

The Complaint of Jacob

By R.P. Nettelhorst

Introduction

We all have complaints. The length of time the local hamburger place took to get around to giving me my meal gave a whole new meaning to the term “fast” food. I hadn’t intended to fast, and what’s worse, I violated what Jesus said about not letting on that I was doing it: I complained. I’ve complained about the cable going off for no reason. I complained about the time my phone was shut off when I mistakenly *overpaid* my phone bill.

Doubtless Jacob, the patriarch in the Bible, complained more than a few times during the course of a very long life. But there was once, when he was an old man, that the Bible records he made the following complaint: “everything is against me.” It is this complaint of Jacob that I intend to examine in this little book.

On the face of it, he had good reason to gripe. Better reason than I have to complain about waiting ten minutes for my fast food burger. Life threw Jacob some

lemons, and when he tried to make lemonade, he found out he was out of sugar and the lemons were rotten. Of course, Jacob's perspective was off just a tad, too. It is, after all, hard to keep one's perspective in the middle of a tornado. But reality hasn't changed just because we happen to be a little dizzy at the moment. What do I mean by that? Come and see...

Chapter One: The Complaint

The Issue of Suffering

There is so much I don't understand. I do not understand a mother deserting her husband and children for another relationship in another state. I do not understand why she abandoned all her friends, people she had known and cared about for years, people that genuinely cared for her—without so much as a goodbye or explanation. The loss of that friend is just a tiny hole in my life, compared to the giant gap in the lives of a husband who now works seven days a week to try to make ends meet while he raises his children by himself, children who must try to understand how their mother must no longer love them.

I do not understand the death of a friend's daughter, a young woman barely past her teens, from an accidental overdose of prescription drugs.

I do not understand the death of another friend's only son in a car accident in which he was the passenger, leaving behind his young wife and three year old daughter.

How does this new widow explain to her daughter that daddy really isn't going to come home again, despite her tiny certainty that, "of course he'll be home, mommy."

It tears at the fabric of my soul. It is like tiny moths, eating away at it, leaving it filled with holes from which drips nothing but pain and puzzlement. But it is the small tragedies of life that torment us most frequently, most incessantly: the hurts in those close to us, the pain of the day-to-day grind, of the flat tires and the bounced checks and the unpaid bills; the suffering of the children talking back, not making the team, scraping by with C's, listening to music I don't like and hanging with friends that make me worry; coming home late and not being good about calling.

And then there are the big things of cosmic dimension that rip the fabric to shreds.

On September 11, 2001 terrorists hijacked four passenger jetliners. They crashed two of them into the World Trade Center, destroying the buildings and killing close to three thousand people. Meanwhile, another of the planes crashed into the Pentagon, killing over two hundred people there, and the final aircraft crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after the passengers onboard heroically fought back, preventing that plane from reaching its intended target, likely either the U.S. Capitol building or the White House.

September 11, 2001 was thus a horrible day and raised numerous questions in everyone's minds about the nature of existence, about the goodness of God, about what it really is that God wants and expects out of all of us.

How do we live in a world where this sort of thing can happen? How do we face the crises of life, both small and great? Is there some key to life, some playbook we can get, some list we can follow, some formula we can memorize that will get us through this

world in one piece, with ourselves and our families living long, productive and prosperous lives?

The Search for Answers

Prosperity, peace, health, love and acceptance, happiness: these are the desires of our hearts. We spend hours and lots of money in their pursuit. We find ourselves buying the latest gadget, going to the hottest movie, buying certain foods and cars, almost as if we believe that what is missing in our lives can be satisfied by stuffing more things into them. And of course, we know, if we ever slow down a bit and think about it, that the hole inside will not be filled by either a Hummer or that new plasma screen television.

And it is not something that only those outside the church do. In the church, we find ourselves frustrated, convinced that there must be something that we're missing still. We are not achieving the fullness of the life that we know God wants us to have. Where is the peace we were promised, the abundant living we thought we were guaranteed?

Why are my children talking back to me, why am I not completely enamored of my spouse? Why do I have trouble making ends meet, why do I feel so tired and stressed? Why do I still worry and feel frustrated? Why do I still feel tempted to look at those pictures on the web, or eat too much cake, or wonder, sometimes, if maybe I would be happier living somewhere else, or being with someone else, or going to a different church, or finding a different pastor, or reading this book, or seeing that video, or going to that conference or seminar?

Maybe I'm not praying right. Maybe I need to get the sin out of my life. Maybe I need to read my Bible more. What am I missing? What key do I need to unlock the blessings of God and finally achieve the wonderful life I know God wants me to have?

Or is it all a lie?

Maybe God really wants me to be unhappy? Or have I screwed up so badly now that I'm beyond hope? Have I committed the unpardonable sin? Has God set me on the shelf? Will he no longer use me? Will I now just mark time, and have to eat straw for the rest of my miserable, worthless existence?

Jacob's Struggle

Jacob's life was not an easy one and his family life, both growing up, and then as an adult would fit the modern definition of "dysfunctional." He and his mother had conspired together to defraud both his father and his fraternal twin brother. When he had to leave home out of fear that his swindled brother might actually kill him, he went to live with Laban, his mother's brother.

Laban was a crafty fellow, and noticed that Jacob had quickly taken a shine to his younger daughter. So, Laban consented to a marriage between them, on the condition that Jacob work for him as a virtual slave for seven years first. Only at the end of that time could he then wed Rachel.

So, the blessed day finally arrived. The Bible tells us that the seven years had seemed but a few days because of Jacob's love for Rachel. Jacob survived the wedding ceremony, then partied like there was no tomorrow—and when tomorrow came, he found himself in bed with Rachel's older sister.

Laban had tricked Jacob. During the festivities, old Laban had switched daughters. "Oh," he explained, "it's an old custom around here that the older daughter must always marry first. But seeing as how you're family now, I'll work a good deal for you. You wanted Rachel? No problem. Here, just sign on for another seven year stint

with me and you can have her—and just because I like you so much, you can marry her right after you finish the honeymoon time with my older daughter. Her name's Leah by the way. Remember?"

As if that wasn't a big enough problem, once he did marry Rachel, she had trouble getting pregnant. But her sister, Leah, was having no such difficulty. So Rachel was miserable. Following the customs of the day, Jacob agreed to take her maidservant as a third wife, so that she could serve as a surrogate to bear children for Rachel. And then, almost at once, Leah became infertile too, so by the time all is said and done, Jacob wound up with a fourth wife to do the same for Leah as he was doing for Rachel.

In the course of time, however, Rachel did get pregnant. She gave birth to a son, whom she named Joseph. Some while later, she was expecting again. But it was a hard pregnancy and given the lack of modern medical technology, she died in childbirth. The son survived, however, and Jacob named him Benjamin.

Jacob showed obvious favoritism to Joseph, the first-born son of the one woman out of the four that he had actually loved. This did not endear Joseph to his other, by that time, ten brothers. The fraternal resentment grew to such an extreme that the ten brothers determined to murder Joseph. But at the last minute, rather than kill him, they realized they could be rid of him and make some money at the same time. They sold Joseph to a passing group of traders. Then they took the fancy clothes that Jacob had given Joseph, roughed them up a bit and dipped them in goat blood. They told their elderly father, "look what we found, do you suppose this means that poor Joseph has been torn to pieces by a lion or something?"

Jacob was heartbroken, and the brothers were secretly pleased. No more Joseph. Easy money. Life was good.

The story continues: the traders sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt, where, through a course of events that would distract our story here, he winds up rising to favor with the Pharaoh—the king—of Egypt and becomes his second in command.

Meanwhile, famine came to the world, both in Egypt and in Palestine, where Jacob was living. Thanks to Joseph, Egypt was continuing to prosper and had food in abundance—but for a price. So Jacob sent his ten oldest sons down to Egypt with money and told them to buy provision so that they wouldn't starve to death.

When they got there, Joseph recognized them right off, though of course his brothers didn't. It's been twenty-five years and they *know* they sold Joseph as a slave and so chances are he's dead by now anyhow; perhaps they've almost convinced themselves the story they told their old man was the truth. In any case, Joseph torments them for awhile, then arrests one of the brothers, Simeon, and locks him in jail. He tells the remaining nine brothers that if they ever hope to see Simeon again, then the next time they come to Egypt they'd best bring Benjamin, their youngest brother with them. Or else. And so away the nine remaining brothers go.

When they arrived back home, they told Jacob their tale of woe about Simeon, about how harshly they were treated, and about the demand for Benjamin to meet the Egyptian governor. As if that weren't bad enough, there seemed to have been a mix-up in the whole transaction, because though they did at least return with the food they'd been sent to get, the Egyptian authorities had apparently been shortchanged: the money they

had given to pay for it all was somehow still in their bags. So now the Egyptians would be sending the bill collectors out to get them if they didn't get that taken care of soon.

To say the least, Jacob was not at all happy. The one true love of his life was dead. Joseph, his favorite, the oldest son of his beloved, had been dead for twenty-five years. And now Simeon had been taken from him, and that monster in Egypt was demanding the last link he had to his beloved! Beside himself with grief, we can read his reaction in Genesis 42:36 where it all comes down to this:

Their father Jacob said to them, "You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me!"

And certainly it was the case that the circumstances of his life were unbearably bad. From his perspective, from the perspective of his sons standing around him, his complaint was fully reasonable, perfectly understandable, and self-evidently true.

And yet, the fascinating thing about his words is that we know that he couldn't be more wrong! This, despite the fact that his words seemed so obviously true to Jacob—unassailably true, in fact. But we the readers of this episode know some things that Jacob didn't know. In fact, we know facts that Jacob *couldn't* know. We know that Joseph was not only not dead, but he was second in command in Egypt, the most powerful and most wealthy nation on the planet at that time.

The reality of Jacob's existence is that everything could hardly be better. His favorite son has done very well for himself, thank you. Good job, and great future, with money to burn. *Poor Jacob simply doesn't know this yet.* His perception, his *perspective* of reality, is incorrect.

We, the readers, can do nothing to alleviate Jacob's suffering. God didn't do anything about it either. It'll be another year before Jacob learns the truth of what his life is *really* like, in contrast to his perception of it. For twenty-five years he mourned for someone who was not dead. He bemoans his fate as a miserable one, though his family is powerful and prosperous.

The Quest for the Abundant Life

A lot of Christians are running around looking for the way to fix all the problems in their lives, convinced that if they could only learn the secret, discover the magic words, find the special knowledge, locate the missing puzzle pieces, then suddenly life would be okay: their kids will behave and do well in school, they'll be able to pay all their bills on time and they'll get out of debt; they will find that their wives or husbands are now gorgeous. Their cars will stop breaking down and never be more than three years old, their sleep will be sweet, and their health problems will be a thing of the past. They will eat whatever they want and never grow fat, and exercise will be a pleasure. Not only that, but they will suddenly have a theologian's understanding of God and the Bible and so all will be well.

They see people out there who live like that, or seem to live like that, and so they try to fathom what secret recipe they followed, what prayers they offered, that got God to grant them this wonderful, abundant life. And of course, that's what all people wish for: a life free from pain, a life of abundance, a life of blessing. And surely, *surely* the reason I don't have that life right now is because I've missed something, done something wrong, followed a wrong path, made a wrong choice. But if I read the right books, see the right

pastor, listen to the right tapes, follow the right program, view the right video series, then that'll take care of it. The thing that has been hidden from me will finally be in the open.

Millions of Christians drop enormous amounts of money and time going from place to place hoping to find the abundant life. For awhile, things look pretty good after a seminar or after finishing a book. After all, the seminar or book promises that if the advice is followed then happiness will surely follow; the secret is finally secured. All I have to do now is follow these steps and do these easy things. So the happy Christian carefully follows the items on the list, and a few days go by or a few weeks, and he or she changes her life, and throws out the things that the book says would hinder the coming of the abundant life, and she adds the things that will bring it: a regimen begins, a checking off of boxes, of prayers said, Bible passages read and memorized, ideas gotten into the skull. Thus, the days pass, the weeks, and sometimes the months or even a few years.

But, despite all that effort, all that activity, all that following of the rules—life remains more or less the same. The car needs tires, and the check book is empty. The boy decides he wants an earring and you look in the mirror and you have some more wrinkles and the hair isn't quite as shiny as it used to be and the color seems to be fading and then the doctor tells you that you need to lose weight, and the pain in your knee won't go away, and you get the flu.

Then you hear about another preacher come to town, and he tells you that all that stuff you did was good—real good—but look here, did you see *this*? And since you missed *that* then why would you wonder why your life is so messed up, why you're under your circumstances and not rising above them, and why your prayers go unanswered, and you haven't seen revival and no one got baptized in your little church,

which, shame be told, is struggling each month to scrape together enough cash to pay the light bill, let alone the mortgage and the pastor.

And see *there*. If you weren't in debt, if you hadn't gone and disobeyed God on that point, then your life wouldn't be the shambles that it is. But see *here*, just buy these tapes and this guide book—and by the way, I can take Visa or Master Card—and you'll get your finances in order in no time. It's just a matter of following these simple steps. *See?*

The abundant life remains forever just over the next hill—if you are ever honest with yourself as you bop from place to place, person to person, looking for the thing that'll fill the hole in your life. *Tomorrow*, I'll see the light. So you struggle, and you follow the rules and you try to put on the face, and you know if you can only get good enough, and do just the right things, and that if there's no unconfessed sin in your life (and how, pray tell, do you keep up on *that*? “Father forgive me, for I have sinned; it has been five minutes since my last confession. I lusted twice, and I felt anger at that doofus who cut me off just now and...”). Maybe if you don't let the devil into your house, why *then*...everything will be fine.

Yet, late at night, when you stare at the ceiling, you know that lust in your heart, and your anger at wayward drivers, and the stack of past due notices, and that mysterious ache in your back, and that stranger in bed next to you that doesn't at all resemble the lover of your sweaty dreams, is still going to be there in the morning. And inside, you feel like a rat in a maze, pushing levers and getting pellets and wondering: if this is all there is, then why am I not happy, why do I not see satisfaction, where is the abundance I've been promised?

Does God not want me to be happy? Am I just supposed to learn to live with this, put up with it—stiff upper lip now, and all of that? If so, then I don't know if I want to go on living, I don't know if all the running about, all the work, all the lists and rules and the search for the holy grail is even worth the effort, since I really don't seem to be seeing any benefit from it. If I'm unhappy being good, then maybe it's time I try a little bad. Or put it another way, what's the point of the rules if life still sucks?

If that's how you feel, then I've got a lot of good news for you. It won't cost you a thing. There are no seminars to attend, no tapes to watch, no magic words to learn and no quest to undertake.

So we begin...

Chapter Two: The Abundant Life

We Already Have It

There is no secret to abundant life. We already *have* abundant life (oh *yeah?* Then what about...) The secret, if it is a secret, is that we should believe that God hasn't been lying to us, and that he really, truly *does* know what he is doing, *even* when everything is falling down around our ears.

It was a warm, sunny Friday afternoon in the High Desert of California. The sky was bright and clear, and we were building a new sign for our church. My friend Dandi and I had done most of the work; she had designed the sign and I had cut out all the pieces and she had painted them. Today we were putting the sign in place on its concrete foundation.

At about one o'clock she left with her husband to go to her perfectly normal, ordinary, planned, nothing-special visit with her doctor. She was seven months pregnant.

It was supposed to take about an hour and she was hoping to be back before we had finished attaching the sign to the concrete.

About two o'clock, she and her husband returned. I knew right away just from their faces that something was very, very wrong.

The doctor had done an ultrasound and her baby was showing no movement. The amniotic fluid had dropped, and there was no heartbeat.

Her baby was dead.

Dandi and her husband Dennis went into our pastor's office to give him the news and to talk to him and to pray with him, while my wife and I huddled outside feeling awful.

Something that is obvious, and yet easily forgotten: it is not possible to be fully a part of someone else's grief, no matter how close you might be to them. Dennis and Dandi are our best friends, and that night we took them to see a movie and then out to pizza. But of course our minds were not on either the movie or the pizza, and our conversation kept coming back to the fact that her baby was dead. They would try to induce labor the next week. This had happened on a Friday.

At the end of the evening, they went back to their home to be alone together with their grief, and my wife and I went home to be alone with ours. At church that Sunday, Dennis and Dandi were there, and they sang and worshipped and we went out to lunch together.

And the next week was both long and painful.

In the end, Dandi gave birth to a stillborn baby girl, whom she named Marissa Ruth. Ruth is my wife's name. We went with Dennis and Dandi to the funeral home,

helped them make the arrangements, wanting to make certain that in their grief they didn't end up spending more than they needed or wanted. And so on the day of the funeral, we released balloons, and we sang, and we prayed and the baby was buried beneath a tree in the cemetery. Dandi commented that it was like tucking her in for the night.

I wrote a novel a few years ago called *The Wrong Side of Morning*. The title describes the fact that in this day-to-day experience of existence we are living somewhere past midnight, but before the dawn. As Christians we look to a coming city, a coming kingdom, and know on some level that we are pilgrims here, traveling toward the celestial home where we will dwell forever. But we are not there yet.

Our mistake comes in forgetting that this journey we call life is not the destination. And when we make that mistake, as it is oh so easy to make, we grow discouraged and depressed and overwhelmed, because the journey sometimes has potholes, and sometimes we face robbers, and we are wearied by the walk, and the sun is hot, or the wind is cold, or the rain is wet, or the snow gives us frostbite or the mountains seem too steep.

So much of what happens to us seems to make no sense at all, coming upon us without rhyme, reason, or warning. Someone commented to my wife over lunch at the hospital, while waiting for Dandi to give birth to Marissa, that “you know, good things come to good people, and bad things come to bad people...” And my wife looked at her lunch companion aghast and asked, “What possible bad thing has Dandi done that it would cost the life of her daughter?”

The disciples of Jesus confronted a blind man one day—a man blind since the day he was born. They asked a simple question: “Who sinned, this man or his parents?” And what was Jesus’ response? “Neither.” It was for the glory of God, he told them.

Yet how many still believe what my wife’s lunch companion had to say? This despite the fact that Job’s friends had the same opinion, which happened to be the opinion of Satan (a good clue that the friends might be mistaken). Satan asks the following at the beginning of the book of Job:

“Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan replied. “Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.” (Job 1:9-11).

Job’s friends ask the same question, with great fear. If good doesn’t come to the good and bad doesn’t come to the bad, *then what is the point of being good?* Job was trying to argue the obvious, yet radical notion that being good or bad doesn’t matter. God treats everyone the same.

Job’s friend Eliphaz is horrified and comments: “But you even undermine piety and hinder devotion to God.” (Job 15:4)

But Job and God both knew that a blessed life of prosperity is *not* the reason for worshipping God. Satan asks, “Does Job fear God for nothing?” Satan’s assumption, the assumption of Job’s friends, the assumptions of many Christians and non Christians alike, *despite* all the evidence in the Bible and in life to the contrary, is that if you do what’s right, if you can find the magic spell, if you keep God happy, then you’ll be happy and your life will be swell.

Perspective

Christians go on believing that the reason they are not happy and “fulfilled” is because there is something wrong with what they are doing. “If only I wasn’t screwing up so badly in my life...” If only I could find the right seminar, teacher, preacher, seven step program, book, video, *then* I would have the answer I’m missing. I just need to know what I’m doing wrong, change it, and start doing it right, and then my life will be wonderful. God is just waiting up there for me to find that secret. Once I do, he’ll unleash all the blessings that up till now he’s been prevented from sending my way because I’m, well, just too stupid to figure it out.

Of course this is all nonsense.

Many people have difficulty understanding love and grace.

Stephen Crane, the author of *Red Badge of Courage*, also wrote poetry. In one of his poems, entitled *The Wayfarer*, he speaks of the enormous trouble people have with accepting the truth, however much they may claim they want it:

The wayfarer,
Perceiving the pathway to truth,
Was struck with astonishment.
It was thickly grown with weeds.
“Ha,” he said,
“I see that none has passed here
In a long time.”
Later he saw that each weed
Was a singular knife.
“Well,” he mumbled at last,
“Doubtless there are other roads.”

Instead of truth, people seem mostly to want very tasty lies. The truth tends to taste like castor oil.

Seminars and preaching that are simply a list of things to do, when combined with the promise, either explicit or implicit, that if you just “do these things, you’ll be happy and wealthy and your kids will grow up right” turns out to be appealing to the vast majority of people. It is obvious that such legalism tastes great and is less filling to boot. It seems to be what people want and hunger after: it is the meager fantasy that attracts. Like Jacob, they imagine everything is against them, and so they strive to find things they can do that will fix the mess that they see their life as being. And so teaching about love and grace, by contrast, seems just not practical, just not a solution to what ails them.

