain him in sickness, But who can bear a broken spirit? (Prov. 17:22; 18:14).

Prayer Answered, Request Denied

Prayer does not always result in deliverance, nor is it always the means of ending our pain. Sometimes, prayer provides the

We do know that even when prayers do not result in a cure, it often results in the emotional healing of the person praying or the one being prayed for.

power of transforming the pain into dependence upon God. The transformation comes when we are able to redefine the problem as a gift from God, and when we also receive grace from God to cope with our unrelenting, hurting situation.

Let me illustrate this with Paul's reaction to the "thorn in his flesh" (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Three times Paul prayed earnestly for relief, but the problem did not leave. This goes to show that some of our problems will

not go away, no matter how much we pray, and regardless of what office or position in Christ's church we occupy. The important point is that Paul's was not a case of unanswered *prayer*; it was one of denied *request*. God supplied Paul's *need* (grace), not his *want* (physical relief).

And Paul was not bitter or resentful of the outcome. He was told why his request had not been granted, and he accepted this answer. Quite often, we are not told why we weren't granted our request, and God is not obliged to explain Himself to anyone, for He is sovereign.

Paul accepted this sovereignty. His words, "*a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan*" (2 Cor. 12:7b), suggest that, to him, everything originates and ends with God; God was the "Lord" over all events of his life. Thus, he could rejoice because he saw God's hand in his life and suffering.

From Paul's example, we learn that how we use our pain and suffering is more important than understanding its mystery. Paul did this when he decided to see his "*thorn*" as an opportunity to draw upon God's strength in his weakness. Paul understood that his "*thorn*" would drive him to his knees; he would have to lean on God's grace, mercy, and direction, and not on his own.

God does not need us to be strong. He knows we are frail, human beings. The sooner we acknowledge this, the better, for God does not use us when we pose to be self-sufficient and perfect. God's strength is made perfect *only* in our weakness and authenticity as human vessels.

We know from 1 Corinthians 10:13 that no problem will come our way that is uncommon or beyond our ability to endure, because God is faithful and His "*grace is sufficient for you*" (2 Cor. 12:9). As Robert T. Ketcham said, "Your heavenly Father is too good to be unkind, and too wise to make mistakes." Don't close yourself off to God and His grace in your time of need. Believe that He is sovereign, that He is "bigger than any disease" and any situa-

Prayer does not always result in deliverance, nor is it always the means of ending our pain. Sometimes, prayer provides the power of transforming the pain into dependence upon God.

tion. And pray. Pray that even if your circumstances don't change, that God will at least change your understanding and perception of

your situation. As I write this, I think of Barbara, a patient who told me the secret of her ability to cope: “Pain is inevitable, but suffering optional. Suffering is a choice,” she explained. “It depends on what you tell yourself about your pain.”

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. What strikes you most in Evan’s story?
2. How do you cope when the hospital becomes like a revolving door: there is always something around the corner, but you don’t know what’s waiting for you until you turn the bend?
3. Make a list of attitudes and behaviors that would be helpful to keep a “merry heart” even when situations are unpleasant.
4. Do you have “*a thorn in the flesh*,” a problem that won’t go away despite much prayer? Can we refer to a besetting sin as “*a thorn in the flesh*”? Explain why or why not.
5. A friend says with a shrug, “What will be will be.” Is this philosophy the same as belief in God’s sovereignty? Explain.
6. Do you agree with the patient who said, “Pain is inevitable but suffering is optional”? Explain why or why not.

7

• • Transitions and Terminations • •

(I'm Grieving)

Have mercy on me, O LORD, for I am in trouble; My eye wastes away with grief, Yes, my soul and my body! (Ps. 31:9).

Miriam

Miriam is a thirty-five-year-old lymphoma patient who is waiting to be released from the hospital on the day I visit. When I see Miriam, she is lying in bed, dressed in street clothing. A turban is completely wrapped over her head, which at this time in her treatment may be completely bald from the effects of chemotherapy. Miriam's charts indicate that she is "non-religious."

When I introduce myself and ask Miriam if it is a good time to visit with her, Miriam informs me she has been discharged and is likely going home soon. She seems nervous, but I figure it's because she is anxious to leave.

"How are you?" I ask.

With a big smile, Miriam answers, "Good!"

I have become too familiar with patients whose words do not express their feelings, but instead of "calling bluff," I try to match my humor to hers.

“How good?” I jest.

“Better than yesterday,” she responds with a smile.

“Well, how was yesterday?” I persist.

“I was dizzy.” Suddenly Miriam changes to a brighter note. “But I’m almost through. This is my sixth of eight chemo treatments.”

“How has it been?” I ask.

“Not bad,” she concedes. “I’ve not had any of the problems that many patients on chemo often have. And I’ve had my family and friends with me. They have been very supportive.”

“You sound very grateful for your family’s support,” I note to her.

“Yes, and my positive attitude.”

“Positive attitude? How’s that?” I ask.

“My attitude that I will make it through,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Has that always been your attitude, or is it something you developed to cope with this illness?” I ask. I know many patients have been told by medical staff and family to keep a positive spirit to fight their disease.

*Life is not
a bed of roses.*

“Yes, it’s always been my attitude.”

“Always?” I cock my head in doubt. When a person says “always” or “never,” I often challenge them. Those are exclusive words that are rarely true of human behavior.

And since the visit has been light and friendly, I continue to play the game.

She takes some time to reflect on her answer, and then qualifies it. “Well, okay, not *always*. Life does throw you pebbles,” she admits.

“Pebbles? Hmm. Tell me more.”

“Well, you know...‘Life is not a bed of roses.’” Miriam looks away from me.

I sit quietly with her for a moment before gently asking. “How did you take the news when you were first diagnosed?”

She begins to cry. “I lost a friend through breast cancer before this came up,” her voice cracks.

“That’s scary,” I acknowledge.

“Yeah. So I have to make plans both ways: if I make it, and if I

don't...I'll make it, though. But I have to make plans if I don't. My attitude and will to conquer has helped my family. I am very positive."

"You know, I've been on a sick bed before," I share with her. "From my experience, it's easier to have a positive attitude when you're healthy than when illness stares you in the face."

"And it also makes you see life from another angle," she adds.

"Has that been your experience?"

"Yes, you know what matters in life from what you can and can't let go of."

I nod. "I'm with you on that."

Miriam continues to cry and reaches for a wad of tissues. "This is the first time I've been upset in a long while," she sobs.

"I'm sorry I upset you."

"It's not you." She is unable to control herself. "It's not you."

Miriam's words stuck with me. "You know what matters in life from what you can and can't let go of."

Dray

Dray, who just learned of his terminal condition, was given about six months to live with or without surgery. When I came to see him, his hospital room was decorated with photographs, cards, flowers, and the handiwork of his children and grandchildren. Everything around Dray reminded him of his family, the greatest sense of loss he was mourning. Again and again, Dray choked back tears as he told me of his family life: his first marriage, his second marriage, his children and the colleges they attended, jobs they held, what part of the United States they lived in. He told me the stories of the people in his photographs, and the cards and decorations that surrounded him. Those were the things that gave meaning to his life. "I am not asking to live forever," Dray said,

The diagnoses of certain diseases often strike us with fear of imminent death.

“but why should sickness snatch me away from all these loved ones and these beautiful things in my life?”

Christie

Once I had the opportunity to meet with Christie, a black woman from the outpatient clinic who was awaiting radiation. In one short hour, Christie opened my eyes to the world she lived in everyday: “I was a healthy person doing my work,” Christie explained, “and now, this! What did I do? I have children and grandchildren, and I love them. There are women who don’t love their children, women who take the lives of their own children. Nothing like this happens to them. It is people who love their children and want to raise them who suffer.

“My husband died of the same thing three years ago,” she continued, “so the children have to go through it again. It’s not fair! I have a good job; I have done well in life and in my career, but now I have to lose everything. What is the whole purpose of working hard? Why do you think this happens?...You visit and preach to patients? Tell me what you tell them! Suddenly you are losing control; you are helpless. Little by little, the sickness robs you of your life and all that is important to you. God must have some ways to explain this...”