Kind of sad, really. But nothing new. Paul wrote:

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent’s cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. (2 Corinthians 11:3-4)

And of course the new three or six or twelve part plan to the abundant life doesn’t work much longer than the ten week course, or the time it took to read through the books, and yet that rarely cools the desire for the search. So people keep going from this hot thing to the next hot thing, always in search of the list, the word, the promise, the plan that will give them the abundant life. Few seem ever to consider that perhaps the treadmill that they are on is the actual problem, and that what they really need is simply to get off altogether. And what is that treadmill? *The idea that there’s something they need to DO.* The truth is, they already have it—the abundant life—just like Jacob did when he made his complaint. If they could shift their perspective and stop running about, and lift up their eyes long enough and look at what reality is, from God’s perspective,

they'd understand that they're just letting people sell their own wallets back to them. Too easy and too hard, both, despite what Peter writes:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

People are always pleased to find something which tells them that they can have a better life if only they do three simple things, or even three hard things. Unfortunately, reality is something else altogether, even in the land of ministry and serving God. I read so many books where authors give examples of people having “successful” ministries as a consequence of saying a special prayer, or learning a certain lesson, or following some program. And what is a successful ministry? One where a lot of people get involved, one where there are lots of converts. And certainly lots of people getting saved, lots of people getting involved, lots of money being raised are good things. But success is not necessarily a matter of numbers. There's nothing wrong with numbers, but it doesn't always work that way. And not having the numbers doesn't mean that you've done something wrong.

There needs to be an understanding that simply doing God's will is a success in and of itself; that having a relationship with God, that loving him and loving people is all that is asked and that there are no guarantees that you will see anyone saved, any ministries grow, any increase in growth either spiritually, in numbers, or in money. It could all go south on you. After all, look at the prophet Jeremiah as an obvious example: in his lifetime, no one paid attention to him and he kept getting thrown in prison. Or how

about Isaiah? According to tradition, Manasseh stuffed him in a log and sawed him in two—lengthwise.

We need to take seriously what the author of Ecclesiastes wrote:

I have seen something else under the sun:
The race is not to the swift
or the battle to the strong,
nor does food come to the wise
or wealth to the brilliant
or favor to the learned;
but time and chance happen to them all.
Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come:
As fish are caught in a cruel net,
or birds are taken in a snare,
so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them.
(Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)

In the early church, all the leaders but John were killed for their faith. When John wrote the book of Revelation, as near as he could see, everything he'd spent his life on, everything that mattered to him, was wrecked. Everyone he loved and cared about was either dead or gone: his family was wiped out, Jerusalem was a smoldering ruin, the temple of God was destroyed. A very odd way, it seemed to him, for God to be treating his servants.

Hebrews 11 ends by pointing out that many of the great people of faith never received the promise; from their perspective, everything did not work out.

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. (Hebrews 11:35b-39)

Does that mean that God doesn't want us to be happy? Does that mean he wants to see us fail and fail and fail and to be forever miserable?

Of course not. Paul writes, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11)

What it means is that we need to reevaluate what it is that we value. A teacher approached Jesus once and asked him, "what is the greatest commandment?" Jesus' response is profound. He told the teacher that the greatest commandment was to love God. Then Jesus said there is a second commandment that is equal to it and complements it: "love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus explained that those two commandments contain everything that the Bible is all about. It is the Bible's theme. Later, Paul makes the same point in Romans 13: "The commandments, 'Do not commit adultery,' 'Do not murder,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not covet,' and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

So what does this mean for us? We need to think again of what loving God and loving people means in the context of our lives. We need to remind ourselves to think of the nature of faith and freedom, of grace and peace. And most of all, we need to catch our breath, open our eyes, and really take a look at reality afresh. We need a new *perspective*. We need to realize that what God asks us to see is the world through *his* eyes, to see our lives through *his* eyes, to realize that because we love him and he loves us, and through us, we love others, that we have joy and satisfaction and success, even in the midst of the gloom and apparent failure that surrounds us. There is no secret to

abundant life; we *have* abundant life. The secret, if it is a secret, is just that we have to believe that God hasn't been lying to us, and that he really and truly does know what he is doing, even when everything is crashing down around our ears. Like Jacob, we need to find out what our situation really is, not just what a limited point of view tries to make us think it is.

I keep thinking about why so often we are told to “encourage one another” in the Bible. If life was really guided by our fidelity to a seven part program that promises abundant peaceful living, I don't think we'd need that constant reminder to encourage.

Instead of an easy plan, a simple set of principles, life is hard and what we see around us can confuse us and throw us off balance. I need constant reminding that the world is not really spinning around me out of control. My dizziness is temporary and subjective, after all. And so I make a conscious choice to be reminded of that bit of non-dizzy reality.

And there is more...

Chapter Three: Deserving That Pat On The Back

Keeping All The Rules

Most people believe that God has a list, and if only they can find it, memorize it, and follow it to the letter, then all will be well. But such superstition—and that's all such legalism is—is not biblical. So some may wonder why, then, do we do find lists in the Bible that are very specific about what things are good and what things are bad? Why does the Bible encourage us to behave?

But why do we think this listing of ethical and unethical behavior has anything to do with our relationship with God? Why do we imagine a cause and effect relationship between our behavior and whether God loves us?

As simple a thing as the Gospel is, it is remarkable how easily it becomes confused in the minds of both Christians and non-Christians. For most, salvation and a proper relationship to God seem to be bound up in attempts to be holy, to do good, to avoid evil and thereby achieve either heaven, God's blessing, or the working of miracles

or some other desired action on the part of God. “If only I learn the right prayer, think the right things, get all the sin out of my life, then God will be able to release his blessings on me and my life will finally be okay.”

Nothing could be further from the truth of the Gospel than to imagine that being good has anything to do with it at all!

How many of us have someone in our life whom we are constantly doing stuff for? It seems like they are always in crisis, always having a flat tire, always needing a sink repaired, a computer hard drive defragged. We’re always watching their children, or lending them “twenty bucks till payday”. We’re always there for them.

But the first time we ask *them* to do something for us, they can’t help. “I’m sorry, but I’m all out of cash just now.” They’ve made plans. They are too busy, not interested, or something came up. They are never there for us and they always have very reasonable excuses for why they didn’t get back to us. We find ourselves forever giving and never getting anything back. We wonder why they have no problem asking us for help, while it is unreasonable to even hope for an acknowledgment, let alone a thanks. And we’re completely unfair to think that they should help us with some project or problem. In fact, half the time it seems to be unbearably burdensome for them to even *talk* to us, except when they have a need, in which case we must drop everything and listen to their every complaint.

Kind of like how it is when we take care of a baby, eh?

We get up at three in the morning, but when we ask them to mow the grass, they just cry and insist that we feed them or change their diapers instead.

Peter asks the question, “how many times should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Seven times?” Jesus’ response: “seventy times seven times.” Of course, we know that doesn’t mean we start counting. “Oops, that’s 489 times now that you’ve spilled tea on my carpet. One more time and I’ll have to kill you.”

Or how about this: our friends that keep a running tally on who’s done something *nice* for them? If we invite them over, they feel obligated to invite us over. In fact, they have a list of all the things we’ve ever done for them, and they keep a list of everything they’ve ever done for us, and they work hard at keeping the lists the same length. If we do something for them, they do something for us. They are always keeping track, keeping count, keeping a balance, as if they are a borrower and we’re a creditor. They don’t want to fall behind or feel indebted.

Is that a good way to live? Is that a fine way to relate to our friends? Do we relate to our parents that way? Is that what we expect of our kids? “Okay kid, I diapered your bottom for the last two years, now it’s your turn” or “you know, I’ve seen to it that you had food three times a day for the last eighteen years. I’m expecting payback real soon now.”

That sounds ludicrous, but how many people act that way with God? How often do we think of our relationship with God that way?

“You know God, I went to church today, I put money in the offering, heck, I went twice today and that money...it was a TWENTY! Did you see that? Huh? And how about when that guy cut me off. I didn’t cuss once! And you know Jill down at work? I haven’t had an affair with her yet, now have I? And it’s not like she doesn’t want me.”

God has been doing and doing and doing. We're always asking him for help, to make us well, give us money, protect us, keep us safe on our travels, bless our activities, strengthen our weaknesses, give us the words to say. But what does he ever get back? Really? He made certain that the earth kept rotating on its axis and so the sun came up this morning. He made sure you have air to breathe today. He saw to it that you ate lunch, and that you'll have your supper.

And what did you do for God? Not a thing, most likely. Most of the billions of people on the planet don't respond to God much at all; in fact, we hardly think about him except when we hurt and then we're crying out for help right away. And whenever something goes wrong, we're quick to blame him or at least to ask, "So what were you thinking?" and "why?" We talk to God when we need stuff. Sometimes we acknowledge him, and some of us show up at church and worship him—well, words come out of our mouths more or less in tune with the music and sometimes we're actually thinking about what we're singing instead of about the baseball game that starts at one or about how hot Lorilai looks in that blue dress today or what was the organist thinking wearing plaid pants with a striped shirt? But when God needs something, well, we're too busy, we've got other things to do, and, well, maybe tomorrow. God understands how busy I am, after all.

So most of God's love goes unrequited. He is the lover sending flowers and candy to the beautiful neighbor, who listens to her tales of woe, and then watches her go out with Joe Loser instead. What do you suppose God thinks about that?

Not a thing. He doesn't even notice.

Why? Because he LOVES us.

Think about it! If your best friend's house burns down, do you weigh whether or not you're "even" when you take him and his family in? It doesn't even enter your head that your baby just insists on being fed at four in the morning, and expects you to wipe her butt, and yet never once offers to do the dishes for you.

That's how it is with God. He doesn't even consider the fact that you're not "even" with him.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. (1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

"Love keeps no record of wrongs." God doesn't even notice. It doesn't enter his head. It isn't an issue. He loves us and that means that he is there for us, he is faithful, he cares, he is interested and he will be there no matter what, no matter how we respond, because *he doesn't even think about how we might respond*. Look at what Paul writes about the nature of God's love:

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:5-8)

He gave everything he had when we were his enemies. We have trouble sometimes doing things for our dear friends and family. Would we even consider lifting a finger, let alone giving all we have, to someone who just punched us in the face and sued us for a million dollars because our face broke his hand? And yet that's precisely how God operates.

Therefore, when we start doing things as if to “even the score,” God doesn’t understand what in the world we’re going on about. He’s already giving us stuff, he already loves us. His question for us is, “How can you be nice to me, only thinking of what you’ll get out of it? You think *that’s* love?”

“I took you out, I bought you dinner, did you see how much I dropped on that wine, how much I tipped the *matre d’*? So don’t you think you owe me, something baby? Just a handshake? Come on now, get real...”

Or: “I gave you roses, and I made the bed, and I picked up my socks and put them in the hamper. Did you see that? And how ‘bout this, I put the toilet seat down! So tonight, don’t you feel I deserve to get lucky?”

Does that work?

Ever? Are our spouses going to be happy with us? Are we going to get anywhere with an attitude like that? Do we know what we sound like when we talk that way? But of course we’re smart enough now not to *say* that sort of thing to our mates. But how often do we let that thought go through our heads?

And so, with such attitudes, we reduce love to: I paid you the cash, now perform.

Is that love? Of course not. Let’s consider Paul’s description again as recorded in his first letter to the Corinthian church. What do we see? We see that love acts without any thought of returns. Love simply and wholly is consumed by doing what is best for the one who is loved.

And yet how is it, in the face of such a description of love, a description that is a description of God himself, since he is love (1 John 4:7-8), how is it that we’ve decided that if we live good lives and do good things, that *for that reason*, God must protect us

from the horrors of life? Ethics has nothing to do with whether God loves us. He simply loves us, just as we simply love our babies.

It is superstitious to imagine that the reason we lost the basketball game today is because we didn't wear our lucky underwear. But, if only we'd prayed more. If only we weren't such sinners. If only we read our Bibles more. If only we had tithed better. Then God would have made us win that game. No. That's all superstitious too. We lost because the other team played the game better.

It's really as simple as that.

We make an enormous mistake in imagining that there is a connection between our ethics and whether God loves us or whether we get the blessings of God. God's love is not dependent on how we behave or act.

Paul writes:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? Have you suffered so much for nothing— if it really was for nothing? Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? (Galatians 2:20-3:5)

Our being good is simply because we love God. If we think we're going to get something back, then we're being good because we love *us*; we're manipulating the other person. And so our actions aren't good at all.

My wife comes up to me on occasion and asks, "Do you *love* me?" And of course I know right away that she wants me to do something or to get something for her. It has

become a joke and a funny way for her to ask for my help. But how often do we seriously relate to the people in our lives just this way?

Jesus said,

“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even ‘sinners’ lend to ‘sinners,’ expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” (Luke 6:32-36)

If we’re good because we think God will then be obligated to bless us—then we’re not being good at all and, even worse, we’re accusing God of not being good. We’re telling him that the ONLY reason he is nice to us is because he’s getting something out of it. We’re buying him off, earning his favor. This is why Isaiah argued that all our good deeds are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

Too often, the only reason we put the toilet seat down and picked up our socks is because we think we’ll get lucky. That is not loving our wives. That is manipulating them to get something from them that we imagine they don’t want to give us. And so the same sort of behavior, no matter how we might try to pretty it up with spiritual verbiage, is certainly not loving God. Instead, it is turning God into a slave. But God is not our slave.

The sad reality, though, is that we tend to think and live and behave and do what we do because most of what we do, whether for God or for others, is because of what we think we’ll get out of it.

We love ourselves and we fear that no one else does.

But love casts our fear.

We make a mistake if we imagine that God owes us because we do all sorts of good stuff. If we do good stuff and think that therefore God must do something good for us, then we do not love God. And if we think this is how God operates, if we think that what he is waiting to see from us is certain behavior before he'll bless us, then we think God does not love us.

But God *does* love us and that means he is good to us no matter what! He doesn't expect anything back. His love is not dependent upon our performance. 1 Corinthians 13 demonstrates that love, real love, is *never* based on performance. God isn't looking to get anything back. He doesn't think about it at all. And he doesn't mind.

Chapter Four: So Does God Really Love Me?

How Important Is Love?

In Douglas Adam's humorous novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, scientists build the computer Deep Thought and ask it "the great Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything." After contemplating for seven and a half million years, the computer responds, "I don't think you're going to like the answer." After the scientists insist the computer say it anyway, it tells them that the answer is forty-two. Then it adds—since they *aren't* happy with the answer—"I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is." I saw a bumper sticker recently which asked, "The Hokey-Pokey: what if that's really what it's all about?"

If you had just watched the movie *A Beautiful Mind* and your buddy came up to you and asked, "What's that film about?" you probably wouldn't have too much trouble giving him or her a quick summary of the basic theme and plot. What if they caught you living your life and asked you that question about it?

So what *is* it all about?

Actually, it's summarized nicely in Matthew 22:34-40, when Jesus says that it all rests on just two commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." So *love* is what it is really all about. It's neither forty-two nor the Hokey-Pokey. Loving God and loving people amounts to God's theory of everything. (cf. Paul's comment in Galatians 5:14 and Romans 13:9-10). Obviously, then, love is *very* important. Remember, it is the theme of the entire Bible. It is the point of life.

Interpersonal Relations

Since the theme of everything is to love God and to love people, the issue of interpersonal relations is one of the two most critical issues in the Bible. In fact, if we take a look at what the apostle John has to say, how we relate to others largely is how we show our love to God, too.

1 John 4:20-21:

If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Under this theme of "loving others" falls the issue of ethics. In theory, nothing could be simpler. Paul writes that *all* the commandments, whether "do not kill" or "do not steal" are summed up in the single command to "love your neighbor as yourself." After all, if you love someone, Paul argues, you're not likely to hurt him (Romans 13:8-10).

Even in practice, acting on the basis of love is not as hard or unfocussed as it might seem. In ethics classes, professors delight in coming up with difficult dilemmas. For instance, imagine you're living in Germany in 1938 and you're hiding Jews in your basement. Now, if the Nazis come to your door and demand to know if you've seen any Jews around lately, will you lie?

It comes down to having the principle of “loving others” firmly imbedded in your brain, and recognizing that all laws are to be understood in light of that principle. That is, ask yourself, WHY does this law exist? Jesus derided the Pharisees when they criticized his behavior on the Sabbath by pointing out that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. That is, the laws are designed to BENEFIT you and others. If you find the application of a law or ethical principle hurtful or burdensome and unpleasant, then perhaps you're misinterpreting it. Getting back to the Nazis and your hidden Jews. If you tell the Nazis about them, you've caused the death of the Jews and turned the Nazis into murderers—clearly violations of the central law: love others. Thus, you lie. “Jews? Haven't been any Jews here in years.”

Definition of Love

Most of us act like we know what love is. But do we really?

We fall in love, we get married, and then, at some point, a sizeable percentage of men and women start having an affair with someone else, someone that they didn't marry, someone to whom they have not said that they would “love, honor and cherish until death do they part.” I've heard lots of people talk about love dying. I've watched longtime friendships dissolve or simply grow cold. Divorce is not uncommon, affairs are not uncommon. So what's going on here? Even parents and children become estranged.

How many teenagers shout at their parents “I hate you”—to the same human being that only a few years earlier they spent hours cutting out paper hearts for on Valentines, threw their arms around, and cooed “I love you!”

Sadly we see spouses not just divorcing, but sometimes committing violence against one another; parents abuse their children. Children attack their parents. How does love turn into hate? Or are we missing something altogether? Are we understanding what love is at all? Have we ever experienced the genuine article? Did we really know what we were saying when we told someone “I love you?”

Paul of course, gave us a definition of “love” in the Bible in a letter that he wrote to a church in the city of Corinth, which is located in the modern nation of Greece, in Europe. This is what he wrote:

Love is patient,
love is kind.
It does not envy,
it does not boast,
it is not proud.
It is not rude,
it is not self-seeking,
it is not easily angered,
it keeps no record of wrongs.
Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
It always protects,
always trusts,
always hopes,
always perseveres.
Love never fails. (1 Cor. 13:4-8)

We may be familiar with this passage, so familiar in fact that we’ve stopped listening to it. Such nice sentiments, so pleasant, so romantic. Let’s put it on our wedding invitation. Though pretty, it seems to have little if anything to do with how we

actually live here in the real world. But let's look at what Paul wrote a bit more closely. Perhaps it actually still has something to say to us.

First off, I think that what we need to recognize is that love may be a lot less common than we like to imagine. Just because we refer to something as “love” does not necessarily mean that's what it is. If what you called “love” ended and didn't persevere, as wonderful as you might have thought it was, it could not be, and was not, what the Bible calls love. We must also distinguish between “love” and the “in love” phenomenon. A lot of people don't understand the difference, because what we're talking about here is not about being *in* love; it is about *love*.

Perhaps one of the most important things to understand in looking at what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians is to see that these things that Paul lists about love are DESCRIPTIVE of love; they are not PRESCRIPTIVE. This is NOT a list of do's and don'ts. This is a list of what love is like by nature, what love is, what love does, how love acts. If this isn't what goes on with it for you, then guess what? Whatever you're feeling isn't really love, at least not by Paul's definition, at least not in all the fullness as is expressed in this famous passage.

Love is Patient

I have three daughters, all adopted out of foster care. My youngest was born addicted to crack cocaine. Additionally, she had been prenatally exposed to methamphetamine and alcohol. When she arrived in our home, five days after she had been born, she was still going through withdrawal and suffered uncontrollable tremors. One possible consequence of that drug exposure is that she now suffers from severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: ADHD for short. She is regularly misbehaving

and frequently getting into things, and she has trouble thinking ahead about the possible repercussions of any of her actions. If the mood strikes her, she does it. “I have scissors, the cat has hair. What can I do about that? Hmm.” So she has required a *lot* more time and effort and work to raise and discipline.

But she is still alive. How come? Because we love her. And we are obviously “patient” with her. From the moment she came into our home, we sought out all the best therapy for her: we found all the developmental services that are offered. She had physical therapists, speech therapists, and went to special preschool, and special kindergarten, then repeated in regular kindergarten.

The point, of course, is that love is willing to stick with a person, to wait however long is necessary, to *do* whatever needs to be done in order to solve the problem, for however long it might take. Why is that? Because the person is the object of my affections, and because that person and his or her welfare is vital to me.

I am a writer. The process of getting a novel published is a very long, long process. Two years ago a particular editor asked me to send him a book proposal. I did. About a year later, he told me that he didn’t think he wanted to “lead” with that book and asked me to send him three more proposals. A few weeks ago, he called and told me he was taking one of them to an editorial meeting. And of course, I’m still waiting, still wondering, and still not certain which of four books this company is going to publish. But what do I do? *I wait*. I am patient? Of course. Why? Because I know what the outcome of my waiting will be: a book on the bookstore shelves and money in my bank account. Those things are important to me and so I can be patient.

Do you collect your paycheck at the end of every day of work? No, you get it at the end of the week, or the end of every two weeks, or maybe at the end of the month. Do you say “to heck with it” because you don’t get paid at the end of every day? No, you happily wait; you’re *patient*, because that paycheck is worth the wait, worth the process.

How long you are willing to wait for something is dependent upon how important it is to you.

Love is Kind

This is pretty obvious, don’t you suppose? Or is it? What does it mean to be kind? It means to think of what would bring joy and pleasure to the other person. Do you know that your friend enjoys Star Trek, so you get him a Star Trek book for Christmas? That is kind. Did someone get you something and it isn’t what you were really wanting? But because it is from them, and you love them, you thank them anyhow, because the *source* of the gift and the thought behind it is what brings you pleasure? Isn’t this what we do for our small children when they with great joy give us the misshapen clay pot they made in school? And of course, it extends to such simple things as being polite and saying nice things, being thoughtful, getting a cup of coffee for someone, helping when someone asks for help. And again, remember: this is a description of how you are. Think of how a person behaves during the “in love” period. Did you have to be asked to get the flowers for the object of your affection? Probably not. You don’t have to be asked to be kind to those you love.