For most of the time Christie was talking, I was speechless, overwhelmed, and saddened by her story. It was my first day on the job at this hospital, and I couldn’t but wonder, *Am I ready for this?* I did not know that my sadness and confusion could be read on my face until Christie wiped her tears and said to me, “Chaplain, you have to be strong to be able to help others. Don’t take it on yourself, otherwise you won’t be able to visit patients.”

Confronting Your Death

The diagnoses of certain diseases often strike us with fear of imminent death. When test results show disease with no known cure or little chance of recovery, the news is often received by patients and family members as the sign of the beginning of the end.

During my schooling, I remember being told that if I wanted to be effective in my job, I would need to face my own death squarely. Dr. Richard Bennink, one of my CPE supervisors, once told of a seminar he went to, where an expert on end-of-life issues discussed this issue more in depth. The speaker, who dealt with terminal patients on a day-to-day basis, said that hospital staff needed to put themselves in the shoes of a terminal patient. They needed to ask themselves how *they* would bring closure to *their* lives if they were told they only had three months to live. If medical practitioners or hospital chaplains have not faced the issue of their death, they will always run away, either emotionally or physically, when they encounter a patient on a deathbed.

God has not promised any of us three months. In fact, he hasn't even promised us tomorrow. Only today, only now! Dr. Gary V. Simpson, senior pastor of Concord Baptist Church, Brooklyn, NY, often says, "This is not the land of the living, but of the dying." Have you confronted *your* death?

TRANSITIONS AND TERMINATIONS

Loss and Gain, Endings and Beginnings

Life is full of loss and gain, endings and beginnings. And in order to deal with loss, we must go through a process of grieving where we eventually become reconciled to our painful situation.

Those who do not grieve, or are not willing to embrace loss, can hardly welcome the gains that come from it. Jesus said that a grain of wheat has to be buried in the soil and "die" before it can bring forth a new beginning (John 12:24). The fact is, we hardly can initiate beginnings unless we have learned to celebrate endings (Bridges, 1991).

To enjoy the present, we have to say goodbye to the past. If, for example, we want to get married, we have to be willing to let go of

- *Life is full of loss and gain, endings and beginnings.*

- *To deal with loss, we must go through a process of grieving.*

- *To enjoy the present, we have to say goodbye to the past.*

our independence before the gain of companionship becomes a reality. If there is no proper closure to how things used to be, how the person used to live as a single person, then the individual can rarely be committed to a spouse in a lifelong relationship.

Or, if you are sick with an illness, you may realize you do not have the quality of life you had before. You may now be dependent on others, and you may not be able to return to your old job. Your sickness imprints you with a new identity. It is a loss that needs to be accepted and adjusted to.

The challenge for those who experience loss is to leave the familiar for the unfamiliar. For many, their former lifestyle was a “safe haven” where they felt acceptance, security, and community. Now the changes in their life come with great emotional turmoil. However, if there is no proper ending or grieving over the loss, the new has little chance of taking root. It is only when one has acknowledged the cost, and properly grieved over the loss, that acceptance and reconciliation to the new reality becomes possible.

Feeling “Death” in Our Losses

In a sense, any loss is like a death experience, for death is something before which we are helpless. When we lose of anything, physical or intangible, living or non-living, such as a favorite pet, a missed opportunity, an amputation, a job through a lay off, our visceral response is mourning. Whether you have lost health or wealth, a house or a spouse, a job or a friend, the feelings of pain, aloneness, helplessness, or abandonment are all the same in each situation. All result in some sort of deprivation and can be devastating as death itself.

Death of anything—a person, an unfulfilled dream, a miscarriage, a former way of life—requires that we grieve. It is helpful to encourage and leave room for people to grieve and release emotions when they suffer significant loss. However, we must be careful in our approach. For example, in her effort to comfort a young widow, a divorcee, whose former husband had remarried and was no longer a part of her life, told her widowed friend that she understood what

she was going through. The divorcee said she understood the widow's feelings of loss and the sadness she felt over shattered dreams, because she, too, felt those feelings when she divorced. The grieving widow, however, felt that her friend minimized her pain by comparing the loss of a husband through death, with loss through divorce. Her friend's children could still see their father; her children, however, would never have that opportunity. While loss through divorce is not the same as loss through death, the feelings may actually compare.

*Death of anything—
a person, an unful-
filled dream, a former
way of life—requires
that we grieve.*

However, we must understand that grieving cannot be programmed or planned, because it is an individualistic process dependent on a person's temperament and his or her own unique experiences. It is also a very sensitive time when powerful emotions, such as denial, hopelessness, anger, guilt, and other such feelings, surface. It takes time for these emotions to be processed, and every person goes through grief on his or her own timetable.

The Importance of Proper Closure

The Example of Freed Israelites

Though the Israelites had been released from the slavery of Egypt, they never got to enter the Promised Land. This was not only because of their lack of trust and their fear of the giants, it was also because they kept looking back to Egypt. They did not admit that they had to bring closure to their life in Egypt and cut themselves off from the so-called "good old days" before they could be engaged in the moment and enter the Promised Land. They were so enamored with the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic they had in their former life, that a new beginning was made impossible. This was their complaint in the wilderness:

We wish that the LORD had killed us in Egypt. There we could at least sit down and eat meat as much as other food as we wanted....If only we could have some meat! In Egypt we used to eat all the fish we wanted, and it cost us nothing. Remember the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic we had? But now our strength is gone. There is nothing at all to eat—nothing but this manna day after day! (Ex. 16:3; Num. 11:4-6; TEV).

Those Israelites had left Egypt, but Egypt had not left them. They carried Egypt in their hearts. They had so idealized the past that they became enslaved and entrapped by it. And the same can happen to us. In order to step into the unknown that lies continually before us, we need to be willing to bring other things to a close. Only then can a new chapter be opened.

Paul's Example

Even though the apostle Paul had no regret for what he left behind to follow Jesus, he nonetheless acknowledged them as legitimate losses (Phil. 3:3-11).

In our emotions,

- *Loss translates as death*
- *Death has a tone of finality*
- *This feeling reminds us of our powerlessness and a sense of defeat*
- *Therefore, in our experience, living and non-living things die*

But what things were gain to me [in his former life], these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ...but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead (Phil. 3:7,8,13b).

Paul didn't look back to anything he left behind in his former life to follow Christ. They were meaningless compared to his new identity in Christ. Jesus used some parables to illustrate and teach the importance of counting the cost of following Him (Luke 9:57-62; 14:25-33). Counting the cost implies balancing a ledger or doing a feasibility study to be certain of the prospects of one's investment. Counting the cost will, among other things, involve evaluating possible losses and potential gains, and being determined to bring certain activities to a close.

To step into the unknown implies being conscious of the endings that must take place and being willing to shut the door and leave them behind in order to invest in other things. Without this a person may be dissatisfied with the way things are, but he or she will not be able to move beyond that point into a new environment.

Elisha's Example

It is always helpful to mark endings or beginnings with a kind of ceremony, ritual, "funeral," party, or anything to indicate symbolically that some things are either being laid to rest, or being brought to life. After Elijah the prophet threw his mantle on Elisha (signifying Elisha's call into prophetic ministry as Elijah's successor), Elisha ritualized the end of his life as a farmer. He took a pair of oxen from the twelve he was plowing with,

"slaughtered them and boiled their flesh, using the oxen's equipment, and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he arose and followed Elijah, and became his servant" (1 Kings 19:21).

With that symbolic act, Elisha formalized both the closure of his former profession and the entrance into a new one. By killing the oxen that ploughed his fields and burning the "oxen's equipment," he had cut the ties to his former life. Then with the party he gave, he initiated a new beginning with the blessing of friends and family.

- *Stepping into the unknown implies being conscious of the endings that must take place.*
- *Only when the door is shut to the past can one move into new realities.*

A Personal Example

I missed the opportunity to say good-bye to my father, and it still hurts. I was away when the news of his death reached me, and I hurried to make arrangements for the funeral and burial.

But my father had been buried before I arrived. I did not even have the opportunity of seeing him in his casket or taking part in the funeral service.

I am his oldest son! Those to whom he was a brother, uncle, friend and husband made the arrangements, cheating those to whom he was father. And so, I still grieve. I believe it is this lack of saying good-bye and experiencing the reality of the loss in the context of the funeral and burial ceremonies that make it even harder for me to let go.

And it affects my life today. Once, I was asked to give support to a family who decided to take a family member off of life support. While the family members were hugging, kissing, and speaking farewell words to their beloved relative, I had feelings of bitterness, awkwardness and embarrassment, which I could not explain. When I mentioned these feelings to my supervisor, she explained that perhaps I was jealous. This family had the privilege of saying good-bye, something I did not have with my father and still grieve over.

There is no doubt that the future builds on the past, and no doubt that we always carry a bit of the past with us into the present, even after a clean break. Especially when we are at the threshold of major decisions or when life forces us to a crossroad, if we do not learn to deal with the past, at such times, it may be difficult for us to embrace the present.

Approaching the End

There is no greater cause for closure than the time individuals approach the end of their lives. Whether people are terminally ill, or just getting older, it is painful for them to come to terms with an ailing body.

The Bible gives examples of many once-active individuals who needed to cope with the frailty of old age. In Genesis 27:1, we read, “*When Isaac was old and his eyes were so dim that he could not see....*” Or in 1 Kings 1:1, we see that “*King David was old, advanced in years; and they put covers on him, but he could not get warm.*” And King Solomon, in Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, poetically describes the losses and weaknesses associated with old age: failure of sight, teeth, taste buds, hearing, sleep, appetite, a bent back, and trembling limbs. Coping with these losses can be frustrating to the once-independent individual who now has to depend on others.

It is also demanding and frustrating on those who have to care for the aging and dying. Caregivers also lose a sense of independence, for they are now in a situation where they have to sacrifice in order to care for someone else. We especially see this when people have to suddenly take care of their aging parents.

When this happens, it is easy to become frustrated and to see parents as an added burden. In response, some people simply commit their parents to a facility and then wait for the phone call from the institution announcing their parents’ demise. God asks us, however, to “*Honor [our] father and [our] mother, that [our] days may be long...*” (Ex. 20:12).

As caregivers, we need to put ourselves in the shoes of those we take care of—to really try to understand how difficult it is to face a depreciating body, the loss of independence, and ultimately, death. In the Bible, eighty-year-old Barzillai of Gilead describes how difficult it is to become old. Barzillai had taken care of King David and his family when David ran from Absalom. After the civil war had been successfully quelled and David was returning to Jerusalem, he invited Barzillai to come to Jerusalem with him and offered to take care of the old man in return. But Barzillai turned down the king’s offer, saying,

• *The future builds on the past.*

• *We also carry a bit of the past with us into the present.*

How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? Today I am eighty years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not: Can your servant taste what he eats or drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king (2 Sam. 19:34-35; NRSV).

The old man expressed what many aged and ill people experience: uncertainty about time of death, loss of certain feelings and sensations, loss of autonomy and independence, and feeling like a burden to others.

Both parties—patients and caregivers alike—need to adapt to their new role as either a recipient or a provider. The loss of independence is an opportunity to appreciate interdependence, which is how we were made to live.

Grieving Our Losses

Suffering and grief isolate a person. Often, the pain of an event is so difficult, the person can hardly talk about it or put voice to his or her feelings. Then, too often, the person is discouraged from doing so when he or she attempts to, because sympathizers cannot bear the agony of lament. Sometimes friends display a kind of silence and embarrassment at what has happened, but this further isolates and alienates the bereaved in the experience of grief and suffering, in the end often prolonging the recovery process.

Grieving stages

- *Numbness*
- *Denial*
- *Bargaining*
- *Lament*
- *Anger*
- *Guilt*
- *Resolution*

However, it is when people feel safe to speak about their pain and when they know they are being heard, that the recovery process is right on target. It is a two-way track: a mourner encouraged to grieve, cry, lament, groan, shout, shriek, and talk in the presence of car-

ing, uncritical, sensitive, understanding, sympathetic, empathetic listening ears.

Research and studies have shown that suffering and grieving have many stages. This is true of any loss, whether it is the loss of health, job, property, position, freedom, status, loved one, or the like.

The first stage is *numbness*, or an absence of feeling. The person is so shocked by the loss, that he or she cannot voice anything, not even a cry. This is the body's way of keeping a person from being overwhelmed by a sense of loss.

The second stage is *denial*. This is an unconscious self-defense, a way a person protects himself or herself from the first impact of the loss. The person is in denial because they *deny* what has happened: "No! It's not true! Impossible! This can't be happening? I can't believe it. Tell me it's a joke! How could that be?" they say.

For certain losses, like the loss of health, fortune, or a job, there is a third stage, sometimes referred to as *bargaining*. The bargaining stage is when we offer God a proposition: "Lord, if you will do this, I will do that." For example, "If you heal me, I'll become a missionary," or, "Lord, if You please get me out of this problem, I'll be a better husband and father."

The fourth stage is *lament*. This is the cry of the soul. At this point, the person has gotten back their voice and now they cry out in response to their suffering. Lament is often addressed to God. The sufferer usually uses bold language, because they are crying out from the depths of their soul.

I once heard a woman lamenting and expressing her anger and distress at the loss of her husband. She said,

"Oh God, why? *Why* God? Answer me, God! This is not as we agreed. I left him two hours ago and he was doing well. We thought the worst was over. Your Word says that my husband is the crown of my head. Why will You take away the crown of my head? We prayed to You earnestly, didn't we? And You gave us assurance in Your Word. You did, didn't You? We have given testimonies that You answered our prayers. Didn't You, or were You mocking us? What will people say about You? Death is not my covenant with You, is it? Answer me, God! You are God and not Baal. Answer me, why? *Why? Why?*"

It was as if she held God by the shoulders and was shaking Him into action or waking Him out of a deep sleep.

The highly emotion-laden psalms are full of laments and imprecations. Many of them, such as Psalms 44, 79, and 80, are called lament psalms because of the feelings they express. The best way to appreciate the psalms is to read past the words of the psalmist to

People direct their anger at

- *Themselves or a family member*
- *The hospital or school system*
- *Medical personnel or other professionals*
- *Other "fortunate" people; survivors*
- *The deceased or the victim*
- *God (or pastors)*

the feelings behind the words. I also believe this is the way to understand the primal cry when a soul is distressed by the loss of a dear one. If God could bear with the strong emotions of the psalmists, He will bear with ours, too.

The fifth stage of grieving is usually *anger*. The anger of the griever may be directed at different sources. Sometimes people direct their anger at themselves, for being so helpless in the face of death. Others direct their anger at the doctors who could not save the person, or at the system that broke down.

Still, others direct their anger at the one who died, for leaving them behind to mourn and suffer. Some people even feel bitter toward those who still have loved ones living, while they do not. Or they may become angry at God for not heeding their prayers or for seeming unconcerned.

One of my supervisors, Dr. John Gleason defined anger as the human emotion in response to stress. In this way, anger is a secondary feeling to fear. John says anger by itself is amoral, neither good nor evil—it is part of our God-given instinct to survive. It is the direction and expression given to anger that has moral value. Studies have shown that when we are angry, a chemical change takes place in the body that builds up energy for either “fight” or “flight.” I

“touched this energy” in two instances: when I tried to calm a man who was boiling with anger, and with a patient who sat in his chair, motionless and speechless, repressing his feelings. As I touched these men, I experienced a surge of power similar to the sensation of touching a bare wire carrying an electric current. I withdrew my hand involuntarily as one does with static electricity. When anger is repressed and this intense energy builds up, the result is a destructive use of the energy, the physical manifestation of which may include ulcers, headaches and migraines, or high blood pressure.

The sixth stage of the grief process is *guilt*. This is when we say things such as, “If only...”, “I should have...”, “Had I known...”, “I wish I had....”, etc. These are statements of regret, where the bereaved or sick person seeks to absorb the guilt and holds him or herself responsible for what he or she could do nothing about.

The final stage is *resolution* or *acceptance*. In this stage, people work through the situation to find meaning in it. They are willing to put the past behind them and re-invest in life, becoming reconciled to what quality and quantity of life still remains. The hurt still exists but so does peace. In a personal way, the individual has found a program of action or even a new ministry through the experience of the loss. This stage moves the person forward, gets the individual occupied and busy, and instills a new sense of usefulness, purpose, and meaning to life. Accepting the loss and adjusting to it finally brings resolution.