Love Does Not Envy

Your friends get a new car or a new job, or a new boyfriend or girlfriend and you are genuinely pleased for them. It is not gritting your teeth, it is not rolling your eyes, it

is not forced or an effort; it is your natural response, without thought. When the one you love is happy, when something wonderful happens to the one you adore, the first thought is not, “Why didn’t I get that”; instead, the first thought is merely to be happy with them.

Their joy, their good fortune, makes you as happy as if it had happened to you.

Love Does Not Boast

Love is not boastful because you suddenly lack pride, but because you don’t feel the need to boast. Boasting is a consequence of feeling inadequate, of not feeling accepted by the one you love. If you truly love, you don’t feel a need to put on airs. During a new relationship, one tries to impress the new guy or gal, especially during the “in love” phase. You don’t need to impress, nor do you *feel* a need to impress, those you love. It is those you don’t know, who are new to you, that you feel a need to impress, or those that you are unsure of, like your boss or coworkers or acquaintances.

The more the insecurity, the more the need to start listing one’s accomplishments and attributes, or flaunting them. When one is comfortable, one doesn’t need to show off. That’s why the husband doesn’t feel the need to put on fancy clothes and cologne and suck in his gut when he is with his wife.

Love is comfortable.

Love Is Not Rude Or Self-Seeking

This can be as simple as not interrupting the other person when he or she is busy, but more it is the sense that one’s focus is not on oneself at all, but rather on what the other person needs. Your joy is fulfilled in seeing the joy in the other person. For instance, when having sex, you are not thinking about how much fun you’re having; instead, you are focused on making sure that the other person has fun. But notice

something. If *both* of you are doing this, then you're *both* going to have a fabulous time. But you are not thinking about it one way or the other; you simply are working for the good of the other person, thinking of the pleasure of the other person. You are completely selfless in it. Again, this is descriptive. You simply don't consider what you'll get out of it; all you care about is what the other person gets from it. So much so, that if the other person says "thank you" you're puzzled about what it is they might be talking about.

Love seeks what is best for the other person, always, no matter what. Love means helping the other person get what is best for her, not necessarily what you would want. When one of my daughters awakened at three in the morning crying, even though I would have liked to have continued sleeping, I did not hesitate to get up. When I discovered she had a fever and was throwing up her first Christmas Eve, my wife and I hurried her to the emergency room, where we stayed until six Christmas morning. My first thought was her getting well, not how I'd been inconvenienced over the holiday. But what about in less significant and obvious situations? For instance, taking the last cupcake when you know the other person really, really wanted it? That would be rude and in fact, if you know the other person really, really wanted it, then you would really, really want for them to have it.

Love is at ease only when the one loved is happy. In fact, joy arises most strongly from seeing the joy of the beloved.

Love Is Not Easily Angered And Keeps No Record Of Wrongs

This, likewise, comes from the fact that you're focused on the other person. Anger comes from the failure of expectations being met. You expected your loved one to

remember your birthday. He didn't. So now you're angry; how rude, how thoughtless. Didn't they learn anything from this book? Perhaps, but you didn't learn anything either. And besides, remember; this is *descriptive*. One will not become loving by striving to do each of these items in Paul's list of what love is. Rather, these items will happen if you are characterized by love.

Peter asked Jesus, how often should I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Seven times? How generous. No, said Jesus. Seventy times seven times. So now I keep track. Oops, that was four hundred ninety times, so now I won't talk to you anymore.

Nope. The point is that you shouldn't be keeping track; you shouldn't think about it. It doesn't matter to you because the performance of the person you love does not have a thing to do with the fact that you love him or her.

Remember: God loved us while we were unlovely, while we were his enemies, while we were actively opposed to him. He loved us when we had done nothing to make ourselves loveable. And that's what love is, when it is really love. It is unrequited and is not dependent for its existence on the behavior of the other person. The love is there, regardless, in the face of hatred and opposition.

Love can't remember that the beloved ever did anything wrong.

Love Does Not Delight In Evil But Rejoices With The Truth

We feel a certain slight satisfaction when something bad happens to someone who wronged us, or whom we feel has been getting just too much of the good things life has to offer. Serves him right that he got cancer; look at how happy and wonderful everything's been for him. Good that he should have a little trouble now. Of course, we

never verbalize such thoughts, but sometimes, if we are honest with ourselves, they are there. The Germans have a word for it: *schadenfreude*, which means taking delight in the discomfiture of our friends. Of course, this is hardly an expression of love. Just the opposite. When bad things happen to those whom we actually love, we hurt with them. If your toe hurts, you don't divorce that from yourself and think, well, it's only my toe. Doesn't affect my thumb at all. My thumb couldn't care less.

...but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1Corinthians 12:25b-27)

Our basis for hope is the truth that God loves us and that he knows what he is doing—and that what he is doing is something good, since God does not delight in evil. There is no *schadenfreude* in God. In the middle of Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians, a destruction that saw women and children brutalized, and the enslavement of a nation, God told Jeremiah, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'" (Jeremiah 29:11)

Love Always Protects

When something bad happens to one we love, we automatically want to do what we can to help. We read stories of the father who drowns trying to save his daughter from the raging river; or mothers running into burning buildings to save their children. Our best friend's car dies on the freeway and he calls us at two in the morning and we think nothing of going out there to help, even if he is a hundred miles away. And I do hope you have people in your life that you would do that for, and that you know would be there for you.

One day my youngest daughter was running through the house, chasing after our dog. My wife warned her to stop running in the house. But she didn't obey and wound up smacking into the aquarium. She cut open her head and bled profusely. But I didn't stand over her and comment, "Well, you got what you deserved, now suffer the consequences." I did not leave her bleeding on the floor. Instead, my wife and I scooped her up and we took her to the emergency room, where she got stitches.

We help those we love, no matter what.

Love Always Trusts And Always Hopes

This can look like stupidity, as when a wife trusts her husband even though he is cheating on her; but that is how love is. It is not willing to believe anything but what is best about the other person. Anything less than that is not love.

God loves us very much. I know I say that a lot, but it is the most profound thought and for me, the hardest to remember. I got a phone call from Dandi once that I always remember with humor. She had a question about a Christmas present for my wife Ruth, and then we just chatted awhile (maybe a half hour). Part way into the conversation, Dandi told me that she had given a card to Dennis to send to my mom a couple of weeks earlier and thought it had been taken care of. Just that very afternoon, she had found the card buried under some papers. She was very annoyed, and told me that she'd mail it herself now. And she asked, "Why do I always do that? Why do I always think he'll do something I ask him to do and of course he never does? Why don't I learn?" Admittedly, Dennis tends to be a bit absentminded. I simply told her, "Because that's the nature of love. 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that 'Love always hopes'

and so you can't help but always think that he'll do what he's been asked to do, since you love him."

She laughed and commented that love is kind of stupid, then. But she understood and was happy.

I'm glad that God loves us with that kind of love. Love does make us stupid, but it's a good kind of stupid.

Love Always Perseveres

Love cannot end, it does not die. This of course is a great comfort as we think of our relationship with God. But it also affects how we relate to others, and it follows from all that has been said thus far about love. Love is not dependent upon performance; it simply exists and cannot be stopped, no matter what. If you turn from love to hate, then it wasn't love, not the love described here, no matter how wonderful or perfect it might have felt.

...for love is as strong as death,
its jealousy unyielding as the grave.
It burns like blazing fire,
like a mighty flame.
Many waters cannot quench love;
rivers cannot wash it away.
If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love,
it would be utterly scorned. (Song of Songs 8:6b-7)

If someone ordered you at gunpoint to stop loving your daughter, would you be able to comply? Love cannot be shut off. It doesn't fade away.

Love is something that God does through us; and in order to love like the love Paul talks about in 1 Corinthians 13, we need to be comfortable with the fact that God loves us and that we are complete and whole in him. If we do not understand and feel and accept and fully inculcate the love of God, we can't love others, either. If we don't

understand the unconditional nature of God's love for us, if we don't understand that he requires nothing of us and loves us fully, completely and forever, world without end, it will be hard for us—impossible—to give that back to him, or to anyone else. We must understand grace (which is a consequence of love) if we are going to understand love at all.

God Loves Sinners

There are those who argue that God hates sinners. They have a collection of verses that they like to use, most notably: Psalm 5:5-6, 11:5; Lev. 20:23, 20:13, 26:30; Deut. 32:19; Mal. 1:3 and Rom. 9:13. The fundamental problem with the use being made of these verses is that every last one of them is being taken out of context, both their specific context in place, as well as the broader context of the biblical revelation.

Remember what it's all about: loving God and loving people (Matthew 22:34-40, Romans 13:8-10, Galatians 5:14 and James 2:8). Any interpretation of the Bible which results in a conclusion contrary to what it's all about is necessarily wrong. No ifs, no ands, no buts. Thus, to suggest that God *hates*, rather than *loves* sinners, creates an absurdity: a contradiction with the very theme of the Bible. John writes "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother." (1 John 4:19-21).

Thus, the interpretation that God hates sinners, or that he desires to see bad things happen to them, simply is an untenable interpretation of the verses used by those who

would choose to hate, imagining that for some reason that God has it in for them because of something that they did, or said, or thought.

Some will try to tell me that we are only supposed to love our brother. Who is our brother? They will insist it is only those who believe like us, or behave like us. I would suggest that those who would argue like that are exactly like the expert who, in response to Jesus' suggestion that he should love his neighbor asked "who is my neighbor?"

Jesus' response was to tell the now familiar story of the good Samaritan, who helped a badly injured crime victim where a priest and a Levite both ignored the problem and passed on by (Luke 10:25-37).

The problem for us moderns, though, is that Jesus' story of the good Samaritan doesn't fully resonate with us. What is a Samaritan, anyhow? To put it simply, Samaritans were apostates from Judaism. They were the result of mixed marriages between Jews and pagan idolaters who had moved into Palestine during the period of the Babylonian captivity. Their religion was considered a cult. They were worthless sinners deserving nothing but curses according to the religious establishment in Jerusalem.

So let's update things. If Jesus were asked the same question today, his response would be to tell the story of how a Baptist preacher and a famous televangelist ignored the rape victim in the gutter, in contrast to the good gay, black transvestite from San Francisco who helped her.

What does this mean then practically? If Christians are going to hate the gay community, for instance, then they need to be consistent and hate the liars, the backbiters, the gossips, and the hypocrites, too. Maybe put up a few pickets around the neighborhood

supermarket that caters to all those gluttons. If hating ice cream overeaters seems silly, then hating *any* sinner is just as silly.

Maybe I just don't get it. Jesus died for sinners. All of us are sinners, and that's what we'll all be—every last one of us—till the day we die. Are certain sinners irredeemable? Whosoever will may come, but wait, if you're overindulging in snack foods, you've got to clean up your act first? Since when has the church become an exclusive club? Are we supposed to have bouncers at the door making sure everyone has a tie and that they're "the right sort of people," untainted by chocolate, before we let them in?

Maybe I just don't understand the gospel and the mission of the church. But I don't think so. I think it's those who hate that just don't get it.

But what about me? What about a horrid, sinful person like me? Does God really love me? Even though I've messed everything up?

The story is told of a Sunday School class filled with happy little five year olds. The teacher smiled and asked the class, "Can someone tell me what has soft brown fur, a big bushy tail, climbs in trees and eats nuts?" The class was completely silent. Finally, one little girl raised her hand and timidly answered, "I know the answer has to be Jesus, but it still sounds like a squirrel to me."

We automatically answer the question "does God love me" with the pat answer: "of course." But if we're completely honest with ourselves, especially during those times in our lives when we have the flu, or someone we love has died, or a check bounced, or the tire is flat and we're late and it's raining—sometimes, if we are honest—we wonder if it might just be a squirrel after all.

What is Love?

But do we even know what love is? Every time the Israelites faced a new crisis, they would moan that God had brought them from Egypt just so they could die now in the wilderness, miserable and sad (Exodus 16:3, Numbers 21:5).

But notice something in those situations, when they were disobedient, ungrateful, and moaning: did the congregation of Israel starve to death in the wilderness? Did they die of thirst? Of course not. God *loved* them and took care of them. We cannot reasonably be critical of these ancient people, because our own attitude, *if we're honest with ourselves*, is too often exactly the same as theirs. No matter how many times we've come to the brink of disaster, no matter how many awful experiences we've had that we've seen God rescue us from, we remain convinced, when each new problem comes, that **THIS** time God has abandoned us and **THIS** time everything is going to be awful, *because God doesn't really love me*.

It is funny that we choose to believe the lie that the serpent gave Adam and Eve. What lie is that? "He doesn't want you to have this fruit, because he knows that when you take it you'll be just like him. So *obviously* God is holding out. He's keeping something good from you! He doesn't have your best interests in mind. Instead, he wants you to be unhappy. In fact, he never wants you to be joyful and peaceful ever again."

How much of Christianity is built on this same squirrely attitude? After all, how often do we read with approval, or view with approval, people who gave up everything so they could do God's work or be closer to God? They sold everything they owned, they lived in a cave, their clothes were burlap and they slept on cold hard dirt. On account of

that, we *know* they were especially holy and close to God, because the way to get close to God is to abandon anything that might be fun. If you're smiling and eating and drinking, then you can't possibly be close to God. It's only in fasting and self-denial and misery and poverty that God can be found.

Yeah, right. And so Jesus himself was criticized by the Pharisees and other religious sorts because his disciples didn't fast, and because he frequented parties where he ate good food and drank good drink (Matthew 9:14 and 11:19).

Why is it so hard to understand that God's love is not dependent on how often we deny ourselves ice cream?

Chapter Five: For Goodness Sake

Being Good Enough

Obsessing on being good means that we are centering our attention on something that God had never intended for us to know anything about in the first place, let alone focus on.

Most people understand that when Adam and Eve found out about sin from eating fruit off the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that they had done a “bad” thing. But this tree with the forbidden fruit was not just the tree of the knowledge of *evil*. It was the tree of the knowledge of *good* and evil. We were not supposed to know about *good* any more than we were supposed to know about evil.

In his book *Ethics*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out that being preoccupied with good and evil is *abnormal* for human beings. In the beginning, Adam and Eve knew only God. Good and evil were not an issue for them at all. In fact, Adam and Eve didn’t even know such concepts existed and God warned them not to find out. But Adam and Eve disobeyed.

With their discovery of the meaning of good and evil, they suddenly became “like God.” They had become originators of good and evil themselves. Before the Fall they did not have an identity apart from God. After the Fall, they had cut off their relationship with Him altogether.

As a consequence of Adam and Eve’s poor choice, we, their decedents, find ourselves similarly alienated from God. Instead of seeing God, we can only see ourselves. We were made in the image of God and drew our life entirely from our origin in God. Before the Fall we recognized ourselves as being chosen and loved by God. Our shame and sadness since Adam and Eve’s choice is a consequence of our estrangement from God. This estrangement can only be overcome through forgiveness and a restoration of fellowship with God through Jesus.

Bonhoeffer writes that “The freedom of Jesus is not about arbitrary choice of one amongst innumerable possibilities; it consists, on the contrary, precisely in the complete simplicity of his action...[which is] only by one thing. This one thing Jesus calls the will of God...The will of God is his life....He lives and acts not by the knowledge of good and evil but by the will of God. There is only one will of God. In it the origin is recovered...” (*Ethics*, pp. 33-34). Most importantly, in union with God there is no knowledge outside of God, there is no knowledge of good or evil, and there is no knowledge of evil toward us. “Knowledge of Jesus Christ implies ignorance of ...[our] own good and evil...to the exclusion of all other knowledge” (*Ethics*, p. 43).

There’s a paradoxical passage that suggests we shouldn’t notice our good deeds at all: the left hand shouldn’t know what the right hand is doing (Matthew 6:3-4). How in the world would we pull that off?

By the reconciliation that comes through Christ.

Instead of thinking of good and bad, we simply focus on God. Ideally, in Christ, we are restored to the place of innocence that Adam and Eve had before they made their wrong choice. In Christ, God hits the reset button and we return to the factory original settings.

Bonhoeffer argues that no action we take should be intended to reflect back on us, our character, or our reputation. We must, for the sake of the moment, unreservedly surrender all self-directed wishes and desires. It is the *other* person who becomes the focus of all our attention. Not us. In ethical action, the left hand really must be unaware of what the right hand is doing if the right hand is to do anything ethical at all. Otherwise, our so-called good deeds become something else altogether: just a pat on our own backs. In fact, we generally do good only because it benefits us. It is hard to see that any true altruism—what might be called selfless action—exists in human affairs.

Bonhoeffer illustrates this notion of selfless action—true altruism—by contrasting the behavior of Jesus in the New Testament with that of the Pharisees. He writes that the Pharisee is someone for “whom only the knowledge of good and evil has come to be of importance.” Each moment of his life, the Pharisee chooses between what is good and what is evil (*Ethics*, p.30). Likewise, the Pharisee can confront no one without evaluating him in terms of his behavior, good or bad (*Ethics*, p.31). For the Pharisee, all judgments are moral judgments, and everyone teeters on the brink of condemnation.

Bonhoeffer points out that Jesus refused to see the world according to the black and white distinctions of the Pharisee. He threw away many of the legal distinctions the Pharisees worked so hard to maintain. Jesus let his disciples eat with unwashed hands.

He healed a woman on the Sabbath, in violation of the prohibition of working on that day. Jesus exhibited a freedom from the law in everything he did and in fact never shied from tweaking the Pharisees notions of right and wrong.

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus did not concern himself with the goodness or badness of those he helped. He did not care about the personal moral worth of those with whom he interacted. He cared only about the well being of those with whom he came in contact. He exhibited no other concern. He is the paradigm of selfless action, and the exact opposite of the Pharisees. For the Pharisee every gesture was fundamentally self-reflective. Jesus loved others, where the Pharisee loved only himself.

In one of his critical diatribes against the Pharisees, Jesus pointed out that tithing cumin and mint was fine, but one should not lose sight of the more important issue of love and mercy; doing the tithing without the love and mercy was the problem, not the tithing itself. The attitude behind the actions seems to matter to God.

Paul writes of the importance of love and argues in 1 Corinthians 13 that if we give all our money away, die for the faith, know everything, and have no love, then all we did was just so much empty noise. Shakespeare perhaps echoes this in the famous lines from his play *Macbeth*:

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V,v, 17)

Dogs are very good “Christians.” No dog has ever gambled away its rent money, frequented a bar, used bad language, or smoked cigarettes. But of course, perhaps this illustrates that being good really isn’t what it’s all about, is it? Being good does not make

a dog a Christian, now does it? Perhaps focusing on behavior misses the point completely?

Is love dependent on the actions of the one loved? The lover does not see his beloved as she is, but as love says she is. Love always hopes, always trusts, always perseveres, and so on. And so the lover sees his beloved as the ideal; she is always without blemish, always thin, always wrinkle free; the hair never grays, the body never sags. He loves each and every bit of her because it is hers. An ideal lover never sees his beloved any other way but as flawless. He cannot conceive that she can be anything but perfect. She is all that matters, and when she smiles at him and gives herself, then all other problems fade to insignificance. There is no fear, no sorrow, no suffering in the arms of the beloved.

A lot of what is promoted and preached is tantamount to adding to the gospel and is in a sense simple Gnosticism. “Well and good that you have the gospel; now you must add to that our hidden, special knowledge. You must do these things in order to really have the blessings of God, to open the floodgates of happiness, to gain the good things that God would like to give you if only you weren’t so bad or stupid.”

And yet we read that we have the kingdom of God now (Luke 17:21), that God has given us everything we need for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3), and instead of choosing to enjoy that, we let the circumstances of our life distract us, robbing us of the joy we might otherwise experience.

Two children I saw in Disneyland once. One was holding his father’s hand, jumping up and down, looking at all the bright things around, laughing and happy, pointing at a horse walking by, and enjoying the moment. The other was holding her

father's hand, crying, and pointing at a cotton candy booth, miserable because her father wasn't getting her any cotton candy. For both, their circumstances were actually the same. One chose to focus on the fact that he was in Disneyland. The other chose to focus on her lack of cotton candy. One chose to be happy. One chose to be miserable. They were both in Disneyland nevertheless. The only difference was their perspective.

Making your life as pleasant as possible, improving your circumstances, getting an education, learning to balance your checkbook, mowing your lawn, these are all good things to do. Just don't imagine that they have anything to do with your relationship to God or that somehow in the doing of these "good" things, you can somehow get more of God or more of his blessings. How could that even be possible? You have the Holy Spirit living inside of you; you are a child of God; you will be with him forever. What more do you suppose there is?

The issue for so many Christians is the lists of do's and don'ts in the Bible. They read that they must be filled with the spirit and avoid all sorts of evil: don't gossip, don't kill, don't steal, be kind, don't stare at Sheila and certainly don't enjoy what you see, and whatever you do, stay away from that ice cream! And so they get the sense that if they aren't doing *these* things and if they aren't avoiding *those* things then Hell awaits them—or at the very least they will spend a lifetime sitting on God's shelf as a vessel of dishonor.