Individuals who get involved in a support group with others who have experienced similar losses often reach resolution sooner than those who do not have such opportunities. Bereavement support groups are often affiliated with umbrella organizations such as churches, hospitals, counseling services, community centers and social service agencies. If a support group is not available, it is helpful to talk to those who have gone through or are going through the same experience.

These stages of grief are not fixed. Rather, they are multi-dimensional; people go back and forth in their expression of these emotions; jumping stages, and experiencing more of one than another. People also feel and express these emotions at different levels of

intensity, or sometimes they get stuck in one stage for a while. Getting stuck will prolong—and may even prevent—the stage of resolution.

It is also unhealthy for caregivers to attempt to short-circuit the stages by offering platitudes. It is important for all concerned to acknowledge that grief is normal and not unspiritual.

It is also important that we do not prolong our grief by stifling our tears because we think we are being “weak.” Studies have shown that the chemical content of the tears we shed when we grieve is different from the content of tears we shed for joy. When we grieve, the tears contain toxins (poisons) which nature helps us get rid of. How foolish we are then, when we, especially men, bottle up and shut out the fountains by totally controlling weeping and tears! One of the most helpful and most appropriate things to do for those who have experienced a loss is to allow them to grieve through it.

Grieving Styles

Grief is experienced and expressed differently, but it needs to be affectively ventilated, one way or another. It is important for family and friends to validate what a person is experiencing and how the person is expressing his or her grief, especially when the grieving pattern is different from what is conventional or cultural. As long as individuals

show movement and growth toward adjusting to life in spite of their losses, then they are doing fine.

During my residency, I once attended a seminar where a grief expert updated us on recent findings from research and pointed to different models and types of grieving processes. According to the instructor, grief experts have shown that there are cognitive (rational) and affective (emotional) ways of grieving.

All healthy grieving styles have the elements of a process, movement, and consistency; and the eventual outcome is resolution or acceptance.

ing. The emotive, internal expression of grief, which is conventional, has been labeled “feminine,” while the cognitive, external model, has

been dubbed the “masculine” type of mourning. The masculine-feminine tags have no gender connotation. A woman may mourn in a “masculine” way, and a man may mourn in a “feminine” manner.

The “masculine” mourner—male or female—deals with grief through rational thinking or by engaging in activities, or both. The activities may include projects, business trips, sports, games, business, cleaning, mowing, exercising, washing, visiting, writing, reading, journaling, and many other such things that are unemotional and disengaging.

For a “masculine” mourner, the grief energy may be directed into writing a book about experiences with the deceased, journaling one’s own grief process, or reading about losses. They may become philosophical, and may redefine, interpret, and formulate his or her theology and spiritual understanding in the light of the loss, not only to enable him or her to cope with the loss, but also to

validate the individual’s experience and provide a model for others. Some societies readily concede this to men but are critical of a woman who, by nature, exhibits the “masculine” response to grief. I know a Nigerian woman who was harshly criticized by her society, friends, and family for writing a book on her son’s death. The son had died after a protracted illness and the mother published what she thought was a celebration of the boy’s life. In the view (and culture) of her critics, such a thing ought to be done *by a child* for the parent, not vice versa.

The “feminine” mourner—man or woman—deals with grief in an affective, expressive manner. It is conventional for women and children to weep and show emotions, but when a man who is a feminine mourner expresses grief in the same way, he is challenged to shut down his feelings for fear of being considered a disgrace to his manhood.

Grieving styles

- “*Feminine mourner*”—*emotive, expressive manner*
- “*Masculine mourner*”—*rational, engages in activities*

Scripture is replete with male “feminine” mourners who openly grieved their losses. For example, when David and his warriors discovered that their village had been invaded and burnt, and their wives and children taken captives, *“then David and the people who were with him [his trained warriors] lifted up their voices and wept, until they had no more power to weep* (1 Sam. 30:4). In another instance, when David heard of the death of Saul and Jonathan, he *“took hold of his own clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted...”* (2 Sam. 1:11,12). And in the New Testament, after the death of the first Christian martyr, Luke records that *“devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him”* (Acts 8:2). It is okay, and healthy, for men to cry.

The way a person expresses grief has little or nothing to do with love for the deceased or the gravity of the loss experienced, but is determined by an individual’s chemistry. Emotional release may be absent or tempered, private or open, and it may be expressed in humor or limited to anger. All healthy grieving styles have the elements of a process, movement, and consistency; and the eventual outcome is resolution or acceptance.

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. “You know what matters in life from what you can and can’t let go of.” According to this statement, what is important to you? What things used to be important and now you realize they aren’t?
2. Dray: “I am not asking to live forever, but why should sickness snatch me away from all these loved ones and these beautiful things in my life?” Christie: “I was a healthy person doing my work, and now, this! What did I do? I have children and grandchildren, and I love them...” Design a program to help your church minister more effectively to those who are struggling with terminal illnesses.

3. If you had three months to live: (a) what would you tell God...your spouse...your children...your friends? (b) What would you do with the three months? How would you spend your last days on earth?
4. What losses are you experiencing in your life presently?
5. What endings are appropriate to usher new beginnings in some aspects of your life?
6. Are you a “masculine” or “feminine” griever? Are you in any grieving process right now? What do you do or find yourself doing when you are hurting?
7. What, to you, is the difference between proper grieving and having a pity party?

8

• • A Loved One Passes On • •

(I'm Crushed)

*“And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes;
there shall be no more death....for the former
things have passed away” (Rev. 21:4).*

The Kuti Family

On her tombstone are these words:

IN EVER INCREASING AFFECTIONATE MEMORY OF
OUR DEARLY BELOVED ONLY DAUGHTER AND SISTER

OLUFUNTO OLUDAMILOLA KUTI
ARIYIKE: AGED 22 YEARS

GIVEN: NOVEMBER 11, 1971

TAKEN: APRIL 7, 1994

BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD

“WHEN THE TRUMPET SHALL SOUND AND JESUS COMES IN GREAT
POWER HE WILL RAISE US UP TO BE WITH HIM FOREVER”

DADDY, MUMMY & BROTHERS

The questions surrounding Olufunto's death were many. *How can this happen to the Kuti family? Is this a big test of their faith, or have they sinned? If it can happen to them, who is safe? God, where is our testimony? How can You allow such a thing to happen to those who love and serve You? What will unbelievers say about You?*

When loved ones pass on, it is difficult to deal with all the emotions that surface. It is difficult to see God in the situation because we cannot understand His ways—especially when He takes away from the people who serve Him.

The Kuti nuclear family is an exemplary Christian home. Many of their extended family members are also known to be devoted Christians, and are providing leadership in various local churches. In addition to the many who have dealt with them on a professional level, the Kutis have touched many lives for good by their faith, Christian service, and charity. They are models among lay Christian leaders. Mr. Kuti is a deacon and an architect by profession. His wife is a deaconess and also a pharmacist.

Their daughter's final illness began with a fever. When she was admitted into a clinic, they found she had chloroquine-resistant malaria; parasites had affected her kidneys.

Unfortunately, Olufunto was sick at a time when the doctors and nurses of the Teaching Hospitals were on strike. The Lagos University Teaching Hospital, which had the most appropriate equipment to handle such complications, was also on strike. Thus, an arrangement was made with another private hospital that had the equipment that was needed. Olufunto was to be taken there early the following day. But she did not live that long. Shortly after midnight, Olufunto died.

God, how can You allow such a thing to happen to those who love and serve You? What will unbelievers say about You, Lord?

At dawn the following day, I was told of Olufunto's death. Because she had been a student of the University of Lagos where I was Protestant Chaplain of the University Chapel,

the Kuti family decided I should handle her funeral. When I visited the Kutis early in the morning, few hours after Olufunto's passing, there were many Christians gathered from different churches. The atmosphere, as expected, was laden with emotions. I asked that we go to the built-in chapel in the Kutis residence.

I read from 2 Samuel chapter 12, the story of the death of David and Bathsheba's first child. While the child was sick,

David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. So the elders of his house arose and went to him, to raise him up from the ground. But he would not, nor did he eat food with them (2 Sam. 12:16,17).

In spite of David's prayerful intercession and fasting, the child died on the seventh day. Not knowing how he would respond to the bad news,

the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead. For they said, "Indeed, while the child was alive, we spoke to him, and he would not heed our voice. How can we tell him that the child is dead? He may do some harm" (vs. 18).

David gathered from the whisperings that something was wrong. He asked point blank if the child had died. They replied he had. What David did next baffled them:

David arose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped. Then he went to his own house; and when he requested, they set food before him, and he ate (vs. 20).

When David's servants questioned his strange behavior, David's answer showed he was psychologically in control of himself. He did what he could when it was possible to do something. He prayed, he fasted, and he provided the best medical care possible, yet the child died. There was nothing more he could do to remedy the situation.

David submitted to God's sovereignty and I encouraged Olufunto's mourners to do the same, and not to defend God or judge Him. An uncle of Funto's asked me amidst sobs a question that many people feel when faced against God's sovereign decisions. "Why is it difficult to accept?"

In retrospect, I hope I would minister differently now when confronted with similar circumstances. After hearing the anguish of the uncle and many others, I believe now I tried to apply the bandage to the wound too soon. People need help putting voice to their feelings. We cannot pretend that we are fine when our hearts are aching and questioning. Space and opportunity is needed for people to vent their feelings.

A LOVED ONE PASSES ON

Can Christians Be Angry with God?

It is unfortunate that in times of bereavement and loss, many care providers do not help mourners grieve and release emotions in an appropriate manner. This is partly because they themselves feel threatened by displays of emotions, and partly because some think it is sacrilegious to show anguish. It is even more unfortunate when caregivers hold against the grieving person any action, speech, or comment which, by their judgment, is "unChristian" or "unspiritual." Sadness, anger, fear, denial, depression, and guilt are appropriate emotions to expect when we lose a loved one, and we should give the bereaved the freedom to experience and express them.

Like Job, we can simultaneously express our anger and displeasure at God, and at the same time acknowledge God's sovereignty and affirm our love and commitment to Him. Job did this when he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

Anger is one of the emotions we often discourage people from showing. It seems that we easily concede other emotions but not anger. Therefore many Christians have learned to mask their so-called “inappropriate” anger with sadness or guilt—emotions which are “allowed” by their Christian community. But we must understand that anger is a secondary emotion. There is a *reason* why we get angry. Sometimes it’s because we are frustrated; other times it’s because we are hurt or because we feel powerless.

Imagine this situation. Wouldn’t you be angry if someone you knew could prevent a tragedy but did not do so? Would you just graciously and happily accept this? Now imagine that this someone is a friend, or your father, or your heavenly Father and Friend. Wouldn’t you feel bewildered? Betrayed?

When we are in situations where we do not know how to defend or justify God and His actions, it is only proper to let Him know that we are confused—to confess to Him our true emotions, no matter how raw they are. In healthy families, relationships are sustained by passion and honesty, not by passivity, pretense, or denial. In the same manner, we should not shy away from honestly asking God our questions, even if we may not get answers. If God is your Friend and heavenly Father, then you do not have to hide or pretend that you are happy when you are not. You can direct your anger at Him and express your feelings to Him because He already knows what they are.

If you feel you cannot be truthful in your feelings, either there is no passion in your relationship, or the cord that sustains the relationship is so slender that you are afraid that any expression of real emotion on your part will sever that slim strand. It is when you care about a relationship and when you are committed to its growth that you are honest with people about how you feel.

Do not think that being angry with someone means that the relationship will be severed. Like Job, you can simultaneously express your anger and displeasure at God, and at the same time acknowledge His sovereignty and affirm your love and commitment to Him. Job did this when he said, “*Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him*” (Job 13:15).

Also, do not think that being angry with God is sin. The Bible does not say we should not be angry, but that we should not sin in our anger. To pretend that I am not angry when I am, or to find ways to rationalize my anger, is sin. It is also unhealthy to direct all our anger at Satan, for we stand the chance of being consumed by

God does not want us to be preoccupied with our anger, but to work through it.

our anger. Anger will never be assuaged when it is directed against the devil. God does not want us to be preoccupied by our anger, but to work through it. He wants us to see past the devil to God, who is Lord over all the events of our lives.

Don't get me wrong. Confessing our anger to God does not necessarily mean our anger is justified or that it has been expressed *appropriately*. Though we should be honest in our emotions, we still need to express them in accordance with the scriptural injunction for family living: "*speaking the truth in love*" (Eph. 4:15).

Be honest with God. And know that God is big enough to handle even your anger.

A Painful Farewell

Relatives, friends, and church members gathered in the Chapel of Christ Our Light, at the University of Lagos, on Saturday April 9th, at 9:45 a.m. for Olufunto's funeral service. I knew the family members of the deceased and many other mourners, so I couldn't distance myself from the situation in any way, nor did I want to. I believe no Christian minister should detach himself emotionally from his surrounding at such times, but that mature emotional involvement that communicates hope and empathy should be the goal:

And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.... Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (1 Cor. 12:26; Rom. 12:15).

Knowing full well that the people with wet eyes before me were my close Christian family members, I began the service. The following is the (edited and expanded) sermon I spoke at Olufunto’s funeral:

¹ I do not know if what I shall share here can pass for a funeral sermon. I want to speak from Romans 8:28 because, though this verse is loved and cherished by many, it has often been misapplied and misinterpreted. But it remains true at all times, even now.

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Does God Take Away?

I once heard an American preacher expound on Job chapters 1 and 2. His explanation of Job 1:21 made so much sense to me that I didn’t bother to think it through too thoroughly. Job had said “*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.*”

This preacher said, “God does not take away, God gives. God is a giver. *For God so loved the world that He gave... God gives us all things richly to enjoy... God gives to all liberally and without reproach...* (John 3:16; 1 Tim. 6:17; James 1:5). God gives, Amen!” the preacher continued as he strolled a little into his audience, “God will add to your life, God will not take away from you, Amen!” He went on to say that if Job had known of the dialogue in heaven, he would not have said, “*the LORD has taken away*” because it was *Satan* who

- *God took a rib from Adam and it was an act of love to meet a need in Adam’s life.*
- *It also achieved a divine purpose in God’s creation.*

¹ The text of the sermon has been edited (and expanded) for publication. I humbly dedicate this chapter to the honor and memory of Miss ‘Funto Kuti who is now with her Lord.

took away his wealth, his health, and his family—not God. God only *permitted* the devil to act *with limitations*.

I still respect this American preacher but I no longer accept his explanation of that passage. Why? I had an experience that changed all that. And while we should not use experience to establish doctrine, we may question doctrine in the light of experience. A doctrine that is not supported by experience is half-truth.

I once had the experience of burying a nine-year-old girl who suffered from sickle cell anemia. As her mother drove her to the hospital, the girl sat in the back seat and prayed. She told her mother not to worry, that she would be all right. However, a couple of hours after admission to the hospital, the little girl was *perfectly* all right, for she had gone to a better world!

The mother would not accept her child's death, and Christians were called to pray the girl back to life. As part of the team, I spent the whole night praying to God for mercy and rebuking death in Jesus' name, but no matter what we did, the little girl didn't come back to life. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego once said to Nebuchadnezzar, "...*Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us...and he will deliver us. But if not... we will not serve thy gods...*" (Dan. 3:17,18; KJV). God could bring the little girl back to life in answer to our prayers, but He didn't.

*Ultimately,
"the buck stops"
with God.*

What troubled me was how to accept this situation. The verse, "*The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away,*" kept echoing in my mind and I kept fighting it. I kept saying "No! God does not take away; God is a generous giver. Satan is the thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy." But the verse kept ringing in my ears. Then I took the question to God and searched the Scriptures. I began at Genesis chapter 1. The question was: "Lord, do you take away?" I didn't have to go far, for right there in Genesis chapter 2, I saw that God *took* a rib from Adam.

God took a rib from Adam in an act of love to meet a need in Adam's life. The action helped achieve a purpose not only in Adam's life, but also in God's creation. A voice spoke to my heart

then that God *does* take away, but He does so always as an act of love and to bring glory to God in ways we may not understand. Whatever God does or allows is an act of love.