But doing or not doing is like balancing our checkbook. Although it's a really good idea, *it never increases the amount of money in our account*. We may have less trouble, our lives may be sweeter, we may be happier if we avoid killing our neighbor. And if we don't drool over Sheila, then maybe her husband won't beat us up and she

won't slap us silly. But it's like knowing and obeying the laws of physics. Making allowance for gravity has nothing to do with whether you will make God love you more. But it'll keep you from ruining that nice china tea set. Ethics are like that.

Why do we keep thinking that how we act is going to have anything to do with how much God loves us? Did Jesus die because we did something to deserve it? No, he did it because of his love for us; it had *nothing* to do with our ethics or lack thereof. It had nothing to do with begging or asking or faith. It had *everything* to do with God's love for us and the price he paid on the cross.

See how easy this is?

Infertility and Foster Care

Normal people have trouble keeping perspective in the midst of disasters. When something awful happens, of course we panic, of course we feel bad, of course we want the horrible stuff to stop, to go away, to get fixed. We want to find the mistake we've made and undo it. Surely it's some simple principle I missed. Some good thing I need to do. Some bad thing I need to stop doing.

What can we do when a loved one dies? When our best friend moves away? When we can't pay our bills? When we lose our job? When our children break our heart? When we're the victim of crime? When we do something wrong? When we get caught? When we hurt someone we love?

For eleven years my wife Ruth and I had been the only two members of our household. This was not by choice. We had wanted to have children, but despite our best efforts, none were forthcoming. We finally went and saw a doctor specializing in fertility problems and discovered that we were both infertile. Although modern

technology could make having children possible, our medical insurance would not cover the necessary procedures. So, unless one or the other of us managed to come into a fortune, the chances of us having children was clearly zero.

About a year later we learned about foster care. Although we had some inkling of it before that, we had never really thought much about it. But a friend of ours encouraged us to come to an informational meeting. There, we learned that in addition to older children, there was also a need for foster parents for infants.

Although we couldn't have children of our own, perhaps this would be a way for us to help care for children that needed someone to love them. We decided to sign up for it, go through all the paperwork and background checks and fingerprinting involved, and fix things in our house to make it acceptable to the state for the purpose of doing this task. That done, we were finally approved in the fall of that same year. Then it was just a matter of waiting for a child in need.

We didn't have to wait long. The phone call came one afternoon in December: a four month old, drug exposed infant girl who was not doing well in her current foster home placement. Would we be willing to take her? Her name was Vanessa.

We agreed, of course. I tried to think of doing foster care as extended baby sitting, but of course I soon lost that mind game. It didn't take long to become very attached to the new little addition to our family. Although we knew her placement in our house was likely only temporary, we fell in love.

But unlike a baby showing up in the normal course of events, this one came with several adult strangers: social workers who came each month to inspect us, to whom we

had to report every little thing, and who might show up at any moment, day or night, and who could tell us what to do, and where we could and could not go.

We also had the biological family to deal with. In Vanessa's case, there was the biological mom, a drug addict and convict (incarcerated for a violent offence, at only fifteen years of age); there was the biological grandmother, who was forbidden contact with Vanessa, because she was a convicted drug pusher; there was the other grandmother, who had adopted the biomom, who was permitted contact. Plus, there were the biomom's sisters, who were *also* permitted contact. So we had to juggle visits between all of these people. And of course, the biomom would schedule visits, but then had a tendency not to show up.

Our Daughter is Taken

As I said, we had fallen in love with Vanessa. How can you properly care for a baby without loving it, after all? And although we knew that our relationship was likely only temporary, as the weeks passed it became very easy to think of Vanessa as our child. We were the ones who took her to the doctor when she was sick; we were the ones up with her in the middle of the night to feed or change her. We were the ones who took care of her day after day after day.

But then it happened. One morning, the biomom's sister called while Ruth was at work. She announced that the Court had just given her full custody of Vanessa and so she was coming right over to pick her up.

Within a half hour, the sister arrived, took Vanessa, her diaper bag, and drove off. Vanessa was suddenly no longer with us. What made a bad situation even worse, I had been unable to get a hold of my wife Ruth to let her know what was happening. Ruth

was at work and there was no phone in her classroom. I finally managed to get word to Ruth by sending a friend over to her school. But by the time Ruth got back home, crying and upset, it was too late for her to say goodbye to Vanessa.

Vanessa was gone, and that was that.

Yet, Vanessa's aunt called us repeatedly over the next few days. She wanted to know how to feed Vanessa, how to take care of her, how to get her to sleep, and then told us that she needed someone to take care of Vanessa on the weekends and wondered if we would mind doing that? Of course we were delighted, even though we no longer had any official connection to Vanessa. So on Friday night, Vanessa came back to us, and we got to keep her that whole weekend. Vanessa seemed glad to see us, but she didn't appear to have been eating very well. The weekend ended, of course, and then we had to give her back to the aunt.

But then that next week, Vanessa became ill. Vanessa's aunt did not have the necessary paperwork to allow her to take Vanessa to the doctor for treatment, so she called us again and so we took her to the doctor. We were appalled to find out how much weight Vanessa had lost, on top of the fact that she was now sick. We got the necessary medication and everything else she needed to care for Vanessa. Ruth instructed Vanessa's aunt on the details of how often to feed her, how often to give her the medication, and then she wrote it all down. We explained that we were going out of town to visit Ruth's parents, and so we gave her the phone number of where we would be and told her to call us if she needed anything or had any questions.

So, we left and went down to Orange County to spend the weekend with Ruth's parents. It was Friday evening. We went out to a Mexican restaurant and had a pretty

good time. When we got home to Ruth's parents' house, we found a message on their answering machine. It was from Vanessa's aunt. She was nearly hysterical, crying that she couldn't do this anymore and to please come and get Vanessa. Ruth called the aunt, calmed her down a bit, discovered that indeed, the aunt didn't want to have Vanessa any more, and that she desperately wanted us to please come get her. We could have custody again.

Needless to say, we set a new record getting from Orange County to Lancaster, arriving at the aunt's apartment within an hour of leaving Ruth's parent's house. Pretty good, considering that it normally took us two hours to make the trip, maybe an hour and a half if we drove fast and there was no traffic. Considering that the distance from Ruth's parents to our home was one hundred miles, it is obvious what our average speed had to be. Remarkably, we never saw a single CHP the whole trip. The drive back down to Orange County with Vanessa we took at a much more leisurely pace. There was much rejoicing all around. After this, I was convinced that Vanessa would be staying with us permanently.

Adoption

It turned out well. But it would take another two and a half years of many court dates and lots and lots of stress, lots of social workers and lots of inspections, before our adoption of Vanessa was finalized.

Vanessa of course has turned out just fine. She was largely unaware of most of the turmoil surrounding her. She has only known us as her parents. She's doing well in school, happy and healthy. We love her dearly and she knows that.

So the story, to this point in our lives, had a happy ending, or so we thought. But life, as long as we are alive, is not at the end. We believe, as Christians, that we will live happily ever after. But we are not at the happily ever after place, not yet, not as long as we're here...

Chapter Six: So Does It Matter What I Do?

What the Gospel is All About

Superstition imagines that there is a way to manipulate God. After all, I can pour gasoline into my lawnmower, pull the cord, and proceed to make my lawn look well cared for. By my actions, I have control over how tall the grass in my lawn can get. I control, through watering, fertilizing and edging, how pretty it all turns out. So it is not completely irrational that people imagine that there must be something like putting enough gas in your engine when it comes to God: that he's waiting in our storage shed for us to put in the right octane, and then he's waiting for us to yank his chain just so, and then push him around, and so we'll get what we want: a nice, neat place for our children to play and the envy of our neighbors.

Most of us know that we don't get saved by doing good works. We understand that following the Ten Commandments will not get us into heaven. We realize that putting money in the offering box and attending church will not get St. Peter to look the other way so we can sneak through the pearly gates. On that level, most of us understand

that being good has nothing to do with our salvation. And yet oddly, such knowledge seems to have so little practical impact on our day to day existence that it almost seems not to matter at all. We compartmentalize the good news to the few seconds when we mouthed the sinner's prayer, but it has no effect on how we live today. We lock it away into a nice little box, put it up on a shelf, honor it, think fondly of it and memorialize it. But we live our lives as if it never happened and can't mean anything to what's going on now, with my bills to pay, and my wayward children, and tendency to pause too long on certain cable channels as I'm flipping toward the playoffs.

This is very peculiar. Especially given the sorts of lives we are given record of in the Bible. We know that no one was ever saved by keeping the law, and we know that our righteousness is in Christ and we know that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins, and yet we get completely confused when we read something like the story of Lot in Genesis 19.

As the story opens, we discover that Lot is living in the city of Sodom, where he has risen to a position of some authority. Two of his daughters are still living at home with him. One night, he noticed a couple of strangers had come to town and he invites them to spend the night.

A crowd gathers at his door soon after he has taken them into his home, insisting that Lot send them out so they can have their way with them. Lot refuses to turn over his guests, but he tells the mob that they can have sex with his daughters instead.

The crowd refuses, but the strangers, whom we now realize are angels, intervene and get the crowd to abandon their quest by making them blind. The angels then insist that Lot and his family must leave Sodom so that it can be destroyed. He talks to his

sons-in-law, but they just laugh at him. He is very reluctant to leave his city, but the angels eventually grab him and force him, his wife and both daughters out.

After negotiating with the angels about just where they might flee, Lot is granted permission to go to a small town named Zoar, not too far away.

On the way, his wife is turned into a pillar of salt when she looks back, in disobedience to the angels' warning. Lot is too terrified to stay for long in the city of his choice and so he winds up setting up house with his two daughters in a cave.

The daughters are lonely and decide to get Lot drunk so that they can have sex with him, get pregnant, and preserve the family line. They succeed in their plans and give birth to boys who are simultaneously both his sons and his grandsons.

We read that story and we shake our heads and we think of the contrast between poor Lot and his righteous, upstanding uncle Abraham. And we might not be overly puzzled, but for Peter's comment on Lot's life:

And if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men (for that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard)... (2 Peter 2:7-8)

Lot is a righteous man? How? He didn't want to leave Sodom and Gomorrah, his sons-in-law had no respect for him, he offered his daughters to a mob to be raped, and finally his daughters get him so drunk that he has sex with them and gets them pregnant. How can a man like this be considered righteous? *What* was Peter thinking?

I've seen Christians fall all over themselves trying to make sense of something that shouldn't be the least bit confusing at all. Most Christians try to explain away his bad behavior. They say well, he wasn't so bad, really, and in the context of his culture, maybe giving his daughters to that mob was really a good thing. And so they wind up

sounding like God has a scale and that somehow there must be some hidden good deeds in Lot's life that will get things to tip in his favor so that then he'll actually be the righteous man Peter says he is. With that all too common reaction, I realize that most Christians still think that that righteousness means good behavior.

The real answer to the problem of Lot comes from a consideration of the well known passage in Ephesians: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:8-10; one might also consider such passages as Galatians 2:20-3:5, Romans 3:21-28, and Romans 8:1-2). Lot's righteousness is not in anything he did or didn't do. No one is righteous on the basis of how they behave. His righteousness was the consequence of the work of Jesus on the cross.

We are saved by grace, not by works. We know this, but we keep on forgetting it and so the life of Lot confuses us when it shouldn't at all. Our own lives in the same way confuse us, when they shouldn't. Being good is not the path to salvation. It is not the definition of righteousness. Our righteousness is in Jesus. We should know that. Being good is also not the path to prosperity. We should know this too.

But how many people continue to insist otherwise? Like Job's friends, they remain of the opinion that good things come to good people, bad things to bad people. They want to think that God rewards the righteous and dumps garbage on the guilty because that would so neatly solve the question of suffering

in the world and in their own lives.

It seemed obvious to Job's friends, since Job was suffering horribly, that surely he was a sinner who needed to repent. And if he took that simple step, then all would be well. Job's insistence on his innocence infuriated and terrified them. In their minds, Job was obviously hiding his sin. If he wasn't, if he were really innocent, then the world simply no longer made sense to them.

Remarkably, despite the fact that we are told that Job is blameless, that Job was right in everything he said and that Job's friends were wrong, many Christians will still try to argue that Job was somehow being "disciplined" or "chastised." They thus miss the whole point of the story, a point that *should* be obvious! And what is that point? Our behavior has nothing to do with how much God loves us or blesses us. It is superstitious to think that it does, on a level with thinking that if I rub a rabbit's foot just so, and hang a horseshoe just right, and avoid black cats that I'll have good luck instead of bad.

But What About Good Works?

A potential problem in this talk about grace arises when one looks at the law in the Old Testament and even more so when one notices the lists of what constitutes righteousness in say Ephesians 5:3-6, which gives a long list of bad behavior with the stern warning that no such immoral person has any inheritance in the kingdom of God.

One might also bring to mind the fate of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11, who, because of lying about what they'd done with the money they'd received in the sale of their property dropped dead. Or look at the fate of the nameless man in Numbers 15:32-36 who simply picked up sticks on the Sabbath in violation of the commandment

to do no work on that day. The consequence of his action was that he was then stoned to death.

Such strictness about details of the law, such harsh penalties for lawbreakers in both the Old and New Testaments, may make a lot of people wonder what has become of grace, and whether our behavior really does determine God's love for us. Maybe if we don't straighten up quick, we are toast.

However, a hint that there is something we might be missing in our initial thought to cringe becomes apparent when we compare the man who broke the Sabbath with David, the king of Israel. The Bible is clear in stating, for instance in Leviticus 20:10 that adultery carries a death penalty, just as Numbers 35:29-34 informs us that murder is also a capital offense.

And yet most of us are familiar with the story of David, who was not only guilty of adultery with Bathsheba, but also of murdering her husband in his final attempt to cover up his sin. But when he is found out, rather than being hauled off to be executed, he receives a full pardon (2 Samuel 12:13).

So something seems out of whack, doesn't it? David was not executed for his sin, though he had committed *two* that carried the death penalty. Yet other people, such as the man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath, suffered the ultimate penalty. Hardly seems fair does it?

What is the cause for this seeming inconsistency?

In helping to solve the problem, an additional passage will be illustrative. In 2 Chronicles 30 we find the story of a Passover celebration during the reign of King Hezekiah, the king of Judah. It had been many years since Passover had been celebrated

by the Jewish people, but finally, under this king, the holiday was revived.

However, they weren't doing the Passover according to all the details laid down in the Law of Moses: they celebrated it in the wrong month, they celebrated it for an extra week, and people who were ceremonially unclean, people who were forbidden by the Law to participate in the holiday, took part anyway. How does all this misbehavior help with our question? Because once again we see punishment deferred. In fact God not only forgave them and accepted their worship, he even blessed them.

Our progress toward understanding may also be aided by the remarkable passage in Isaiah 1:10-20, where God tells the people he doesn't want any more of their meaningless sacrifices, despite the fact that such sacrifices were prescribed in the Law of Moses. Why? Because there was no love for God or people behind their sacrifices. They were merely going through the motions.

This same sentiment is echoed in Jesus' words to the Pharisees, for instance in Matthew 23:23 where he says "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel." It is also clear from what he says in verses 27 and 28 of the same passage: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness."

When he is trying to find the next king of Israel, God tells the prophet Samuel that “he looks on the heart, not the outward appearance.” Likewise, the Bible says, “God weighs the hearts of men...” With Paul, in Philippians 2, we can agree that we are “not yet perfect” and we will “press onward.” While outwardly, and when measured against the perfection of God—or even against the perfect lives of our critics—we leave much to be desired, that is *not* what is important to God. Instead, he is most concerned with our attitude: with whether we truly love.

According to Ephesians 2:10, doing good is the *result* of God’s activity in a life, not the magnet that draws God into a life. Goodness is an effect, not a cause. It is no proof of righteousness (the Pharisees, after all, were very good).

Further hints about how to solve our paradox come from Romans 14, where we learn the interesting lesson that what is good and right for one person may very easily be a sin in the life of someone else. What I praise God for can condemn another individual.

So, where does grace fit, where does living righteously come in? How do good deeds and condemnation and even death for evil deeds meet up and join happily, hand in hand, with the unmerited favor of the free gift of God? How can a reprobate like Lot be called righteous while a guy picking up sticks on Saturday gets stoned to death at the command of God? How is it that David gets to live, remains king of Israel, and is in the lineage of Christ after committing adultery and murder, while Ananias and Sapphira die for telling a half truth?

The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that:

“In this meaningless life of mine I have seen both of these:
a righteous man perishing in his righteousness,
and a wicked man living long in his wickedness.
Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise—why destroy yourself?

Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool—why die before your time?
It is good to grasp the one and not let go of the other. (Ecclesiastes 7:15-17)

God has his reasons for whatever he chooses to do. Paul quotes God's words to Moses in Romans 9:15 that "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." And then he comments in the very next verse, "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy." The bottom line is that there are no good people. Only God is good. Our righteousness and acceptability to God are entirely the work of God himself. It is the work of Christ on the cross that cleanses us from all iniquity. Only in him do we become righteous. Apart from him, we are nothing. There is nothing more to be done to be in God's good graces. Jesus took care of it all; we do good things simply because He compels us (Ephesians 2:10). Therefore, with Paul, we have nothing to boast of except the cross of Christ (Galatians 6:14).

One day I had disciplined my oldest daughter for misbehaving; I had yelled at her and sent her to her room. She was in tears, and came to me later. "You don't love me, do you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"You were mad at me; you yelled at me; you put me in time out."

We smile bittersweetly at such a tale, knowing that momentary anger, the discipline of a father toward his daughter, is not a signal that love has fled. Children will commonly get mad at one another, scream that the other is "no longer my friend" and then, an hour or two later, they are playing together again as if nothing had happened. As adults, we should have a sense that love does not vanish if there is discipline, that anger

and disappointment do not preclude the simultaneous and continued existence of love and passion. And yet, in our thinking about God, how often do we revert to my daughter's understanding of her relationship?

I asked her, "Do you ever get mad at your sisters?"

She nodded.

"Do you love your sisters?"

"Of course!"

"But you get mad at them."

"Oh." And then she finally understood. She doesn't worry that her parents don't love her anymore. She understands that love doesn't end and that anger and discipline and love are not necessarily mutually exclusive. What's odd is that so many Christians imagine that being disciplined somehow means that God's love is gone; that punishment is the negation of salvation.

But what did the author of Hebrews say? "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the

time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.”

Being disciplined, being punished, being taken to the woodshed, is simply part of being loved. Do you not have arguments with your best friend? Do you and your spouse not ever get angry with one another? Do you never yell at your children or put them in time out? Then why would you think God, in loving you, would treat you with any less concern?

And part of discipline sometimes is in letting our children do whatever they want, even when we know better. My four year old daughter once got a toy in a fast food meal that required some assembly. I offered to help her put it together but she insisted that, “I can do it myself.” So, I gave her the freedom to try. Eventually, in tears, she gave me the pieces and let me help her put it together. Similarly, God grants us freedom.

Freedom is constrained by freedom

Paul writes in Galatians 5:1 that “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Jesus died to give us freedom from judgment, freedom from the law, freedom from the knowledge even of good and evil.

How free are we? We can do anything we want, but we are limited by our own natures. For instance, however much I may want to, flapping my arms rapidly will not get me airborne. I cannot leap a tall building in a single bound. I cannot run faster than a speeding bullet. I cannot look through walls with x-ray eyes. I cannot pick up a locomotive and carry it on my back.

So I am free, but I am constrained by my own body's limits.

I cannot live forever; I will die.

I can choose to jump out of an airplane ten thousand feet above the ground without a parachute. But I will probably choose not to do so because I am constrained by my understanding of the force of gravity and the consequences of such a force on my body.

I could choose to become excessively wicked, perhaps rob banks and beat up those who annoy me; but other people, acting freely, will likely constrain my behavior and I'll be caught and put in prison. Likewise if I choose to murder, whether an individual or serially, I will be constrained in my freedom by the free actions of others. Feelings of guilt or the fear of being caught may constrain my behavior and either keep me from doing such things, or if I do go ahead and exercise my freedom that way, others exercising their freedom will likely catch me and punish me.

I will be constrained ultimately by my own mortality. Idi Amin was an evil dictator; he is thought to be responsible for the deaths of over 500,000 of his countrymen. But he was never brought before a tribunal, never convicted, never faced punishment in that sense. But at 78 years of age he died nevertheless. His freedom was ultimately constrained by his mortality.

We are all free, but we are constrained by all the freedom around us: the other free sentient beings, the freely swirling universe, the weather, and our physical limitations. We exercise our freedom in a limited way because our freedom does not exist in isolation.

So it is odd, given that, that people can be so fearful of the freedom given by

grace, that they imagine such freedom will lead to anarchy, that folks will run amuck. Anarchy is really not possible, because nothing happens in isolation. Freedom constrains freedom. Those who fear grace don't understand freedom and in their attempts to impose order and law, create many unintended bad consequences and pitch us all toward chaos.