When I said that God takes away, I do not mean that we can hold Him responsible in the immediate circumstance of any event, but that, ultimately, “the buck stops” with Him. The investigators and reporters of Job’s story did not hint that the tragedies were “the acts of God,” because they found enough evidence at the scene of the tragedies that pointed to some culprits. So God was not directly responsible for the calamities, as the American preacher had insinuated. The *Sabeans* and the *Chaldeans* were responsible for stealing Job’s flock and killing his men. And *Satan* was behind the Sabeans and the Chaldeans.

But Satan’s power is limited. Behind Job’s situation was the heavenly wager and the overruling control of God. Without God, neither Satan nor those marauders could achieve anything they set out to do. I find this helpful because it helps me turn my anger and passion in the right direction. I think it is the same way Paul dealt with his “*thorn in the flesh*.”

In 2 Corinthians 12:7, Paul implies that, to keep him from becoming conceited because of the abundant revelations given to him, “*a thorn in the flesh was given to [him].*” The phrase, “*was given to me,*” suggests receiving a gift from God. Then he called this “*thorn in the flesh,*” whatever it was, “*a messenger of Satan to buffet me.*” What are we to believe is the source of Paul’s problem? God or Satan? Or is it from God through Satan? Would that not suggest that God and Satan are in partnership?

I believe Paul’s problem was indeed from Satan, but Paul knew that even Satan’s messenger was under God’s surveillance. It was something he learned to live with as an opportunity to show God’s

*Two preachers may
be both*

- *Biblical, and*
- *God-honoring*

*Yet differ in their
interpretation of a
text. Why?*

- *God is greater
than our theologies*

grace. Paul's focus was not on Satan—the agent that caused him stress—but on God. The apostle saw beyond the thorn he could not control to the God who controls the universe. Neither Satan nor the thorn could afflict Paul without God's knowledge. The same holds true for each of us.

What Is a Long Life?

Just barely more than a month ago, the Christians at the University of Lagos held a prayer-walk. We marched round the university campus, stopping at strategic spots to pray. One of our

Only God can weave the story of the drama of salvation, which we call "good news," from an unbroken chain of gory events such as the betrayal, rejection, torture, and death of Jesus, to eventual resurrection against all odds.

prayer requests was for protection from premature, sudden deaths. And we have seen how the Lord miraculously spared many lives, including those attacked by cult members and by armed robbers. When I learned of Funto's death I was very upset for many reasons. I said to God, "But we prayed against sudden and premature deaths. Your Word says, 'With long life I will satisfy him...' (Ps. 91:16). What is a long life?"

I took my frustrations to God and began to search His Word, again from Genesis, the book of beginnings. In Genesis 1, I saw the love of God in creation. In Genesis 2, I saw God perfecting His creation. Adam lacked a companion, so God, in His great love, made a wife for him. In Genesis 3, I saw the entrance of sin into the world. But I also saw how God lovingly provided redemption: He clothed Adam and Eve with animal skin and gave the promise of a Savior.

In Genesis 4, I saw a young man clubbed to death by his own brother, the first record of physical death. Here was a righteous young man who had been murdered by his jealous brother. Cain

lived to marry and to have a city named after his son, Enoch. But Abel never married; he wasn't allowed to live long enough to marry. I asked, "Is this a long life?"

Strangely, I heard a voice in my spirit that said, "Yes, that was a long life. Abel's life was long enough for him to know how to offer an acceptable sacrifice to God. It was long enough for Abel to have the opportunity to offer his sacrifice to God, long enough for him to have a good testimony. Abel lived long enough to be able to prepare for eternity. His name is mentioned among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. What else of eternal value do you expect to accomplish in a long life? What is it of spiritual importance that Abel's lifespan did not achieve? Nothing!"

A long life is one that is long enough to prepare for eternity.

If you ask me if Funto lived a long life, my answer would be YES. She lived long enough to prepare for eternity. She lived long enough to give her life to Christ and to offer her life as an acceptable sacrifice. She lived long enough to leave a good testimony to all of us. She lived long enough to accomplish what the Lord required of her.

Today, if you ask me to define a long life or to speak on Psalm 91:16, "*With long life I will satisfy him...*", I will tell you that a long life is one that is long enough to be presented with the message of life through Christ, long enough to prepare for eternity, long enough to leave a good testimony, long enough that when that person stands before God and God asks him or her, "What did you do with Christ? What did you do with the talents I gave you? What did you do with the opportunities I gave you?" He or she will not be able to answer back, "God, you know I didn't live long enough to receive Christ;" or, "Lord, you know I didn't live long enough to serve you with my talents or long enough to use the opportunities you brought my way."

The last part of Psalm 91:16, reads, "*...And show him My salvation.*" "Salvation" is an all-embracing word. It is used in the Scriptures in three tenses: past, present, and future. As used in the

past, it refers to our *justification* in Christ. We have been saved from the penalty of sin. Used in the present, it denotes our *sanctification* in Christ. We are being saved from the power of sin. In the future tense, it depicts our *glorification* in Christ. We shall be saved from the presence of sin. Whenever our Lord Jesus refers to His death, He talks about His glorification (John 7:39; 12:16).

Funto's salvation is now complete. She has been saved from the presence of sin. She can no longer be tempted; she can no longer commit sin, and can no longer fall. Any of us here will still be tempted and may fall into sin, but that can no longer happen to Funto. She has been glorified and saved in a way that we have yet to experience.

The Scriptures make it abundantly clear that, for a child of God, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23).

When a Christian experiences physical death, the Bible says the individual sleeps (1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Thess. 4:13). Our sister Funto is asleep. Contrary to what some think, her life has not come to an end, only her state has changed. This change is inevitable for all of us because flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. What we have here is just Funto's physical remains.

What Is a Good Old Age?

God answered my question regarding a long life. But I still had another question to ask Him. I now took two other verses to the Lord. First Job 5:26, which reads, "*You shall come to the grave at a full age...*", and then Genesis 15:15, which says, "*...you shall be buried at a good old age.*" So I asked, "What is a good old age or full age?"

I searched the Bible for the answer. I found in Genesis chapter 5, Enoch lived far below the average lifespan of his generation. Enoch walked with God and was taken home at 365 years, less than half the average lifespan in that generation. Methuselah, Enoch's son, lived to 969 years. Why didn't the righteous man, Enoch, live longer to continue to witness for God? Enoch's con-

temporaries might have said that Enoch's God failed him, because they viewed longevity as a sign of favor from God.

Then I felt a gentle nudge, "Did you ever feel sorry for Enoch because he died at a relatively younger age than his contemporaries?" No, I never did. The testimony of Enoch's life outlasted the number of years he lived. He walked with God. That is more important than the number of years one lives.

When Paul says, "we know," he didn't mean that we have been told. He meant a level of experience or knowing that is so total and radical, that for it to be proven untrue would put our very existence into question.

Romans 8:28

Having shared with you my struggles and how I found comfort from Scriptures and a measure of peace regarding this young life snatched away from us, I want to return to Romans 8:28. "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). This promise is sure. It is not a promise to everyone, but only to those who love God.

Romans 8:28 is always true but it is not always well applied. First, everyone has to make sense of his or her own situation of suffering in his or her own way. The way a person becomes reconciled to a painful situation may be illogical to someone else, and that is okay. Second, this verse has often been applied at the wrong time. Sometimes individuals use this verse to try to evade or minimize personal accountability for an irresponsible action. Just because "all things work together for good," does not mean consequences no longer follow bad decisions. We live in a world governed by the principle of cause and effect, action and reaction. The verse is also misapplied when a person tries to use it to soothe his or her conscience for having acted wrongly. Romans 8:28 is not an excuse or

safety net for bad behavior. It may also be misquoted to try to shut down the grieving process prematurely. This short-circuits the process of healing. We all know that “*all things work together for good to those who love God,*” but loss hurts in the meantime. The process of pain must be dealt with first before the sufferer can affirm the truth.

And We Know...

“*And we know that all things work together...*” (Emphasis mine). When the Bible uses the word “*know,*” most times, it does not mean mere mental awareness, but an experiential understanding that affects the total being: spirit, soul, and body. I call this the grace of divine knowledge. For example, to describe the deepest level of intimacy possible between two souls—that “*knowledge*” that results in the miracle of the birth of a baby—the Bible says, “*Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain*” (Gen. 4:1; emphasis mine).

Romans 8:28 does not say that all things in, of, and by themselves are good. But rather that they “work together for good,” through God’s grace and mercy.

When Paul says, “*we know,*” he didn’t mean that we have been told. He meant a level of experience or knowing that is so total and radical, that for it to be proven untrue would put our very existence into question.

Not many people have this kind of knowledge because it is of divine origin (Matt. 11:25-27), but we see many of God’s followers, having this grace of divine knowledge.

For example, when the Philistines took David in Gath, and he was in real trouble (see the superscript on Ps. 56), David boldly declared, “*Whenever I am afraid, I will trust in You.... This I know, because God is for me*” (Ps. 56:3,9b; emphasis mine).

Daniel also had this knowledge. In spite of the dreadful prophecies and visions of future things that Daniel’s people would be subjected to, he declared confidently, “*...but the people who know*

their God shall be strong, and carry out great exploits” (Dan. 11:32; emphasis mine). Do we know our God?

Job was deprived of all he had: children, wealth, and health. Job said, “*For I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God*” (Job 19:25,26; emphasis mine).

Paul was forsaken by some Christians, lived with a death sentence hanging over his head, and had little hope of ever being released from prison. He said in his last letter, “*...for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day*” (2 Tim. 1:12; emphasis mine).

There are many things we don't know, but we thank God for what we do know. I pray that God will share with us the truths that we need to know in times like these.

That All Things Work Together for Good...

“*And we know that all things work together for good...*” (Emphasis mine). Borrowing from the lines of that saintly hymn writer, Fanny Crosby, we may term the first part: “*And we know,*” to mean “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine.” Then this phrase, “*all things work together for good,*” would be “Perfect submission, all is at rest.” I call this the grace of divine wisdom. Wisdom is the ability to have the long view, to step out of the box.

Note that the verse says “all things,” not *certain* things or *some* things. Note also what it does not say. It does not say that all things in and by themselves are good, but rather that they “*work together for good.*” God uses *all* things to work for our good. Do you believe this?

It may be hard to believe this when we see a young person die in

We don't know how God compounds life's tragedies in His lab to bring about a completely new and good substance. But we know from nature that if coal is subjected to great pressure over a prolonged time, it becomes diamond.

the prime of her life. Her death is not a good thing, however we look at it. To start with, the Bible teaches us that death is an enemy and it is the last enemy that will be destroyed (1 Cor. 15:25,26). Death is also an unhappy reminder of how frail and mortal we are.

I believe the Bible convicts us that the death of a young person breaks the heart of God as much as it breaks our heart. First, it breaks God's heart that a young life is cut short. Second, it breaks God's heart that we, the living, are broken in this manner over our loss. If Jesus walked physically into this chapel right now, His eyes would be wet. Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus, even though He knew He was going to raise Him up. Those tears of Jesus at the graveside of Lazarus were for the devastation and sorrow that death brought to Lazarus' relatives and friends.

Now, if the death of a young person breaks God's heart this way, why does He not prevent it from happening? The crowd at the grave of Lazarus wondered the same thing. Couldn't Jesus, who opened the eyes of the blind, have kept Lazarus from dying? As soon as this question came into my mind, a verse of Scripture also followed on its heels and kept me silent: "*But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?'*" (Rom. 9:20).

It isn't wrong to ask questions. How did God feel on the day His Son was nailed to the cross and died? How did heaven respond when Jesus' blood dropped to the earth? If the acts of nature in any way indicate God's reaction, then the scene at Calvary spoke volumes. There was a mighty earthquake and the rocks split open, the sun shut its light, the tombs opened, and the curtains of the Temple split into two from top to bottom. God was not smiling about the fact of losing a dear Son. And although Jesus died according to His pre-written biography, Jesus did not go to the cross smiling either. In fact, He had even prayed for God to take away the "cup," if it were possible, but He was also more determined to have it God's way, even if it meant pain and death for Him.

Don't be afraid to ask questions because God understands your feelings. Don't be afraid, even if your questions are defiant. None of us should sit in judgment of those who ask such questions at the

crossroads of life. Because even if we do not verbalize certain questions aloud in public, we still often think them in our hearts. However, there must come a time in our relationship with God when the question marks, legitimate as they may seem, must be abandoned. When we acknowledge that some things are beyond us, we acknowledge God's superior sovereignty and wisdom.

There is an eventual working together for good in what has befallen us, though we are sorrowful and cannot figure out how any good may come from it. It does not make sense, but it challenges us to trust God, "for we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Don't try to defend God. He doesn't need it; He can speak for Himself. Don't try to rationalize or question God's way but yield to His sovereignty (1 Sam. 12:15-23). We are free to ask questions, but we must know that God's answer to most of our questions in circumstances like these is not in words, but in Himself, His presence, and His grace.

• *God didn't start loving us at Calvary—He has always loved us.*

• *The love that was displayed for our redemption is the same love that was at work in creation.*

We don't know how God does the combination of life tragedies and crisis in the crucibles of life and compounds them to bring about a completely new and good thing, but we can take a cue from nature. For example, if coal is subjected to great pressure over a prolonged time, it becomes diamond, a more precious ornamental metal. Could it be that God does these things in nature as an example of what He will do or intends to do in our lives? Could it be that when God intends to change us from "coal" to "diamond," He uses pressure and stress over a long period of time?

Only God can weave the story of the drama of salvation, which we call "good news," from an unbroken chain of gory events such as the betrayal, rejection, torture, and death of Jesus, to eventual resurrection against all odds. To us, the chain of events doesn't make sense and doesn't appear as a prelude to anything good. But

God takes things and events that in and of themselves are bad, and works all things together for good. Only God can do such things.

To Those Who Love God...

“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God...” (emphasis mine). The key word is “love.” It does not say that this promise is true for all people, but only for those who “love” God. We are able to love God only when we have responded to His love. *“We love Him because He first loved us”* (1 John 4:19). Let us call this the grace of divine fellowship. Our love is in response to His love. He loved us when we were sinners and He loves us now that we are His children.

The phrase, *“to those who love God...”* is a qualifier. It limits the application of the verse to God-lovers only. To believers and non-believers alike, we may speak about God’s forgiveness, God’s grace, and God’s mercy, but Romans 8:28 is a special privilege of *“those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose,”* and it is applicable only to them.

God’s love is unconditional, unmerited, sacrificial, practical, eternal, and unchanging. His love never ebbs or diminishes. There is nothing that we can do that will make Him love us more or less. He never stops loving us, in spite of our many shortcomings. Everything He does is consistent with His nature, *agape* love.

God’s sovereignty and human responsibility are simultaneous or parallel truths, and we should teach them that way.

True security is not in money, achievement, position or title, status, education, or anything else but God. Everything around us is changing and will change, but God’s love remains constant.

God didn’t start to love us at Calvary. He has always loved us. Calvary was God’s opportunity to openly display His love. The love that was displayed for our redemption

is the same love that was at work in creation (Gen. 1:1; John 1:1-3,14; 3:16). Calvary is the ultimate demonstration, but not the

beginning of God's love. God loved us before we were born. He even loved us before we were born again.

And God still loves us. Nothing can separate us from God's love. The question really is not "Who or what will keep Christ from loving *us*?" because no one and nothing will. The question is "Who or what will keep us from loving *Him*?" It is my prayer that we may bathe in God's love at this period more than ever before.

To Those Who Are the Called...

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called..." (emphasis mine). I call this the grace of divine calling. *"You did not choose Me, but I chose you"* (John 15:16). We do a great disservice to Scripture when we try to reconcile things that are beyond us. Scripture clearly teaches election and predestination, but it also teaches human responsibility. We have the power to obey or disobey.

God's sovereignty and human responsibility are simultaneous or parallel truths, and we should teach them that way. No one is saved against his will and no one is lost against his will. Nor is anyone saved by his own effort. No one will be able to say to God, "I wanted to be saved, but You did not elect me."

Funto was CALLED. If you are a child of God, rejoice that you have been called into eternal life and jealously guard it. If you are not yet a child of God, then come to Him, for He is calling you:

'Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'.... 'As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.... 'The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out,' (Matt. 11:28; John 1:12; 6:37).