When she was seven years old, Kaila, the daughter of my best friend, Dandi, commented to her mother that "It's more important to God that we be free than that we be good."

Why did she say such a thing? Because of the story of Adam and Eve. If being good were the most important thing, then why did God give Adam and Eve the freedom to disobey?

Freedom is so important to God that he would rather human beings be free than good. He thought freedom was so important, that he would make the Son of God die rather than make people be good. This is the obvious conclusion from Genesis 1-3 and the New Testament. This would mean that we may make a mistake if we place too much emphasis on "being good". Not that good is not desirable, just that it must be tempered by freedom. Thus, to enforce goodness through legalistic means in the church is counter to the biblical revelation.

Remember that the Spirit of God indwells believers and that this probably has a profound impact on their behavior. Freedom is that you limit yourself. Non-freedom is that you are limited by another. In Christ, we are free, because we are no longer slaves to that other: sin.

Thus, one of the goals of God is the maximization of freedom.

Chapter Seven: The Importance of Perspective

Trusting God

God does not try to justify himself. Why should he? If we love him, we will trust him. As we beg for explanations and justifications, how often do we simply sound like insecure spouses demanding to know, “did you really just go to the grocery store?” Certainly, in such circumstances ours is not the voice of the trusting lover.

If I go out to pick up a gallon of milk, my wife trusts me because she knows me and loves me. I do not have to justify myself, give answers for every action I take, every place I go, every word that I say to every person I meet. If I step on my wife’s foot, she does not assume I purposely stomped on it because I wanted to cause her pain. If she finds me snoring some afternoon in my office, she does not conclude that I’m a lazy goof-off that spent too much time with the clerk at the grocery store when I got that milk.

The Story of the Dogs

“It is quite clear that there can be no such thing as the Owner,” said the old dog. He had perched himself on the edge of the chair and surveyed the pups below them.

“Consider the obvious fact of the existence of the Veterinarian.”

The little pups shivered in fear.

“Is there anything positive that might be said about the Veterinarian?” asked the old dog.

“Perhaps it is to teach us something?” squeaked one little pup.

The old dog laughed. “What possible thing can you learn from being jabbed and prodded and tormented in that little cage? That you don’t like being poked? I could have told you that without the experience.”

“Perhaps free-will has something to do with it?” suggested another little pup. Again, the old dog laughed. “We assume that the Owner is all-knowing and all-powerful and that on top of that he loves us and cares for us.”

“We do receive food every day,” pointed out another small pup.

“Then why is there the suffering of the Veterinarian?” demanded the old dog. “If the Owner was all-knowing and all-powerful, couldn’t he keep us from having to endure such suffering?”

“Well certainly,” agreed the pups.

“Then why doesn’t he? If he loved us, wouldn’t he keep the Veterinarian away? In fact, why is there even a Veterinarian at all? It is obvious that the existence of the Veterinarian is incompatible with the existence of the Owner. Either that, or the Owner is not powerful, or else the Owner is not good. There is no way of reconciling the existence of the Owner in the traditional sense with the obvious reality of the Veterinarian.”

It is absolutely impossible for the dogs to ever understand why the Veterinarian is necessary, or that the Veterinarian is actually an element in the Owner’s love for them.

Certainly this is not a perfect analogy, but just as the Veterinarian is nothing but horrible for a dog, perhaps the why of the existence of evil, the reality of suffering, and all that entails is simply beyond our comprehension. That it seems so “obviously” incompatible with the nature of God or even the existence of God does not mean that it necessarily is.

Living in the Dark

And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us. (2 Timothy 1:11-14)

Groucho Marx said that “Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.” Winston Churchill called his periodic bouts with depression his “black dog.” When facing such dark times in life, it is hard to find enough light to read the Bible, let alone any spark of encouragement in it. When the dark times come, it is hard to focus long enough on a passage to even comprehend it. When the dark times come, it can be hard to listen, to concentrate, to do anything at all. When the dark times come, sleep does not, but one is tired constantly. It is hard to get comfortable, to even keep warm.

Having gone through the darkest, most horrible of times, I have discovered what we all know but too often forget: that there is nothing anyone can do or say to make things feel better. Words are meaningless and everything cannot help but sound like a cliché. And yet, in my suffering, I never expected anyone to be able to say anything that would make me feel better. I didn’t expect to be made happy by mere words.

As human beings, not only do we each go through our own dark times, but we experience vicariously what suffering everyone else close to us goes through. How do we manage to keep going, keep our focus, continue to do our task of being a lighthouse to those around us, when our own heart is blackened by suffering? How can we encourage others when we're discouraged? What can we do?

Trust God.

“Oh really? Is that all? My, my, why didn't I think of that?”

We must not think of this as a feeling or a warm fuzzy. God may be gracious and provide a corrective to a sour mood. But he might not. Trust is not dependent upon how we feel. I sit on the chair and trust it to hold me, without a second thought, regardless of how I feel. God should be as second nature in the trust department as a chair is. We know he's there, we know he's got it covered, and that should be enough.

Sometimes it will have to be.

We do not necessarily have an answer to suffering. It comes without reason. As Job had drummed into his head, our trust of God does not waver because we do not understand some obscure law of physics. Our failure to understand how stars shine, where the rain comes from, or how animals reproduce, does not make us question God's goodness, faithfulness, or care. Yet, when we do not understand suffering, many of us are ready to chuck it all.

Why is that?

Because suffering hurts. Not understanding the reason for our pain seems more significant to us than not understanding quantum physics. And yet, fundamentally, there

is no difference in the nature of our questions, except how strongly we want an answer to one as opposed to the other.

Consider it from the other side, too. We ask, “why me?” We look at those with blessings and wonder why God doesn’t bless us like that. But when we see someone else suffer, we never wonder why and ask God if he could please send some suffering our way too. “How unfair God! She gets to suffer and I don’t!”

That’s why Paul could write to the Philippians that he had learned to be content in all circumstances (Philippians 4:11-14). He also wrote what seems at first to be ridiculous: that suffering produces perseverance (Romans 5:1-5).

What suffering most often produces is quitting and running away. I’ve seen it especially with college freshmen. They arrive at school so excited, so certain that being in school is God’s will—until they face their first exams. Then they start giving up, dropping classes, transferring. “I guess that wasn’t what I should have been doing after all,” they mutter. And yet Paul insists that suffering produces perseverance. How? As Christians, we are somehow given the opportunity of not responding in the normal, all too human way.

Even in the darkness, even when suffering, we can remember that God is there, that he is with us, and that he has not forsaken us. Like the chair, he will always support us. *We don’t have to run away.* Consider the interesting words of Jacob’s complaint once again: after his sons return from a trip to Egypt to get food, and they come back without Simeon, he comments that “everything is against me!” From Jacob’s perspective, his words seemed true, and he had no way of knowing any better.

When we face sickness, a death, or any of the other tragedies of life, it is easy for us to feel exactly like Jacob. And yet, the Bible tells us that our Father is God, that we will be with him forever in paradise, and that all that happens is designed for the best. God knows what is happening to us.

And we must keep in mind that paradise is not just “in the sky, by and by” but rather, as Jesus told people, “the kingdom of God is within you.” (Luke 17:21) It is a current reality. Just because Jacob was not physically present with Joseph in Egypt did not negate the present reality of Jacob’s situation, the very real fact that everything wasn’t against him, despite what he felt.

It is because it is hard to see that ultimate reality (being distracted as we are with the in our face reality of this flat tire and a cold, drenching rain) that the Bible repeatedly tells believers “encourage one another” and “be not discouraged”. Such words are there because the here and now reality will repeatedly buffet us and make us discouraged. Discouragement is our nature, since like Jacob, we cannot see very far or very much—not because we’re bad, but just because of our humanness.

So what do we do?

Actually, “doing” isn’t the way at all. The truth is that when we become aware of our relationship with God, of who we are and where we are in Christ, when we relax in God and can believe the word that “Joseph is not dead,” it transforms our outlook just as much as Jacob’s outlook shifted when his sons returned from Egypt the second time with the news that Joseph was not dead but alive and that he was the ruler of Egypt. Jacob didn’t believe until he shifted his focus and noticed that his sons had returned burdened down with the wealth and glory of Egypt, when he finally “heard” what they were saying.

Suddenly his perspective shifted and, as the author of Genesis writes, “the spirit of their father Jacob revived.” Then he said, “I’m convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.” We must remember our calling, what God has asked us to do. Live our lives. We can do no other. We must keep our eyes locked on Him, and on his message to us. We have been called to proclaim the word. You can do that whether you feel good, whether you feel bad, whether you feel up to it, whether you think it will do any good at all. The chair is always there and doesn’t change because we feel bad. It’s still a chair, and it will still hold us up. Do not give up!

We can trust God today if we choose. Jacob could have spent the previous twenty-six years of his life confident that God had a purpose and that every breath, every moment, was part of God’s purpose. Today makes all the difference. How we endure suffering has everything to do with trusting God in the moment, when we can’t see anything else but God. We do not need to look to tomorrow for deliverance. Freedom from our burden can only happen in the moment we have today, now. And that freedom belongs to us, if only we can see it—and seize it.

Chapter Eight: Keeping One's Wits

Money Trouble

Sometimes it happens that we get to see a positive outcome quickly from the trouble that we go through. Sometimes we never see any point to it. The important thing is to remember that we do not live by sight, but by faith. And what do we have faith in? That God is good, that God loves us, and that God knows what he is doing, even if it doesn't seem that way.

Sometimes years will go by before we see something good come out of a difficult situation. Sometimes we will wonder why we keep on living the lives that we are living, doing what seems a foolish thing for years and years, without anything coming of it, sometimes in the face of criticism, sometimes just in the face of the criticism of our own tired hearts.

Consider Abraham. God had promised him a child, an heir. Yet decades passed

and no child came, and the more the years piled on, the less likely it seemed that a child would *ever* come. But we all know the story, and in the end, Abraham had his child, named Isaac—“laughter”—because both he and Sarah had thought the notion so silly that they couldn’t help laughing at what God had told them.

In the end, we will all laugh, though sometimes we wonder how.

One of the things that drags people down faster than anything is financial problems. I’ve seen the stress in my own life from it and I’ve seen what it does to people around me that I care about. Money is said to be the most frequent source of conflict within a marriage. How many church business meetings become harrowing argument-filled nightmares because of money? If money weren’t an issue, would there be any argument at all?

Financial setbacks can suck us dry. They become the focus of all our thoughts and energies. They keep us up late at night and we think to ourselves, “if only I could pay my bills and get caught up, *then* I’d be happy again.” And it leaves us feeling hopeless and worthless and empty.

Consider the words of my friend Dandi from an email I got from her after her husband had been out of work for nearly a year and a half. They were on the verge of losing their house to foreclosure. Both of them were working full time at other jobs, the only jobs that they could find—but it still wasn’t enough to make ends meet and things were getting worse and worse, darker and darker. She wrote:

Frankly I am freaking out. We just got notice the house will be auctioned next month. I will be looking for a bankruptcy lawyer today. It will be no piece of cake. We will probably have to sell off both cars and buy cars valued under \$2500 each. Then we will have to sell off anything we have of value. I don’t know yet if that will be computers, TV, furniture, or what. I don’t think we have much of value. That being said, it’s going to

be a long rough road and I don't have much hope that God will rescue us out of it. A huge part of me wants to just run away and hide and hope the big bad monster will just lose interest in me and walk away. But no, I have to go out and fight him...

Is a seminar, a prayer, *anything* going to make this pain go away?

Nope.

A job and lots of money were the only real answers to the problem. Finding a different preacher, reading another book, watching a video were *not* going to make the suffering end; it would not save their house. All my warm words of encouragement, of concern, of caring, of love did *nothing* to make the disaster go away or ease the pain one iota. Consider what James writes:

If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? (James 2:16)

Thankfully, Dandi's husband Dennis got a new job and they were able to get the money together to save their house—but all that didn't happen until six months later! For a very long time after this letter, things seemed incredibly bleak for my friends. I kept praying, they kept praying, my church kept praying, but frankly none of us had much hope that things would be okay and none of those things made them *feel* any better. They were certain that they'd be forced to leave Colorado and return to California, where they anticipated living with Dandi's parents or friends. Dennis flew out for a job interview. But the interview resulted in nothing, and so the darkness deepened.

But one day Dennis met a man at a Denny's restaurant near his house who worked in his field. The man told Dennis that a major defense contractor in Boulder was hiring, and he told Dennis that he'd put in a good word for him. Within a week Dennis had an interview.

Meanwhile, their mortgage company decided to provide a way for them to solve their arrears and made it so they could stay in the house. Very soon after that, everything was fine again. God had rescued them—even though it looked absolutely impossible, and beyond all hope and even though my friends didn't *believe* that there was any possible good solution.

So was my friend suffering because she needed a book, a seminar, a key to unlock what God wanted to give but she was too dense to see? Did everything get fixed because she suddenly found the right formula, the hidden sin, the seed of faith? Did she finally tithe where before she'd been withholding it? Did she pray a special prayer?

Of course not. Mere nonsense. *God simply did what he was planning on doing all along.* She and her husband, my wife and I, and our church did not know what God was going to do. We couldn't see back when the house was about to be auctioned that everything was going to work out okay within six months. We did not understand that all the endless anguish, unremitting stress, long nights and gloomy feelings were in actuality completely unnecessary. Joseph wasn't dead afterall. And God didn't see a need, in the midst of all of that misery, to offer any sense, *ever*, of "it will be okay."

Why is that? Perhaps because he already said in the Bible that:

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So does that mean that whenever we face a bad time that we know that it will work out and the horrible outcome we fear will not transpire?

Nope.

My brother and sister-in-law, by way of contrast, *lost* their house. They were foreclosed on and they had to move. Dandi's baby really was stillborn and she stayed dead.

My friend A.G. Whytal, who took classes from me at Quartz Hill School of Theology for six years, had congestive heart failure. He'd had it since he was about 28 years old. One evening he died. He was only 48. He'd prayed, we'd prayed, lots of people had prayed for him. He'd spent a lot of time with doctors. Nevertheless, what he and the rest of us feared all along is precisely what wound up happening to him. And yet he went to church, read the Bible, took care of his elderly mother, and was taking theology classes.

And so now the school library bears his name.

A happy ending? Hardly. Not here and not now. I miss him. I wish he weren't dead.

There are lots of stories like these; everyone has them. And we shouldn't pretend or forget or hide them, or think that they are exceptional or that "if only" we had had more faith, less sin, more tithing, more videos to watch, *then* things would have turned out otherwise.

If we read Romans 8:28 and think that it means a happy outcome tomorrow for the problem of today, we misread the intent and ignore the context. Worse, we miss the perspective that we need to have and the help that the passage can actually offer us. Paul goes on, after the famous verse and writes:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to

this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The context of the famous passage about everything working out for good is the full plan and purpose of God. The promise God gives us, the hope that we have, is that in the *end*, we are redeemed and will live with God in paradise forever. Oddly, this seems not to be what people want. Why is that?

They want their heaven now. And by that, I mean they want an absence of pain and trouble here and now.

Yet, the reality is that heaven *is* now. Luke records in his gospel that “Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, ‘The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.’” (Luke 17:20-21)

Peter writes, “His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.” (2 Peter 1:3).

Could our lack of perspective be because we don't believe that God's plan and eternity yet to be are fully real and a part of our lives today, with actual impact for when we get a dreaded phone call late at night that a loved one has died?

If a famous rich man came to you and told you that a year from Saturday he would deposit a billion dollars into your checking account, how would you feel? Would you be happy? Would you think to yourself, "life is good and everything is going to be fine?" Would the lack of money, the financial hardships of today bug you much after that? Would you think you even had financial hardship any more?

And yet God has promised us far more than a billion dollars. But we let ourselves be miserable. He has told us that the people we love who have died will be raised back to life and that we will live with them, and with God, happily ever after, forever and ever and ever, in paradise.

Jesus said something once that we've heard so often it becomes a cliché and we are robbed of the power of it: "If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

About three days after Dandi wrote of her despair in facing foreclosure, she came to understand just this truth about perspective:

I was lying in bed freaking out over our house, worrying that my children won't have a home, I won't have a home, we'll lose all our stuff,

we'll have to move, we'll have to start over, my children will have no friends—every possible horrid eventuality that could possibly happen from losing our home ran about in my head, arms flailing, screaming. I couldn't shut it off; I was tired, needed to sleep, and all these freaked out thoughts wouldn't shut up.

Then God intruded and asked me a question. Why is it, when tomorrow has an infinite number of possibilities ranging from horrible to wonderful, do you invest all this time and energy about what might happen next? Why invest so much emotion into a merely possible outcome? If you have to think about what might happen, then why not pick the best possible outcome and get all excited and happy about that?

But instead of doing either, why not just stop? Just see what happens tomorrow. Why invest the energy and emotion you'll need tomorrow now? Just live in the moment. Tomorrow will never be what you expect. How can it be? So be in the moment. All you have is now, after all. And now you need to sleep. When tomorrow comes and if bad stuff happens, you'll need your emotion and energy to live through that. Why use what you'll need tomorrow, now, when you'll need it then?

I once wrote the following: "Everyone's life story is a tragedy, because in the end, the hero of the story dies." As I've thought about that over the years, I've decided that sentence really isn't true. Why? *Because we don't stay dead.*

And so in the end, the story of each individual, and for that matter, the story of the whole history of the world, is a comedy. Comedies can have bad things happen in them, after all: people slip on banana peels and misunderstandings result in funny arguments and broken hearts—think of a standard episode of *I Love Lucy*—but in the end everything is resolved and everyone laughs. The resurrection will be when everyone laughs.

The problem with stories that end tragically like the movie *A.I.*, where the boy-android's search for love concludes with loneliness and death, is that they are fundamentally unrealistic if one accepts that the world is a comedy.

Or to look at it another way: such tragic tales are truncated. They are not a *full* story. The full story always has a happy ending.

I think most of us like happy endings in our fiction because that's what we yearn for in life. The good news of the gospel is just that: that the ending actually will be happy. So though the credits of the movie *A.I.* run where they do, I must, in my mind, imagine the story goes just a bit further, and that in the morning, his mother is not dead, but awakens and so they live happily ever after.

Among the novels that I have written, *Somewhere Obscurely* in an early draft came closest to having a sad ending. But it wasn't sad at all. Though I had the protagonist Aramond dying in his attempt to save the woman he loves, the story doesn't end with a corpse.

The darkness was brief. Though Aramond was dead, he didn't mind at all. Heaven does really interesting things to your sense of perspective.

It is hard to have an eternal perspective before we are in eternity. After all, we cannot *see* eternity. But as the author of Ecclesiastes wrote, "God has set eternity in our hearts." (Ecclesiastes 3:11) God promises us a happy ending, but more than that, he promises us "I am with you to the end of the world." He is with us *now*, not just in the by and by. The kingdom of God is *today*, not just tomorrow. Certainly we do not experience the lack of pain or the lack of death today. But it's not just a grin and bear it until the end, either. There is relief now. It is based on how you choose to perceive stuff based on the eternal perspective, the eternity that God has given us today, in this moment. Then, when the flat tires come, you will have the strength to get them changed.

Chapter Nine: What Did I Do To Deserve This?

Feelings of Incompleteness

“I know that there’s something missing from my life.”

And if you can’t say “amen” to something like that, then the advertising you see every day is simply not doing its job. Every day we are bombarded by the emptiness of our lives, made to feel inadequate and incomplete by relentless showmen, whether on television, the radio, whether in print advertising, or in billboards. Simply walking down the street and noticing the things in the store windows, we are reminded that we don’t have everything we need. And even if we miss the ads, we can’t help but notice all the neat stuff our friends, neighbors, coworkers, and fellow students have that we don’t have. Or maybe it’s just the contrast between how good so and so looks versus me. “She sure was smiling big; why can’t I smile like that?” Maybe you wonder why your nose is too big or too small. There is no end to the perceived inadequacies.

In all my life, I have yet to meet a woman who thought she was beautiful. Every

one of the women I know has explained to me why she isn't pretty, and what is wrong with how she looks today, or yesterday, or tomorrow or always. And certainly if the hair isn't just so, and the clothes aren't just right, then certainly "I look hideous." Is it any wonder then that when we think about our relationship with God and our life in general, we are convinced that something is missing? And that if only we could *get* that missing thing, *then* we'd be okay. Other people have it all together; why not me? They don't have the constant crises, the shortage of money, the sick children. Hasn't God promised us that if we do the right thing that he'll protect us? Isn't there some place in the psalms that talks about the arrows falling to the right of me and the left of me but never hitting me? Why hasn't my life gotten to that place? When am I going to get to that spot where the arrows miss and I don't have any more stresses, at least for awhile?

Maybe if I took some classes, or found a different church, or a better pastor, or maybe if I took that Sunday school class instead of the one I'm in, then—at last, my children would have a good parent, and my finances would be in order, and I'd finally be truly and completely happy!

But the author of Ecclesiastes writes:

I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all. Moreover, no man knows when his hour will come: As fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times that fall unexpectedly upon them. (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12)

So does that mean that you can do everything right, be a good person, follow all the directions and disaster can still strike?

Yes.