Called According to His Purpose

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose" (emphasis mine). The key word is "purpose." There is a purpose behind all the acts of God. The highest goal and the greatest

good that comes to a child of God is that he or she is conformed to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). This is the grace of divine conformity. God works in every situation to conform us to the image of Christ.

Here lies the problem: we have often defined the word “good” in this verse to mean comfort, deliverance, safety, plenty, health, prosperity—and such things—when in essence the “good” is explained in the next verse. The “good” is that we become “*conformed to the image of His [God’s] Son*” (Rom. 8:29), to be more and more like Jesus.

God uses all things to work toward that goal. God uses both the Holy Spirit *inside* us (Rom. 8:26,27) and circumstances *outside* us (Rom. 5:3-5) to conform us to the image of Christ. The Holy Spirit is our Helper, Comforter, Strengthener, Counselor, Advocate, and Teacher. The circumstances around us, such as, trials, losses, persecution, death, bereavement, hardships, and temptations, fashion character in us, help to draw us closer to God, and cause us to see what we have not seen before. Come what may, we are not left to our own resources because the Holy Spirit “*helps in our weaknesses*” (Rom. 8:26).

Who knows, the whole purpose of Funto’s sudden home-going may be for the sake of one of us here. God may be speaking to some of us through Funto’s sudden home-calling.

Ecclesiastes 7:2 says, “*Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart....*” Those were not the words of a sadist. We hardly think of the end except in moments like these. But what if this were you in the casket before us? Think about it. The motto of one monastery was: “Remember Death.”

We do not know when our life will end. Call to mind the parable of the unproductive fig tree in Luke’s gospel (Luke 13:6-9). The owner got fed up when, after three years, the tree did not bear fruit. He asked the gardener to cut it down. “*Why does it use up the ground?*” (vs. 7). There was no need to keep it any longer. But the gardener intervened, pleading, “*Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not,*

after that you can cut it down” (Luke 13:8,9). What an agonizing plea: “Sir, let it alone this year also.” Some of us, like the tree, may be on probation, living on borrowed time.

The rich fool in Luke 12:16-21, had no idea that the end was going to come so soon. No one ever does. When he thought he had everything, he discovered that he had nothing. He lost everything in one night: “God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’” (Luke 12:20). This rich man had investments on earth but not where it mattered most, in heaven. He had got his priorities wrong.

James reminds us of the brevity of life in James 4:13-16. He says life is fragile, unpredictable, and uncertain. He says, “You do not know what will happen tomorrow” (vs. 14). Who of us here knows what is waiting for him or her tomorrow, or even today?

One Year Later

On the first anniversary of 'Funto's death, there was a memorial service in her honor. It was a solemn service with friends and family members. Mrs. Kuti shared a little bit of the tormenting thoughts and agony she had battled. At one time she was afraid that she might lose touch with reality. But God delivered her from the wiles of the evil one.

One cannot expect the friends and relatives of the deceased, especially the Kuti family, to stop weeping and throw off mourning once and for all. Those who we have loved but who have died will

We have often defined the word "good" in this verse to mean comfort, deliverance, safety, plenty, health, prosperity—and such things—when in essence the "good" is explained in the next verse. The "good" is that we become "conformed to the image of His [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29).

God uses both the Holy Spirit inside us, and circumstances outside us, to conform us to the image of Christ.

always be in our minds. The passage of time cannot erase what they have meant to us. However, I do hope and pray that in the coming years, the grieving and shedding of tears will give way to cherished memories of fun times. I also hope and pray that at such moments when the “little reminders” of our

loved one’s life become mental and emotional tormentors, the Holy Spirit will whisper phrases of comfort, submission, and surrender.

We do not know why we have to mourn, grieve, and experience suffering, but we know the God who knows all things. We can face life’s odds with God because we “know” by faith that He loves and cares for us. And, God is more than enough for any situation.

Life Application/Group Discussion Questions

1. If a Christian says that he is angry with God, would that suggest to you that the person is not living in faith, or in a genuine relationship with God? Why or why not?
2. In Nigerian culture, parents are not supposed to be at their children’s funeral. The Kutis, therefore, were absent at Olufunto’s service. Do you think the same sermon should have been preached if they were present in the front row? Explain.
3. What part of the sermon is most meaningful for you? Explain.
4. In what particular area of your life can you apply and take comfort in Romans 8:28?
5. How would you be remembered if you died today? How do you like to be remembered?
6. What would be missing in the world if you were not born?

Don't be too hard or too negative on yourself. Think *only* of the positive and beautiful things you have brought into the lives of those closest to you, and be thankful for your life.

• • Bibliography • •

- Adams, Jay E. (1970). *Competent to Counsel*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.
- Adams, Jay E. (1973). *The Christian Counselor's Manual*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.
- Adams, Jay E. (1979). *A Theology of Christian Counseling*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.
- Adams, Jay E. (1986). *How to Help People Change*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Angel, Marc D. (1997). *The Orphaned Adult: Confronting the Death of a Parent*. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.: Northvale.
- Baker, Virginia. (1997). "Healing Circle." *Guideposts*, Volume 52, No 9; pgs. 24-27. New York: 39 Seminary Hill Road, Carmel.
- Bridges, Jerry. (1988). *Trusting God (Even When Life Hurts)*. Colorado: NavPress, Colorado Springs.
- Bridges, William. (1991). *Managing Transitions*. Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Reading.
- Clarkson, Margaret. (1972). *Grace Grows Best in Winter*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.
- Crabb, Larry. (1975). *Basic Principles of Biblical Counseling*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.

Crabb, Larry. (1977). *Effective Biblical Counseling*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.

Crabb, Larry. *Inside Out*. (1988). Colorado: NavPress, Colorado Springs.

Dostoevsky, Fyodor. (1970). *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York: Bantam Books.

Guideposts. (2002). January, LVI:II.

Horton, Michael Scott, Ed. (1992). *Power Religion*. Chicago: Moody Press.

Kienholz, Rick. (2002). Quoted in *Guideposts*. New York: Volume LVI, Issue 11, January 2002.

Kirkpatrick, Donald L. (1985). *How to Manage Change Effectively*. California: Jossey-Bass Inc., Publishers, San Francisco.

Kubler-Ross, E. (1975). *On Death and Dying*. New York and London: Macmillan.

Kushner, Harold S. (1981). *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. New York: Schocken Books.

Lawrence, (Brother). (1982). *The Practice of the Presence of God*. Pennsylvania: Whitaker House, New Kensington.

Lewis, C.S. (1962). *The Problem of Pain*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. (1994). *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* Illinois: Crossway Books, Wheaton.

Mitchell, Kenneth R. and Anderson, Herbert. (1983). *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press.

Ojewale, Michael Olufemi. (1996). *The Balm of Gilead*. Lagos: Peace and Salvation Publishers Limited.

Ojewale, Michael Olufemi. (1986). *Overcoming Life's Crises*. Lagos: Peace and Salvation Publishers Limited.

Pope, George F. (2002). Quoted in *Guideposts*. New York: Volume LVI, Issue 11, January 2002.

Roberts, Robert C. (1993). *Taking the Word to Heart*. Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids.

Rogers, Carl R. (1965). *Client-Centered Therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Schaller, Lyle E. (1993). *Strategies for Change*. Abingdon.

- Schilder, K. (1945). *Christ in His Suffering*. Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids.
- Slater, Michael. (1985). *Stretcher Bearers*. California: Regal Books, Div. of GL Publ., Ventura.
- Soelle, Dorothee. (1975). *Suffering*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Stanley, Charles. (1996). *The Glorious Journey: Insight, Encouragement, and Guidance for Your Walk of Faith*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, Tennessee.
- Stephenson, John Wallace. (1996). *Through Tears to Triumph*. Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, Schaumburg.
- Wilhoit, James C. and John M. Dettoni. (Ed.) (1995). *Nurture that is Christian: Developmental Perspectives on Christian Education*. Michigan: Baker Books, Grand Rapids.
- Wright, Norman, H. (1995). *Marriage Counseling*. California: Regal Books, Ventura.
- Yancey, Philip. (1988). *Disappointment With God*. Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.
- Yancey, Philip. (1990). *Where Is God When It Hurts?* Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.
- Yancey, Philip. (1997). *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids.