On any given morning a whole lot of people will get up and eat their breakfasts.

Some will kiss their spouses and head off to work. Some will beat their spouses. Some will beat their kids. There will be people who get up, take a deep breath, shower and then go out and murder someone, or have an affair, or embezzle money, or lie. On any given morning there are those who have been up all night drinking and using drugs and having unprotected sex with people they aren't married to. Some people will be laughing, some people will be crying. Some people will be doing what they are supposed to do and some will not. Some are good Christians. Some are bad Christians. Some are not Christians at all.

But three thousand people out of the six billion on planet Earth one bright September morning went to work like they always did, but they never came home again. Terrorists chose to fly airplanes into their workplaces that particular day. Were they greater sinners than all the other people on the planet?

Bad things can happen without warning and without reason and it isn't because God is mad at you or loves you less than those who didn't suffer that day.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." (Luke 13:1-5)

When you're driving down the freeway and traffic slows in front of you and you put on your brakes to stop, is it your fault when the person behind you doesn't and plows into the back of your car? Of course not. You may drive carefully. That doesn't make your neighbor drive carefully. Were you a worse sinner than the driver in the lane next to you who went on unscathed? How about that crack dealer who was beating up his girl

friend a block away?

A Nightmare Come True

Three thirty on one cold January morning I was awakened by the sound of a baby crying. I was exhausted, having been asleep maybe four hours, and already short of sleep from previous nights of getting up to take care of Derrick. Derrick was our six month old foster baby, the brother of our two year old foster daughter, Brittany. I did not want to get up, but Ruth was tired too, and so why not? In not the best of moods I staggered to the kitchen and found the formula, put the ingredients together, shook, heated the bottle, and then got Derrick out of the cradle at the foot of our bed.

I checked his diaper, changed it since it was a little messy, and then gave him the bottle, which he sucked down slowly, over the course of a half hour or so. When he finally finished it, he was still fussy. I tried putting him back down in the cradle at the foot of our bed, but he was not happy there. Then I tried the swing, but the rocking wasn't giving him joy either. Finally, I set him on the couch in our living room, and to my pleasure, he finally sighed and scrunched up, apparently comfortable at last.

Good, I thought—and managed to make my way back to my bed, where I fell asleep almost at once.

Seven o'clock. The TV popped on in our room and the *Today* show had begun; the lead story was the news that Sonny Bono was dead from a freak skiing accident. Ruth was still half asleep, and I rolled out of bed, thinking I should go check on Derrick and see how he was sleeping.

Arriving in the living room, he was still scrunched on the couch; I walked over to him, peered down at him, and felt a chill. Looking more closely, I failed to discern any

movement. I put my hand on him. Nothing. I picked him up, and he flopped, totally unresponsive.

He wasn't breathing!

But that couldn't be. Why wouldn't he be breathing? What in the world? I tried patting him, but nothing. I began undressing him, thinking maybe that would revive him, wondering what could be wrong. I began yelling for Ruth, "Something's wrong with Derrick." I tried blowing into his nose and mouth, beginning CPR, and feeling scared to death. Ruth finally came out, and she immediately took him in her arms and started yelling at him to wake up, then she continued the CPR on him.

I hurried into my home office and called 911. "My baby's not breathing!" They assured me that paramedics were rolling and would be there right away.

After I hung up, I called our private agency social worker, and our county worker and let them know what was up. Within five minutes, the paramedics were coming through the door.

Ruth had been screaming at Derrick between giving mouth to mouth and compressions; now that the paramedics arrived, they took over and asked me to help Ruth out of the room. While they worked, we stood in our library hugging each other. Eventually, they called Ruth and I back in, and we made the decision that Ruth would ride with him in the ambulance. After Ruth and Derrick had gone outside to the ambulance, one of the paramedics came to me and told me that it didn't look good, that he was in bad shape. I just nodded and said "I understood, I know"...and then they were gone and I made my way back to the office and started calling people. I called our friends Kathy and Dandi and our pastor. I let them know that Derrick had stopped

breathing, that he was probably dead, and that Ruth was going to the hospital in the ambulance and they could meet her there.

It is hard for me to remember all the details, the order of events; everything seems jumbled. I remember feeling empty, but knowing that I had to maintain and get certain things accomplished, like calling the people that needed to know. Kathy showed up at some point, I remember, vaguely. I think she was there when Ruth called and confirmed that Derrick was dead. It was about 8:30 AM. I remember seeing Kathy sort of slump against the wall when I told her.

I had our other children, Toni and Brittany and Vanessa to take care of, to feed. I explained to them what was going on as best I could, trying to adapt the news for them, though for Toni and Brit, there was really no way to make them understand. Vanessa didn't go to preschool that day. At four years of age, she understood something had happened, and she knew Derrick was dead. She had come out of her bedroom when Ruth was working on him. But I really can't remember what I said, now, except that I was concerned with doing it carefully, keeping it at a level she could understand, making her as comfortable in the midst of the turmoil as possible.

At some point Ruth and Pastor Don and others were back at the house. We were concerned about contacting Derrick's grandmother, because she was scheduled to pick him up for a visit at ten that morning and neither we nor the social workers had been able to get a hold of her. And so it fell to us to break the awful news to her when she arrived at our door. Ruth drove her to the hospital then to see Derrick's body and Don and Dandi went with them, too, as I recall. I remember being in a fog, feeling empty, feeling hardly

anything at all, actually, except a vast gulf of isolation. I didn't know what to do, to think, to say: I was simply existing moment by moment.

Our private foster agency social worker told us that the other children, Toni and Brittany (who were only our foster children at the time), would probably be removed from the house, at least until the investigation was over. Maybe Vanessa, too, even though her adoption had been finalized by that time.

And so we waited, wondering when it would happen, trying to pack bags for them, trying to let them know that they might have to go away for awhile, trying to hold them and caress them and comfort them and ourselves as much as we could while we waited. I felt empty, empty, empty and completely alone.

At three that afternoon, we finally got a phone call telling us that the girls were not going to be removed from our house after all. Our county social worker had talked to her supervisor and convinced him to let our girls stay with us.

Late that afternoon, the social workers and their supervisors arrived. We related what had happened, telling them all that we had done, gone through, showing them where he was, how he had been sleeping, what had happened. And they tried to reassure us and comfort us and let us know that it wasn't our fault.

I remember a house full of people that night and I kept telling everyone who came that we didn't expect them to be able to say any words that would make anything better, but just the fact of them being there, staying with us, keeping us company, was what we needed just then. Merely to sit and be with us, without even speaking a word was enough. And I was pleased and marveled at the fact that all the people were there, and how they were swarming around Ruth and helping her and comforting her; and I was

concerned, above all, at trying to make her as comfortable as possible, to ease her through the pain. But I remember thinking to myself, as everyone was there, and the focus was on Ruth—I remembered wondering what was going to happen to me; was there going to be anyone there for me, to help me, and I decided that I just had to do what I could to help Ruth; if she was okay, then I would be okay. I would survive, I would endure, whatever happened. And I would see to it that Ruth was okay.

But I felt so alone; I kept wondering where God was, not in the sense of “why did this happen?” or “why didn’t he stop this from happening?” I did not question God’s wisdom and purpose; I knew God, and I knew that he had a reason for what was happening. My question was, *why do I feel like I’m alone here?* Why don’t I feel God’s presence, why don’t I feel his arms around me, why can’t I feel okay? How long am I going to hurt like this; how long can I endure wondering if my children are going to be taken from me? So they haven’t taken them yet. How long before that changes, before someone, somewhere decides that “action must be taken?”

At last, everyone had to leave, we had to be left alone, it was time to go to bed. Our children were asleep, and now it was just the two of us. All I remember, in trying to sleep, was lying in bed, under the covers, in a heated waterbed and shivering uncontrollably, feeling cold as ice and not being able to get warm. Sleep was intermittent, unsatisfying; I don’t remember dreaming at all. And every time consciousness came, I wished that it could just all be a nightmare, that I would wake up and it would not have happened after all. I’ve had really bad dreams like that, where I would suddenly awake, and the relief was so enormous, so wonderful...and I longed for

that feeling but it wouldn't come. After a long while, morning arrived. We had to face another day.

We had determined to try to maintain a schedule, to make sure that Vanessa got back to preschool; of course, we told her teacher what had happened, since we didn't know how the trauma of what had occurred the day before might affect her.

And then, the time passed; people came over again, though not as many. They spent time with Ruth, and I tried reading the Bible, and didn't receive any comfort from it, but I read it anyhow, and reminded myself that like the song, "when I don't see you, I know you're there, when I don't feel you," and so on. I understood, that as alone, as empty, as hopeless, as fearful at the potential loss of my other children, that even though I felt nothing, couldn't see or explain or understand what was going on, still God was there. He said he was; and I didn't doubt it, but I still couldn't relax or feel any comfort. What I wanted more than anything was to feel at peace, but instead, I could feel nothing. I felt alone; I didn't feel anything from God, or from anyone else for that matter. I didn't know what to say, or really where to turn or who to turn to. All I could do was pray, read the same paragraph over and over again in the Bible, seemingly never quite remembering what I had just read. I had heard stories of people going through dark times, and telling how they felt the presence of God with them; but that was not my experience at all. I was alone, with only the cold promises of the Bible to cling to, and the experience of my life up to that moment. And that was going to have to be enough, I decided, unless God chose otherwise. I prayed over and over that he *would* choose otherwise. But, I knew, perhaps this emptiness, this sense of being alone, was something God needed me to experience, too.

But as the day wore on, I found a slight shifting occurring; I managed to find some sense of comfort in a passage, and shared it with Ruth and it seemed to help her, which made me feel much better. And our children were still with us, which was a miracle in itself, and I recognized the hand of God in how events were playing out. That helped some, and yet...inside, I felt a gap, a disconnect. And I found myself reassuring people around me that I didn't expect them to be able to give me an answer, or press a button and make me feel better, but simply that their presence, their concern, was what really counted. But, dear God, how I wished that someone could have found a word, a phrase, a verse of scripture, *anything* that would make me feel better.

This second day, as I recall, we took the girls to the doctor to have them checked for a particular respiratory virus that was going around; we were concerned that perhaps that had been what had killed Derrick since he had been slightly congested. Meanwhile, we were awaiting word on the autopsy, which would tell us exactly what had happened to him. The two most likely causes were either this infection, or a case of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome). Of course, we also worried that maybe they'd find something else anomalous, and wondered if they could twist some innocuous thing into some form of abuse, and blame us and accuse us of mistreating him in some way. We awaited the results with a lot of trepidation. I tried to divert myself by reading; I read three of Robert Asprin's books from his *Myth* series. They were funny books, and I actually was able, for a few moments, to distance myself from what was going on. I remember, through those next days, what seemed endless interviews, and visits by social workers and phone calls. We feared the supervisor people coming out, and we still wondered how long before they would take our girls from us.

I got to where I just wanted the bad feeling to go away. I had previously scheduled a board of Trustees meeting for that Saturday for the Quartz Hill School of Theology, and so I left for that at noon, still awaiting word from the coroner over what exactly was the cause of death. I have little memory of the meeting, aside from getting the impression that everyone was somewhat distracted and didn't seem to really notice or care. Couldn't they tell how bad I felt, how miserable I was? Why didn't anyone try to comfort me, tell me they felt bad for me, hold me or hug me or something? Where was everyone and why did I have to be alone?

About a week later, when we finally got the results of the autopsy, we felt enormous relief. It was now confirmed SIDS. Sudden Infant Death Syndrome meant that it had not been our fault. There was nothing we could have done, nothing that we did do. The social workers were relieved, too; it confirmed for them their faith in us, and ratified their decision to leave our children with us.

With the autopsy report in, that meant that Derrick's body could now be released to the mortician. His biological family had Derrick cremated and the funeral was scheduled for that week; I do not remember the day of the week; perhaps Tuesday. The biological grandmother asked us if we could get Don, our pastor, to do the funeral, and asked us to pay his expenses, which of course we agreed to. Don of course, wasn't interested in getting paid and we kind of chuckled among ourselves about it.

The biological grandmother gave Don very explicit instructions about what to say during the funeral, and of course he followed the family's wishes. A lot of the people from our church attended; in fact, at least half of the people there, perhaps more than half, were members of our church. My parents sent a large flower arrangement, and several

other friends and family members also sent arrangements that were arrayed in front of the funeral parlor when we arrived.

A tape of rather poor quality through a bad sound system played in the background. Our pastor gave the eulogy. He spoke at length about how much the biological father cared for Derrick, and how close he was to him, and what a great loss his death was. Pastor Don talked about the grandparents, the biological mother, and other relatives. Ruth and I were not mentioned at all; we had known ahead of time such was to be the case. Don was upset by our exclusion, and several church members later expressed dismay that we had not been mentioned or allowed to participate at all.

The biological father had said a few words; I don't remember them at all. I can't remember what songs were being played, either. Derrick's biological mother hadn't been able to attend at all. She was in prison.

We expressed our regrets to the family, and so did many of the members of our congregation. This was the last time that we saw the biological family that they were even marginally civil with us.

Keeping Our Children

After the funeral, all the bio family's attention was suddenly directed toward Brittany. This was dismaying, but not unexpected. Still, we had to question the sincerity of their motives, considering that they had ignored Brittany for months at a time, and that the biological grandmother had never even met her until that December, about fifteen months since she'd been born. Now, suddenly, the grandmother was claiming to want to have custody of her.

The court hearing that followed soon after the funeral was devastating. Although they left Brittany in our custody, for the time being, they ordered an investigation into whether we smoked in our home (despite the fact that we were nonsmokers), among other things. As the judge said, “we know second hand smoke can contribute to SIDS”. Additionally, they gave biomom’s sister and the grandmother, three hour unmonitored visits with Brittany. Until then, only the biological mother and father had been allowed to see her, and then only once a week for a one hour *monitored* visit (which they had very rarely ever managed; the first eight months we had Brittany, she had received absolutely no contact with the biological family: not so much as a card or a phone call).

After that court date, our private agency social worker called us into her office and told us that we needed to hire an attorney; she told us that Brittany was a lost cause, and that she’d inevitably go back to the biological family; but Toni was another matter, and so a lawyer would allow us to shore up her status so it would be very difficult for anyone to remove her from our home. As just foster parents, all it took was the word of a social worker and the child would be gone. But if we got the special arrangement known as *defacto* parent status, then it would take a judge’s order for the child to be removed, and then there’d have to be good cause. The special arrangement was a precursor to adoption; it essentially told the court and the state that we were intending to adopt Toni, and so she was bound more closely to us.

So we contacted the two lawyers that our social worker had recommended; we ended up going with the cheaper one, who charged only \$125 an hour instead of \$250 an hour; his retainer was only \$2500 instead of \$4000, and my parents were happier to give us the smaller loan.

I remember feeling an emptiness inside, a gnawing sense of futility, like trying to slog uphill in hip-deep mud. But I also believed that God knew what he was doing. I just wasn't sure I was going to *enjoy* whatever it was God was doing, but I knew that whatever happened, God loved these children more than I did, so whatever he chose was going to be the best thing possible. But I knew that it might still hurt me an awful lot. A shot is not a pleasant thing, but sometimes it is the best thing; that's how I looked at it.

So, the biological mom's sister picked up Brittany one day for a three hour visit; she arrived a bit late and brought her back a little early. She smelled slightly of smoke, which bothered Ruth and I, and of course we documented it; we were writing down everything that happened.

The biological grandmother also picked up Brittany for a visit, and she was as regular as clock work about it. We were convinced that the next time we had a court hearing about Brittany, that we'd lose custody to her, and that would be the end of it. I felt horrible every time I had to open the door and let that woman carry Brittany away; it was as if she was ripping my arm off, spending the day with it, and then reattaching it later, but knowing that some day soon it was going to get ripped off again, and sooner or later, it wouldn't be coming back.

The next court hearing on Brittany was set for March. Just a couple of weeks before then, while our private agency social worker was doing her weekly visit in our home to check on the kids, the phone rang. I picked it up and someone on the other end told me that the biological grandmother had just suffered a heart attack. I thanked the person for letting me know, expressed condolence and a wish that she'd be okay, and then I hung up the phone.

I was happy; even ecstatic. Because I knew at that moment that Brittany *wouldn't* be going anywhere now: not with the grandmother's health being that fragile. I came in and told the social worker, and she stared at me with a shocked look, not really knowing what to say. I asked her if she'd heard of the German word, *schadenfreude*. She hadn't. I told her it meant taking secret delight in the misfortunes of your friends. She half-smiled, but didn't say anything more.

Proverbs says that we shouldn't rejoice when we see our enemy stumble, but I found it very hard not to; and I talked about the fact that I found it hard not to be pleased. And, it seemed to me, and to Ruth, I think, that this was the hand of God. We had the grandmother added to the weekly list of prayer requests at our church, but frankly, it was hard to pray for her. To be honest, at least in some place inside me, I really would not have minded if she had died. I felt guilty for thinking that; but I could not bring myself to sincerely pray for her recovery.

The next court date in March went very well for us. Instead of moving toward reuniting Brittany with her biological family, the movement now was toward terminating the biological family's rights and a hearing was scheduled to do just that. Despite our social worker's assurance that we were going to lose Brittany, suddenly, we found, in only a month's time, everything had turned back around to our favor.

I was starting to breathe again, at least a little bit. With Toni, everything was going smoothly; her biological mother had dropped out of the picture, never made it to any of the court dates, and so we got our special defacto parent status. Not too long after that, they terminated the biological family's rights and so we moved from foster care with Toni, to being officially in the adoptions process with her. Surprisingly, with our own

private attorney working for us, the adoption proceedings went much faster than they had with Vanessa. He expedited things, and told us his goal was to get her locked in with us as fast as possible, so we could then focus attention wholly on Brittany without distraction. Thus, very soon, we had officially adopted Toni.

In the meantime, we and our pastor arranged for a memorial service for Derrick. The service was for us and for the church members, since everyone had felt so dissatisfied with the funeral. Also, we invited our social workers to come to the memorial service, since the biological family had explicitly asked that they not come to the funeral.

And so, we had our memorial. It was a lovely service, but I find I can barely remember what happened, or who was there. I remember there were more people there than we normally had on a Wednesday night, and I remember that people came by and prayed over Ruth and I. But my thought in going through the memorial service was that this was for the church and for our social workers, because they'd been deprived of a real funeral, and this would give them good closure. I didn't feel anything much myself; I didn't think that it was something that I really needed, and I remember looking forward to the event with great discomfort. But I survived the evening, though I didn't seem to feel anything from it.

As the court hearings came, and the objections, and the delays went on and on, it was becoming increasingly certain that Brittany would be ours. And yet, every hearing was a nightmare to me; I dreaded the getting up early in the morning, the long drive, the interminable wait in the big waiting room. The grandmother never appeared at another hearing after her heart attack. But the biological parents tended to be regular, which of

course added to the stress of the whole situation. Of course, the biological mother was still in prison, and so she was only in the courtroom, never in the waiting area. And the biological father didn't always make it. But my stomach was always in knots, and I was always uncomfortable. I would take books with me to read, and I would open them and stare at the page, and my eyes would move over the words and I didn't seem to ever be able to remember anything; I found myself going over the same paragraph the whole time, getting absolutely nowhere.

What I was feeling was fear. I was afraid that the judge would decide that Brittany shouldn't live with us any more. And despite the fact that I knew that God knew what he was doing, and despite the fact that I knew he loved Brittany more than I did, I still thought it could happen that Brittany might go back to them. How could I know that Brittany being with us was God's will for all of us? I'm not God, I don't know the full picture of reality, the place where all the threads of history were going to go. What seemed really bad to me, losing Brittany, might in the long run be a great good; I couldn't tell. But knowing that whatever happened was going to be for the best, did not make the knots in my stomach, the anguish in my heart, or my terror go away. The bad feelings stayed. I wondered what the peace that passes all understanding could possibly feel like; I imagined it would feel good, that somehow in the midst of this turmoil and stress, I would magically be serene. If that's what the peace that passes all understanding is like, then I never felt it through this whole mess; I'm not sure if I've ever felt it—if that's what it's supposed to feel like.

Once we got de facto parent status on Brittany, things proceeded smoothly enough; the most stressful court date after that was when parental rights were terminated.

We waited outside the courtroom for what seemed like forever. We had arrived at a little past 8:00 AM; court always opened at 8:30, and we had to be there then, regardless of when they would get around to putting us on the docket. None of the biological family for Brittany were in the waiting area, and our lawyer arrived a little late. But once he was there, it wasn't very long before our case came up. When you have your own lawyer that you're paying for, they put you at the top of the docket, we discovered. When we walked into the courtroom, the biological mother was there, but the biological father was not. She was dressed in orange prison garments, and as I recall she was wearing chains. The judge read through the purpose of the hearing, and then took statements from the counsel. The biological mother's court appointed attorney announced that the biological mother objected to the proceedings. The judge seemed hardly to be paying attention to anyone. Unlike in TV dramas, in real life judges mumble, talk fast, and its pretty much all monotone. With a few words, the judge simply announced the termination of the biological family's parental rights, and the placement of Brittany into adoptions.

The long battle for Brittany was suddenly over. And we had won. Despite every indication from our social worker, despite all that had happened because of Derrick, not only had none of our children been taken from us, we now knew they would never be. Brittany was ours.

Our private agency social worker, especially, was ecstatic; she really found it hard to believe that things had worked out the way they had. Of course, with parental rights terminated, and Brittany moving into adoptions, we were technically no longer foster parents and she would thus, at the end of the month, cease to be our social worker. Instead, we would simply have an adoption worker.

Our private agency social worker continued to maintain contact, of course; and wanted to know when the adoption was going to be finalized.

One item of stress hung in the backs of our minds, though. That was the fear of a lawsuit. Our primary concern up till this moment had been adopting Toni and Brittany. With Toni safely adopted, and Brittany now in adoptive placement, the fear of losing our children was finally eliminated. But we had known, on top of that stress, the stress that we were likely to be sued for wrongful death in the case of Derrick.

One thing that we had tried earlier, before the termination of parental rights, back at the early part of the year, was to get both the biological family and us into a counseling situation, where an attempt at reconciliation, and working through the anger issues could be accomplished. Our attorney thought that maybe, if the court ordered counseling, and with some non-disclosure agreements, and maybe even some agreements not to sue, that we could avoid any possible future legal action.

So, the court had ordered us and the biological family into counseling; and Ruth and I made one trip down to see a psychologist. His office was in a strip mall, not too far from a Subway restaurant. It was a nice office, and he was very nice, too. And I told him about my biggest fear in all of this: losing our children. He just kind of nodded, and listened and didn't say much; he didn't seem to ask a whole lot of questions. It was over in an hour and we left.

We understand that the biological grandmother met with him at least once, too; but it wasn't too long after this that we got the first communication from an attorney hired by the biological family: two envelopes, one addressed to me, one addressed to Ruth. They held identical papers: a Tort claim.

In a panic, we called our lawyer and faxed copies of what we had gotten down to him; he calmed us a bit by saying that we hadn't been sued yet; the papers simply gave the biological family the right to bring suit later, if they chose.

So, we continued with our day to day lives, getting up in the morning, feeding the children, getting Vanessa off to school and Ruth off to work; meanwhile, in all these ups and down since Derrick's death, I would make my way to my office and sit down in front of the computer and stare at the monitor and try to find something to write. Since Derrick had died, I had found it impossible to write a book. I had started five the first year after he died, but I could never get more than a handful of pages in; if I got thirty pages over a month, I was doing well. I tried to rewrite, and found myself doing a lot of staring at the page, reading the same paragraphs over and over and not being able to make much sense out of them. Slowly, bit by bit, maybe a few pages at a time, I progressed.

In frustration, I threw myself into doing work for the School of Theology. I created the web pages for the classes. I tinkered with the look, the layout of the different web pages. I tried to find new and creative things to put on the site, links I could make to other sites of similar interest.

I found that nonfiction, oddly enough, was easy enough to write, and so I focused on writing essays on theology. I suspect that the reason nonfiction was easy to do during this period was because academic nonfiction doesn't require so much in the way of emotional effort. Writing a novel has been described as an easy process: you just poke a vein and start bleeding on the paper. Well, my veins all seemed to have collapsed. One of the few pieces of fiction I managed was a short story on gluttony; of course, even that

was more theological than purely emotional. Even so, it was very hard for me to write, far harder than fiction usually is for me, or was, before Derrick died.

I spent a lot of time working over at my church. I knocked down the walls, built an office, built shelves, and catalogued 7600 books for the library. The needs of the School of Theology kept me very busy; but I found it very hard to focus even so. Only mindless activities like cataloguing books I could do; building things I could do. But paperwork was always a struggle. I found it very hard to grade tests and papers; I was always wanting to put it off. I found it hard to do administrative tasks, such as writing letters, working at setting up board meetings, or even preparing for accreditation once one of the board members had loaned us the money to pay for that.

And I was increasingly uncomfortable with publicizing the school, for fear of publicizing me. I knew that with Derrick's death and a potential lawsuit pending, that it was somewhat surprising that the newspapers or other media hadn't picked up on it. In fact, one of the scariest moments one morning about a year after Derrick's death came when one of the local newspapers called—and they weren't just trying to sell me their paper. They wanted to ask me about Derrick, and about being named in a wrongful death lawsuit. I told them no comment, and got off the phone as quickly as possible. And then I called our lawyer and let him know what had just happened.

He told me to never give news media any information. I was instructed just to always say “no comment,” and then to direct them to his office.

Our private agency social worker called shortly after that, having gotten a similar call; she was as confused and frightened as I was. We didn't know what to think; neither we nor private foster agency had even been served yet.

Our attorney told us to not make it easy for them; stay out of sight; keep the blinds down; don't answer the door unless you knew who it was. Our private social worker said that sometimes they'll call and then hang up without saying anything, because they just want to find out if you're there, so they can serve you the papers.

I was terrified. But then, there was just silence after that. Nothing more happened. We got up in the morning, got everyone off to where they needed to be, and I sat down in front of the computer. I spent every morning after that opening the paper in sheer terror, reading carefully, certain that I was going to find my name. I did searches on the newspaper's website, looking for the story. But there never was any story about Derrick or us, and searches on the web never brought up my name in any context except the School of Theology. And yet, I had this fear weighing on the back of my mind, not always really consciously there, but there nevertheless.

And every quarter, I had to send out a press release to announce the new class schedule, so that we could let people know what we had to offer, so that they could come and take classes from us. And I was petrified that sooner or later, the newspaper would want to interview me about the school. So I was very careful to leave any mention of my name out of all the press releases. When I was inducted into *Who's Who in America*, I avoided sending out any press releases on it; there was no way I was going to publicize myself. If I became in any way a public figure, then the whole thing with Derrick would become a big media circus—or so I feared. I even stopped writing letters to the editor. I didn't want their attorney to see my name anywhere and think to himself, "hmmm, maybe I can exploit this..."

But after that one phone call, and the two letters about the Tort Claim, there was nothing. No summons were served, no more calls from the media, and then, suddenly, we had a court date: Brittany's adoption would be finalized in June. We immediately went into celebration mode, preparing a party for the adoption, sending out invitations. Both our private and county social workers were planning on coming to the party. They wanted very much to see this thing happen, this thing that had seemed so unbelievable only a few short months earlier. And even as we celebrated, even as we relaxed, I still, in the back of my head, knew that there was something unpleasant coming.

We had a good time with the celebration after Brittany's adoption. Everyone came and visited, enjoyed the food, and chatted; our county social worker brought us a rose bush; our private social worker came, too, and actually seemed pretty cheerful. I don't remember much in the way of details.

In any case, we got a last little bit of paper work from our lawyer, and a letter telling us that since the threat of a lawsuit seemed to have faded and seemed unlikely at this point, that we could just relax and enjoy our lives with our children and focus on taking care of them now, at last. We could put the stress of the past year or so behind us and move on.

Happily ever after? Had we finally reached that tomorrow, that place of paradise in our lives, where the air would forever be sweet, the hole in our life filled? Did we now live in paradise? Of course not...

Chapter Ten: Is Despair a Sin?

It is Okay to Feel Bad

I get the impression from some Christians that if I am not always smiling, always cheerful, always feeling on top of the world, that somehow I'm sinning. We've all heard the old story now, about the man who went to church and the pastor asked him, "How are you doing?"

"I'm doing fine," said the man, "under the circumstances"

"What are you doing *under* the circumstances, brother?" asked the pastor.

No matter how bad you feel, you can always be made to feel just a tad worse by some well-meaning person heaping a load of guilt on your back to go along with that burden you're already hauling.

How does this happen, that certain emotions get black listed? The positive emotions—well, except maybe lust—are praised and extolled, but those we label as negative, are shamed. On top of feeling bad because we're sad or discouraged, we are

made to feel guilty because of how bad we're feeling, because we're not looking at the bright side, because we're forgetting our "first love", because we've taken our eyes off Jesus and like Peter, we now sink into the stormy sea. And so, already hurting and discouraged, we drop even lower thanks to the well-intentioned "encouragement" of our companions, or our own mental nannies.

This of course is nonsensical given both the nature of life, as well as what we see of life reflected in the Bible. Despair is not a sin. Feeling bad when you're hurting is not a sin. As you regain consciousness after you've been hit by a bus, your legs broken, your arms fractured, your body in so much pain that even your hair follicles ache, you are insane if you smile and say "Praise Jesus, I'm so thankful for getting squished by that bus." Being thankful in everything does not mean thanking God that you're identifying your child's battered body in the morgue. That is insane and that is foolish and that is imagining God is an ogre.

Moses felt despair, Abraham felt despair, and even Jesus felt despair. Sometimes, when you're a human being living on the wrong side of morning, you *need* to feel despair.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!." So said Paul in his letter to the church in Philippi (Philippians 4:4). This must be understood in the context of "Jesus wept." as recorded by John in John 11:35 and that there is "a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance" as recorded in Ecclesiastes 3:4. Circumstances *do* dictate how you feel. The Bible acknowledges this. Keeping your perspective does not mean you'll not still feel awful when the bad times roll. Duh. Why should I even have to say such a thing? But I know Christians who think that they must

always be able to rise above any and every circumstance and feel joy no matter what. I say to them: Jesus wept. We should pay attention to those two words. He was crying because Lazarus was dead. He was crying because everyone around him whom he loved desperately was sad. And yet, he knew that in only a very short time he'd be bringing Lazarus back from death.

Jesus despaired on the cross, even though he knew that he would rise from the grave in three days.

It is okay to feel bad. There's something wrong with you if you don't when something awful happens. We are not Vulcans and even the Vulcans have the same emotions, they just choose to suppress them. Maybe that's okay for a fictional science fiction species. That is not okay for human beings who are not fictional.

Getting Sued

A pleasant enough July afternoon: my friend had come over for some instructions in using a computer. That, and I think she just liked to come over and talk on occasion; she certainly had enough stresses in her own life and I always felt at such a loss as to what to suggest that she should do. In any case, she was over, playing on the internet and my children and hers were playing in the living room. I was not thinking about a whole lot at that moment, beyond listening to make sure that the kids were all right, and trying to pay attention to my friend and whatever it was that she needed me to do at the moment. Ruth was gone for the evening at Magic Mountain with our foreign exchange student from Spain. Karen and Amy, teenaged daughters of friends of ours, were temporarily living with us, too; it was a rather crowded and busy time, just then. Just before five, the doorbell rang and I went to answer it.

A young man dressed in a white shirt and wearing black shorts smiled, dropped some papers in my hands, and informed me that “I have a bit of paperwork for you.” And then he quickly turned and disappeared.

I looked down at what was in my hands, but I already knew what it was. The summons had come at last. Just when we thought maybe, just maybe nothing would happen. Boom. Here it was. And goody, I’m all by myself. Ruth is gone, and there’s no way I can get a hold of her. She won’t be home until after ten at the earliest. Oh well; I knew what I needed to do. I told our visiting teenager Karen to get off the telephone *now*; I was rather abrupt and harsh about it I’m afraid, but I really didn’t care. I was upset and she happened to be in the way of the first thing I absolutely, positively had to do immediately, and whatever she was doing at the moment on the phone really didn’t matter; certainly not as much as this. And so, the phone clear, I called our attorney. Of course, he was busy, and so I left the message with the person who answered, identifying myself and telling him that we had just been served with a wrongful death lawsuit over Derrick.

Then, that done, my friend was staring at me. Her eyes told me she was terribly disturbed by the news, but equally, she didn’t know what to say anymore than I knew what to say about it. I decried the fact that Ruth wasn’t around and that I couldn’t tell her, but I thought it was just as well that she could enjoy herself this evening and not have to worry about it.

“So what are you going to do?” my friend asked.

“Well, I’ve got a deacon’s meeting tonight; I guess I’ll go to that if someone can watch the kids...”

“I can do that.”

“Thank you.”

I don’t remember much of the rest of the conversation we might have had; I remember staring at the papers, going through them, and becoming increasingly agitated. Our attorney finally (really, it wasn’t very long) called me back and I gave him the details; he told me not to panic, and to fax a copy of the papers to him, which I then proceeded to do right away.

And thus, the legal battle commenced. He told me he’d file the necessary preliminary responses, and he’d be nosing around, and he’d let me know, of course, what was happening.

It was frustrating; we had just finished paying off the bill for Toni and Brittany’s de facto parent status, among other legal things, and the adoptions, amounting to over four thousand dollars. Now we were staring at who knew how big an expense. Of course, our lawyer told me not to worry about that, the state had a fund to protect foster families in just this sort of thing, and that maybe our homeowners insurance would cover the legal expenses. Thus began a long and frustrating series of phone calls and letters that in the end netted us absolutely nothing in the way of financial help.

The deacon’s meeting that night consisted of our pastor and my fellow deacons Rex and Sherman; I don’t know that anyone else was there that night; perhaps Rick was there, too. It is oddly disconcerting to find the gaps in my memory. I should be able to remember more of the details. What I do remember, however, is what I was feeling, and I was feeling numb; devastated; empty. I was at a complete loss and really didn’t know what to expect now.

I shared a bit with Don before the meeting started, and so whatever else may have been on the agenda before, my problem suddenly became preeminent; I laid the summons on the table in the library and I remember staring at it the whole meeting, occasionally picking it up, feeling it, and putting it back down. I don't remember much of what was said; I don't remember what was prayed, though I remember that everyone prayed; well, everyone except me—well, out loud that is. I just sort of moaned a bit at God, wondering in essence, okay, what now? I know there's a purpose here, and I know you know what you're doing, but gee whiz, this is really, really awful and I don't like it one bit and I wish it would just go away.

So I went home after the meeting; I don't remember what anyone said to me, although I'm sure they were talking to me about it. I drove home; my friend was still there. I put the children to bed; my friend stayed until Ruth got home a little bit after ten. I do not remember the conversation we had while we waited. I am sitting here, trying to see myself back in my office, and I'm pretty sure most of the time we were in the office, but I don't remember the words; I just remember that my friend looked very sad.

Ruth finally got home, and after the initial exuberance of her return, and separating her from our exchange student, I put my arms around her and told her that I had some bad news. And then I showed her the papers and told her that we'd been sued for thirty-one million dollars. Also named in the suit were the County, our local hospital, our county social worker, and our private foster agency.

Her reaction was to explode: "how dare they do this!" And then she said that the biological grandmother could "kiss her visits with Brittany goodbye now." Up until then, we had allowed the grandmother to take Brittany for three hour visits once a week.

Brittany seemed to enjoy them, and we thought it would be good for the grandmother and help her with her grief over Derrick; now, we began to see the whole affair up to this point in a slightly different light. The biological parents were the named plaintiffs in the lawsuit, and legally the only ones who could have brought such a lawsuit, but it was unlikely that they would have had the financial capability of bringing a lawsuit like this on their own.

I slept badly that evening; I always sleep badly when I'm stressed: my mind simply refuses to relax or shut down at all; instead, the thoughts just go round and around. I think through what has happened, what might happen, what would be good if it happened, what would be bad if it happened, and it goes off in sometimes unrelated directions. Occasionally, in such a state, I get up and try reading my Bible and praying for awhile; sometimes that helps. I don't recall if I wound up doing so that night or not.

The next day, Ruth called our lawyer and discussed with him the situation with the grandmother. He agreed that there were no good reasons to continue letting her see Brittany; she had no legal right to see her in the first place; her visits were purely at our discretion; and there were now obvious sound reasons for terminating the visits. She was likely to become a witness and it would not do well to have her around where she could spy on us and Brittany and concoct any manner of thing against us. Not that she was likely to do any harm to Brittany, or try to kidnap her, but, the visits should end.

I had mixed emotions about terminating the visits. The grandmother had always seemed pleasant enough; she called me "daddy" around Brittany. And yet, I knew for certain that her politeness and pleasant words had not been honest in the least and that she was a hazard now, and in fact for some while had been a hazard, both to me and to my

family. So, Ruth called her and told her the visits were over, and told her why. The grandmother feigned shock at the size of the claim against us, though she admitted to knowing about the suit.

I had very unkind words in my head when I heard that. However, I don't think I actually said the words out loud.

Still, the grandmother asked if she could phone or send cards, and so we agreed to that. She also asked for a last one-hour visit in our front yard, to say good bye to Brittany, and so we permitted that as well.

I was the only one home when she came. The grandmother parked her white van in front of our house and sat with Brittany by our tree while I watched from the front door. I felt angry and worried, wondering at every moment whether she would do something. But she did nothing, and brought Brittany back up, and mouthed something about regretting the situation, and I said something innocuous back instead of wishing her a quick trip to Hell. But in my head, I did not think nice things. Afterward, with Brittany safely back in my arms and the grandmother gone, I hugged her tightly and told her I loved her more than anything, and told God that I knew I shouldn't have thought those mean things about the grandmother and to forgive me. I'm unclear if I genuinely repented, however. And I know that the imprecatory psalms, those psalms where the writer asks for the violent destruction of his enemies, became good reading for awhile after that...

And so now I had a new thing to hang over my head. We'd just had the annual used book sale for the School of Theology, and we were disposing of the unsaleable books. As I was helping load the books that we were not going to use in the future into

the back of a pickup, I talked with those helping me about my nice new lawsuit; and of course we chuckled over the thought of them ever getting thirty-one million dollars out of us, and I told them that my lawyer had assured me that we could always claim bankruptcy anyhow and they'd never get a cent from us. But I didn't like the possibility of them getting a cent out of the County, either. I knew that this was about money, and nothing but money. Their hope, I was convinced, was that the County, rather than going through the expense of fighting the lawsuit, would simply pay them off.

As things developed, however, the County was in no mood for paying off on this one. They chose to fight it, and so did everyone else named in the suit. This was a comfort, in a way. It signaled to us that their case against us must be weak; of course, our attorney kept telling us that they had no case at all. Nevertheless, the lawsuit was always on my mind, oppressively.

I remember a couple of incidents. Once, shortly after Derrick had died, within a day or two, I had to go to the grocery to get some milk. Standing in line, looking around, I noticed carefully all the people going about their normal affairs, and I wondered if any of them were suffering as much as I was at that moment. And then the clerk, as he rang up my order, asked me, "and how are you tonight." I briefly thought about replying, "oh, just fine. My baby died yesterday, but otherwise, no problem." But of course I simply answered, "fine." and he took my money and I left.

And now, with my newly-sued status, I went to the same grocery store and had similar thoughts all over again; and of course, I just answered "fine" this time, too.

The suit was served against us on a Monday I think; or it might have been Tuesday; I really can't remember now. But I do remember the prayer meeting that we

attended right after. We laid the lawsuit on the pulpit and prayed to God about it.

Doubtless there were those in the legal profession who would have been appalled that we shared with our church everyone what was going on. But they were our family. What else could we do?

Things were busy for the first few weeks. We faxed things back and forth, signed faxed documents, sometimes signed documents that were sent in the mail to us.

Eventually, our response was filed (it had to be filed within thirty days of being served, and of course we made the deadline). And then, things were quiet for a little while, until a big fat envelope came from our lawyer holding something called Interrogatories. They are part of the discovery process the plaintiffs use in an attempt to find out all the bad things about us that they could. Many of the questions were innocuous, like name, date of birth, place of residence, and the like. Some asked questions about what we had done with Derrick the previous month, week and twenty-four hours before the “incident”; Ruth had a set of questions, and I had a set of questions. We had to answer details about his medical history, how often we had taken him to the doctor, when, and for what. They also made accusations, wanting us to admit to doing things that we had not done. Our attorney, whom we of course called, explained how to answer the questions, what the point of it all was, and helped us through it. We finished them all, and mailed and faxed everything back to him, and signed where we had to sign. A few weeks later, he sent us copies of the official legal format of our answers. They were worded much better and much more precisely now. Additionally, our attorney responded to many of the interrogatories with an objection, arguing that they had no right to be asking us that particular question. It looked impressive and made us feel a bit better.

And then, I got the lovely letter telling me that I was to be *deposed*. This was scheduled for October, in the other attorney's office; I was told in the letter that I needed to set aside the whole day, and to be prepared for having to come back again the next day and maybe even more after that. I also had a list of more interrogatories to answer. Oddly, they seemed virtually a repeat of the previous set. But, I dutifully answered them and got them back to our lawyer in the time allotted. I hated answering the questions; I did not like doing it, did not want to do it, would have refused to do it if I at all could; it knotted my stomach and stole sleep from me. And now, I had to go to this attorney's office and have him grill me? I was not looking forward to this at all. In fact, I was dreading it. It was hard not to think about anything else. My only comfort in the whole thing was the thought that at least they hadn't asked Ruth to do it, although our attorney thought she'd probably be next. In fact, he was a bit surprised they hadn't asked her first.

And then, a day or two before it was scheduled to happen, I got a phone call from my attorney telling me that their attorney's secretary had called to postpone the deposition.

The relief I felt from that news was enormous; but, of course, as Ruth reminded me, it was *only* a postponement. Doubtless it would be rescheduled. My attorney told us that these things happened, and that it would probably be rescheduled within the month. So, I immediately went back to being stressed.

Our private social worker called me the night before the deposition had originally been scheduled, telling me that the foster agency's attorney was going to be there, and wishing me all the best. And I got to inform her that it had been postponed. She was shocked, wondered why, and I of course had to tell her I didn't have a clue.

For a month, I kept expecting with every ring of the phone, to hear my attorney's voice telling me the deposition had been rescheduled. Every time I got the mail, I expected something in there telling me the news I was dreading to hear. Every time I checked for messages on the voice mail, I had that fear in the front of my brain. And nothing happened. Ever. The deposition was never rescheduled. In fact, no depositions were ever taken from Ruth or me. As the months passed, the fear of that deposition finally faded, at least a bit.

But, of course, the paranoia that became my life remained. Our neighbor told us once that he had seen a car parked in front of our house with a couple of people in it for a long time. And then when he went to go talk to the people, it drove off. I began to wonder whether or not they might have hired a private detective to watch us. Every time I got in the car, sometimes consciously, sometimes just as a nibble on the back of my neck that I tried to brush away, I wondered if someone was following, watching where I was going, what I was up to. Were they peeking into my windows when I wasn't around? Were they shaking their heads over my dirty swimming pool? Were they examining my financial affairs and chortling over the difficulty we were having making ends meet each month? I wondered if they were disappointed by the fact that they kept finding me making my way over to the church rather than having some affair somewhere or frequenting prostitutes or spending my nights in a bar. Would they see me that time when I yelled at Vanessa, or got cross with Toni, or snapped at Brittany? Would some innocuous action be taken out of context and used against us? What would they think of me spending my time at home all day doing nothing but sitting in front of the computer and typing? Would they bug my phone, examine my hard drive, read my email, watch

the sites I surfed? What would they make of my choice in sites? Should I not have looked at that particular news story?

Thankfully the paranoia was not quite a constant companion, but periodically it would peek out from its hiding place and wink at me; I tried to chase it away with reason. Especially when I noticed a car parked outside our house and I peered at the two old people sitting there and worried what they might be up to—until another pair of old people appeared walking up my driveway carrying copies of the Watchtower.

And then on another ordinary day in March, after two years, it simply came to an end.

My phone rang. I picked it up, and my attorney informed me that the lawsuit against me had been dismissed. It was over. I thanked him profusely, and felt an enormous burden fall off my back, a burden larger than I had fully comprehended. When I hung up, I found myself crying, weeping uncontrollably; I called and told Ruth, and called other people to let them know, having a hard time holding back the tears. I found myself crying unexpectedly at odd moments, like singing a hymn the next Sunday morning at church.

And of course, all troubles did not end. That very night, when Ruth and I went out to celebrate, on our way home, our van stopped working: the transmission died and we were suddenly faced with a one thousand, eight hundred dollar bill for fixing that—which was money we didn't have. But it was easy, after having a thirty-one million dollar lawsuit dismissed, to keep one thousand eight hundred dollars in perspective and to think to myself, "you know, if God took care of a thirty-one million dollar problem, perhaps, just perhaps, he can take care of a one thousand eight hundred dollar problem."

Which he did. But that has been one of the few times in my life when I was able to keep my perspective and not lose it and start wailing “everything is against me.”

Chapter Eleven: Jacob Wasn't the Only Complainer

It's Going to be Okay

You will probably never find a secret to let you smile through all the hard times and really mean it (you can pretend easily enough, maybe even play some good mind games; but if that's all it is, it won't last). People have, over the years, quoted the verse which goes:

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:7)

In every crisis I have ever faced I have wanted to get to that place, to realize that peace that passes all understanding. In my mind, I imagined it to be a place I could find somewhere inside, a place metaphorically made of rolling green hills and a few gnarled trees, and somewhere close by, a babbling brook, where the air was comfortable and soft. It was a place where I would no longer feel bad or afraid and I wouldn't hurt anymore. I wanted the bad feeling that came from any crisis to go away and leave me alone.

For instance, when Derrick died, and when we faced the lawsuit, and in the

middle of my days, or at night as I stared at the ceiling, I wanted something to replace the heavy weight on my chest, the sense of despair and emptiness, the sense of being abandoned and alone and all the other negative feelings. But nothing would ever happen. My feelings did not change. When I prayed, I felt nothing; reading the Bible was unsatisfying. I maintained my daily pattern. Since I was sixteen, I have read through the Bible once a year, every year and I continued that practice during the three years from Derrick's death through the dismissal of the lawsuit. And you know what? I never felt better. Time healed the wound of my baby's death; and the news from my attorney that the lawsuit had been tossed out—dismissed—is what finally made me feel good. Just as Dandi finally felt good when Dennis had a job and they knew they weren't going to lose their house.

Was I somehow not spiritual enough? Was I a bad person? Did I not have enough faith? Why couldn't I have felt the way I felt after I got the news from my attorney the whole time I was going through the crisis? Why could I not have found relief from the stress, a stress that daily was like having someone pounding on my head with a small hammer, without letup, for months and years?

And yet, when I look at the Bible, I find that how I felt, the way I handled my crisis, was not any different than the way any of them did. Besides the complaint of Jacob, there are the complaints of Moses and the complaints of Abraham, and the complaints even of Jesus himself. And you know what? I've come to understand something significant and profound.

The peace of God is not always a feeling. Sometimes it is a doing.

It means being able to get up every day and do what you have to do even though

you feel like dog dung. It means reading your Bible, it means praying, it means loving people and loving God even when there's nothing inside that seems to make it easy or natural. The peace of God is simply knowing—as reflected in what Peter said when Jesus asked him, “are you going to leave, too?”—that somehow God is still there and you have no other option each day but just to keep on living and abiding in Him.

From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. “You do not want to leave too, do you?” Jesus asked the Twelve.

Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:66-69)

You come to realize that all is really going to be okay, despite how it looks. You are not free of pain, maybe Joseph is dead after all, but you decide to trust that God really does know what he is doing and it really will be okay, because no matter what, you still have God and he still has you and he loves you and knows what he is doing. So the anxiety fades...

Moses' Complaints

Moses complains more than once, of course. For instance, right after he first gets into Egypt, things don't go the way Moses had anticipated. In Exodus 5:22-23, after Moses has come to Egypt—reluctantly—to rescue the people from Egyptian bondage, he performs a couple of miracles and what happens? Pharaoh not only doesn't let the people go, but he makes things even worse for them. The people then complain to Moses about it—no big surprise there. So Moses prays to God and he's not particularly happy or feeling much in the way of peace:

Moses returned to the LORD and said, “O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to

Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.”

Later, in Numbers 11, the people have been given manna to eat, but they are complaining that they want meat. Moses is not a happy man:

Moses heard the people of every family wailing, each at the entrance to his tent. The LORD became exceedingly angry, and Moses was troubled. He asked the LORD, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant? What have I done to displease you that you put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers? Where can I get meat for all these people? They keep wailing to me, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how you are going to treat me, put me to death right now—if I have found favor in your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin.”

In all of these instances, Moses was not happy. Moses complained. But notice the important part. Moses didn’t think or express any sense that God wasn’t there. He knew God was there, and he knew God was involved. What puzzled and bothered Moses was not a sense that God didn’t exist or that God didn’t care. Rather it was wondering what in the world God might be thinking, and telling God point blank that if things were going to be this way, then Moses didn’t really like the idea of continuing to live.

Abraham’s Complaints

By Genesis 15:1-3, Abraham is an old man, well past ninety and he and his wife have not had any children. This despite the fact that God had years and years before *promised* him otherwise, or so Abraham had thought. Perhaps fifty years after the initial promise, Abraham is weighed down with his disappointment and the fact that his life has not turned out the way he had expected, based on what he thought God had told him would happen:

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.”

But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”

And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”

After Ishmael was born, God eventually explained to Abraham that Ishmael was not the promised offspring, either: that there was yet another to come. Abraham was not entirely pleased by this information, and even had trouble believing it at all. In Genesis 17:18 the following is recorded:

And Abraham said to God, “If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!”

But of course Abraham keeps on keeping on. He knows God is there, he just doesn’t understand what God thinks he is doing. Complaining, feeling unhappy in the midst of life’s troubles, is normal and is not a cause for alarm. There is no reason for feeling guilty.

Israelites’ Complaints

But what, then, are we to make of God’s reaction to the complaints by the Israelites? The Israelites complain about having no water and no food, or at least not the right sort of food, on a not infrequent basis: and God seems to get quite annoyed with them. Why does he react the way he does to their complaints, while accepting the complaints of Moses and Abraham and others?

Or are we missing something? Consider, first, before we examine it any closer, that God did not disown the Israelites, he did not destroy them; he cared for them anyhow and took care of their needs. He responded to their complaints. So even though he was annoyed, even though he was angry, his love did not go away from them. This is an

important thing to keep in mind. Getting mad at those we love is something we have all done. As children, we doubtless were angry at our parents occasionally. We might even have yelled, “I hate you!” at them. But in the final analysis, we didn’t ever really stop loving them, did we? And what about our own children? Do we feel the warm fuzzies just bursting from our hearts when our darling child dumps ketchup on our nice new carpet? Did we feel the affection oozing from us as our daughter came home two hours late without calling, and then berated us for being “too controlling”? Did we always punish our children because it is for their best, and never because we were just royally furious?

But, did we ever stop loving our children? Of course not.

So why is it that God got upset with the Israelites and their complaints? Because they kept wanting to run away from God. Every time a bad thing happened, their first thought was, “forget this, I’m out of here, let’s go back to being slaves.” There was an *ungratefulness* in the complaints. It wasn’t just that they wanted the bad thing to go away, not just that they wanted their pain to be salved, but that they were giving up altogether. “You’ve brought us out to this desert just to kill us,” was their attitude about God.

So God was hurt and upset, and he got angry. But he loved them still, despite all of that, and took care of them despite their ungratefulness and despite their desire to just quit. *He loved them because he couldn’t help but keep loving them.*

Jesus’ Complaints

In Matthew 26: 38-44 we see that Jesus was very upset with the prospect of his coming death. For some reason, people often will try to explain away, or pretend he

wasn't as unhappy and upset as the Bible clearly indicates. People seem uncomfortable with the idea that Jesus could be, well, human:

Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

And of course, once he was on the cross, in Matthew 27:46 we read this:

About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?"—which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Again, there is the tendency to think that for some reason, it wasn't so bad for Jesus, that he wasn't really in despair, that he wasn't really miserable. Why this reluctance to think that Jesus was not human? Because we think that feeling bad, to be in despair, is somehow wrong or unworthy behavior, and since Jesus was perfect, he couldn't do anything unworthy or bad. So, is it necessary to change our understanding of Jesus or to change our understanding of what is okay behavior? Of course, if we change what we think is acceptable behavior, that might alter our perception of Jesus, too.

Jesus had been beaten nearly to death with a whip, he'd had a crown made out of thorns pushed onto his head, he'd been kicked, he'd had his beard and hair plucked out

by the roots, he'd been spit on and mocked and then finally nailed on a cross naked and left to die a slow and miserable death.

Jesus died like men die when they're on a cross, when they've been beaten: he was in agony, he was worn out, and he was alone. Everyone had abandoned him, and now he was just dying there, and nothing was happening, and life was going on without him, and tomorrow he was going to be dead, but everyone else would still be there. The sky was dark, the blue didn't break through, no dove descended from the sky, no words splashed themselves across the clouds, no voice shook the earth announcing that "this is my Son, in whom I'm well pleased." He was up there, and a handful of his closest friends stood below helplessly and watched him die and there wasn't a thing any of them could do to help him, to make him feel better, to make the pain go away. And so he just died, alone, abandoned, hopelessly.

Some people argue that his despairing words on the cross merely signified that when God put all the sins of the world on Jesus, that God turned his back on him and that for the first time ever, Jesus was separated from his Father. But the text does not tell us that.

What the Bible does tell us is that Jesus was a human being; he had the same feelings, the same hopes, the same needs that all the rest of us have. Sure he was God, is God—since he lives again—but he was human, and that meant all the things it means for us to be human. He didn't mess up like the rest of us, but otherwise, he felt what we feel, he was sad, he was happy, he was angry, he was scared, he felt lonely and he felt despair.

God created us to be like we are: to sweat, to get tired, to make love, to touch and feel, to laugh and cry. We rejoice in what we feel, what we taste, what we see, what we

touch. The world around us is full of pleasures, of satisfactions, of enjoyment, and it is there for the purpose of being enjoyed.

There is no virtue in denying our senses, in pretending that we don't feel, or in seeking discomfort instead of pleasure. We are not closer to God, we are not more spiritual, if we refrain from anything that might be fun. Why is the sun warm, the air filled with the smell of sweet flowers, the grass green, the water wet? Why is there pizza, and bread and fruit? Do we cringe from pain? Why does the noxious, the painful, the ugly and the uncomfortable make us flinch away? Why are we attracted to the pleasant, the sweet, the warm, the loving, the happy? Jesus was human like that. He loved life; he felt life. He experienced the full range of emotions. And you know what? We human beings were created in God's image; we're just like him, the lot of us. So feeling, being alive—these were not new experiences to Jesus; God knew those feelings; God has those feelings. Feelings, emotions—they're not an evil thing. They simply are, like the blue in the sky, or the wet in water. Some people seem deeply troubled by Jesus' cry of despair when he died. I think we should be more concerned if he hadn't.

If we ever think that God doesn't understand the pain of being human, the sometimes despair of it, then we don't know God. He understands. He's been there. Sometimes there is reason to feel despair. So feel it; why pretend? Why not accept our feelings and then do something about them, rather than pretend they aren't there, or assume they are something evil? It is not a sin to feel bad, any more than it is to feel good. If we don't rejoice when times are good, and cry when times are bad, we're crazy.

And of course as Jesus died, he was merely echoing the words of his ancestor David, who had his own share of complaints, as recorded in Psalm 22:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from saving me,
so far from the words of my groaning?
O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer,
by night, and am not silent...
I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart has turned to wax;
it has melted away within me.
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;
you lay me in the dust of death.
Dogs have surrounded me;
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet.
I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.

Not feeling happy—more than that, being weighed down by the burdens and stresses of life—seems to be the norm for human beings, from Abraham to Jesus. And in fact we already know this, if we're honest with ourselves, and if we don't try to pretend and play fancy mind games. It is part of what it means to be human and it is common to all human beings in all times and in all places. Why do we think we're unique, or that we should somehow be immune? Why do we believe that having complaints is a sin? Why do we imagine it is wrong to ask God "why" or "what are you thinking?"

When a woman gives birth, the process is incredibly painful. It is not a fun thing to do. Women moan, writhe in pain, call their husbands awful names and yell "It's all your fault!" They will beg to be released from the pain, they will argue that they can't go through with it, that they don't want to do it now. But no matter the complaints, the yelling, the tears, the baby is finally born. And then, remarkably, after the baby comes, the woman is suddenly happy. It turns out to have been worth it after all.

And yet, if she has a second baby, all that she went through the first time has little if any impact on the second experience. The pain is no less intense, the complaining and writhing are just the same, and she wishes once again that it wasn't happening, and complains that it isn't worth it, and begs to be released from her torture.

Oddly, we all experience the crises of life in the same way. No matter how often we go through them, every one is a brand new experience, and we so often seem incapable of bringing what we learned from past trials along with us to the new ones. The pain is never any less painful; the desire for relief is never less strong. But maybe sometimes we can remember the previous times of trouble and in some small way we find added strength, regain our footing, gain our perspective sooner the next time around.

Peter writes “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.” (1 Peter 4:12). And Jesus instructed his disciples: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

James tells us that Elijah “was a man just like us.” (James 5:17). So, in 1 Kings, right after his triumph on Mount Carmel against the priests of Baal, where he had seen God send fire from heaven to consume his soggy sacrifice when he had merely prayed to God, we see this:

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. “I have had enough, LORD,” he said. “Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.” (1 Kings 19:3-4)

So when something bad happens to you, it is okay to be unhappy, it is okay to be

upset, it is okay to complain and wonder why. And feeling bad, hurting, and suffering while you go through the day by day agony of it all does not mean that you are missing the peace of God. You *have* the peace of God, because you keep on getting up out of bed every day. The peace of God does not mean you don't feel bad. It means that God is there with you, that *he* is at peace, even when you can't feel it. Why do you think Jesus tells us at the end of Matthew that he will be with us until the end of time? Because, just perhaps, if he hadn't told us, we wouldn't know. Everything was fine for Jacob. He just didn't know it and he *couldn't* know it. We have an advantage over Jacob when we read his complaint; we know the bigger picture. Thanks to the now permanently indwelling Spirit and the Bible, we have the bigger picture for our own lives. We can, if we choose, remember the bigger picture. The pain of today, while we lie in our hospital bed with all our bones broken from the bus that ran us over, will not be less knowing that in six months we'll be healed. But isn't there some comfort in knowing that the day of our healing is coming? Labor pains don't last forever. The baby finally arrives. Just try not to forget that. Remember that the here and now of life is not all there is. We may live in the darkness of the wrong side of morning. But the dawn is surely coming and knowing that surely helps us even in the middle of the night.

Is it Really Going to Be Okay?

The God who invented sex, who in fact, gave as his first command, to go out and *have* sex (Genesis 1:27-28), wants you to be unhappy and miserable? The God who told us that “all things work together for the good” of those who love him and “if God is for us, who can be against us” is out to make you miserable, to deny you your dreams, to rob you of those things that are precious and important to you; he wants you to learn

something and in order for that to happen, he's got to make you miserable, and if you don't learn it, then you're just going to have to stay miserable? Your whole life will be spent in the corner, in time out, and you'll have to go to bed without your supper?

So what is it with life then? How do we get out of the bad things that happen, the people dying, the illnesses, the financial disasters, the unemployment, the flat tires, the broken water pipes, the misbehaving children, the divorces and heartaches and hurt feelings and estrangements?

The short answer is that we don't. Life has its bad moments; life has its good moments. That's just the way of life. Why would you think it would be something other than it is? Why do you look at life as somehow shocking and unexpected? Who made you think that life was a trouble-free zone? You put your right foot in, you pull your right foot out, you put your left foot in and you shake it all about...

Life is a struggle; it has lots of good times and some bad times in it. But what we have throughout life is God with us and the knowledge that he will always be with us, that he loves us desperately, that he in fact adores us, and that we will get to live with him forever. What we have, if we choose to keep our perspective, is the chance to remember who we are and where we're going and where we've been.

How do we keep that perspective? How do we remind ourselves in the swirling dizziness of life, as we are buffeted and beaten about the face, that Jacob's—and our—complaint is wrong? Well, this is what helps me.

1. Read the Bible—it's God's love letter to us, telling us that sure, it can be really hard, but fear not, he's with us and he has overcome the world and he's with us forever. Pay attention to what he says to do and not do. It'll make

things as good as possible for you, just like balancing your checkbook is a good idea.

2. Go to church—you'll find out that everyone else lives a life of quiet desperation, too. No one has the perfect home, perfect family, perfect *anything*. *Everyone* gets flat tires and has stacks of laundry to do.
3. Live in the moment. Savor every one you get. Get outside. Play in the snow; walk in the rain; look at the blue sky and green grass and trees. Take a quiet lunch out on a lawn in the summer or spring time. Find a quiet place, turn off the phone, and spend an hour reading some poetry or a novel.
4. Remember that the news is news because it is unusual. They don't report on the planes that land safe, the people who quietly go to work and come home. They report on the lone plane crash out of the thousands of safe flights that day. They report on the one loon who machineguns his coworkers, not the millions who didn't. As long as the news is usually bad, then that means mostly life is good. When they start reporting about planes landing safely, *that's* when you need to worry.
5. Don't isolate yourself. Maintain close contact with the people you love and care about. Make a point to spend time with your favorite people. And try to remember that relationships are more important than being right.
6. Make sure you don't deny yourself the little pleasures of life. Eat more ice cream. Take a bubble bath. Go for a walk.
7. Watch your health. Exercise. Eat well and moderately.

Will this mean your life is perfect? Not a chance. Will this mean you won't have

stress? Nope. Will this mean you're always happy? Not at all. Remember the final reality: everyone you know and care about is going to die, and so are you. Keep that perspective. And remember too, that you will *also* be with God—and them—for eternity. Don't forget that perspective, either. Combined, it will remind you that Jacob's complaint was wrong. Everything really is not against you. Quite the opposite, no matter how it looks just now. Paul asks the question: "if God is for us, who can be against us?" Then he writes, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

(Romans 8:32-39)

That's a guarantee. Jesus told us that he will always be with us (Matthew 28:20, Hebrews 13:5-6). We don't face life by ourselves.

God really does love us.

Conclusion

The author of Ecclesiastes comments, “All has been heard. Here is the end of the matter.” And so what is the end of all of this? Jacob’s complaint illustrates the human condition: that we have a hard time seeing the way things really are.

And how are things really, when all is said and done? We are loved, we are God’s child, and we are with him forever and ever and ever. God loves us and he loves those we love more than we do. And he really does know what he is doing—and what he is doing is *good*. Things really are okay, if we don’t lose sight of the big picture. And things are okay, even if we *do* lose sight of it.

We just need to try to keep our *perspective*, that’s all. Don’t let all the noise and flashing lights and dizziness distract us from our safe place with God.

And take comfort: He knows how hard that really is and He’s always there to help us see the truth.