

Pain is unavoidable. It is part of our everyday lives whether we like it or not. Pain is what makes us take our fingers off the hot stove; it is one of God's gifts to us. Emotional pain is also one of God's gifts to us. It also warns us that there is something not quite right in our lives. Unfortunately, some Christians think that they should be spared from that kind of pain, but that is simply not true.

Jesus was "a man of suffering and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3). As followers of Christ we should also expect to experience pain. If you put your hand in the fire and it does not burn, then there is something wrong. If you lose your mother to cancer and you do not grieve, then there is something wrong. Life does hurt from time to time. That is what this book is about.

The heroes of the faith that we read about in the Bible were human like us. They had their problems. Some of them experienced intense emotional pain. Even though they were God's people, God did not spare them from pain.



Saturday: Between Tragedy and Triumph



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Paul Hay

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ISBN 978-1-257-32119-3

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Chapter 1: The Real Pain Came on Saturday - My Own Experience

I remember the experience quite vividly. It was Friday, August 4th, 2000. It was a beautiful day, but I was not feeling well. In fact, I had taken the day off from work. My wife, Linda, usually cuts my hair, but this time she sent me to a hairdresser. We had a coupon for the place and we were supposed to go to a funeral that day. A friend of ours, Alex, had passed away and Linda wanted me to look nice for the occasion. My neck was a little sore and I remember telling the hairdresser about it. She was gentle, but it still hurt when I bent my neck over the sink. That was only a foretaste of what was to come.

On the way home, I was traveling home down Whyte Avenue when I came to a red light. The Jeep in front of me had already stopped and I was coming to a stop behind it when the accident happened. The lady behind me must not have seen the red light or my van because she apparently had not even slowed down. She ran into the back of my van at full speed. I remember applying the brakes hard so that I would not hit the Jeep in front of me. I was successful the first time, but she hit me from behind again and that time I hit him. Sometime during this accident my seat collapsed and went into a permanent recline position. Obviously, this meant that I had no support for my neck. I suffered what is commonly known as a whiplash injury.

I borrowed a cell phone to call my wife. I told her about the accident, assured her that it was not my fault, and said that I did not feel like driving home. This is one of the benefits of “shock.” My neck was sore, but not nearly as sore as it was later. It was not long before the pain began to radiate from my neck to my shoulders and even to my feet and fingers. That night I had a sore throat and experienced difficulty in swallowing. I remember lying in bed next to my wife and she reached over and touched the top of my head. It felt like she was pulling my hair out by the roots.

However, the real pain came on Saturday! My whole body ached from the top of my head to my toes. I had very limited

mobility in my neck. I had cramps in both my legs and they were both very sore, but especially my right leg. I had trouble straightening it. It wanted to turn inward. My sore throat and difficulty in swallowing got even worse. When I rode in the car I could feel every bump in the road.

On Sunday my neck got even stiffer. I went to the doctor and got a prescription for a muscle relaxant. It helped, but it made me dizzy and groggy. I slept most of Sunday and Monday. Later I cut back on my medication so that I would not be so groggy, but then, of course, the pain returned. I was in agony for some time. The only relief that I felt was when I was totally motionless or asleep. I tried going to work several times in the next month, but I had real trouble driving. It was over a month before I could go back to work, and then it was only part time.

There were other inconveniences. Looking up was the hardest thing to do. This made looking at the screen in church to read the choruses very painful. This was probably a blessing for those around me since I cannot sing very well, so it spared people the pain of listening to me. I also had trouble concentrating from time to time, so reading for any length of time was wearisome.

I was in constant pain for months. I had some physical therapy. I went to a chiropractor who specializes in neck adjustments. I did some exercises. I used hot and cold compresses on my neck. I took some medication. All of these things helped, but none of them ended the pain. I was told that I should feel better in a year or two, but patience is not exactly my strong suit. It actually took about three years before I felt normal and my neck still gives me trouble from time to time. Why did God take so long to heal me? I prayed. Many other Christians have prayed for me. Yet I was still in pain. What had I done to deserve this?

Many years ago on a different Friday afternoon, something far more tragic happened. A wonderful man who had helped many people was falsely accused and executed as a common criminal. Yet his followers had thought he was sent by God to deliver them from their enemies. They had even come to the conclusion that he was the Messiah, the Chosen One. How could God abandon

his beloved Son? Why would God allow him to be executed as a criminal? If God did not even save his own Son, how could he be counted on to save his followers? When the shock of the events of Good Friday wore off, these and many more questions must have plagued the followers of Jesus. The Gospels record what happened on Friday and what happened on Sunday, but they say almost nothing about Saturday. Yet without a doubt, the real pain came on Saturday! That is when the disillusionment, the doubt, the disappointment and the despair set in for Jesus' disciples.

The reaction of the disciples can be best summed up in a three word phrase that was spoken by Cleopas. Cleopas was not one of the Twelve. In fact, we know very little about him. What we do know is that he was one of two disciples traveling from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter Sunday. The two of them were discussing the terrible tragedy of Good Friday when Jesus came up and walked along with them. They did not know who he was, possibly because they could not believe that he had risen from the dead. In any case, we can see their attitude in Cleopas' words to Jesus. He said, "We had hoped" (Luke 24:31 N.I.V.). Think about what that means. Before the death of Jesus they had hope. They believed that he was the Messiah, the Chosen One of God who would lead the people of Israel in victory and restore the nation to its former glory. However, that hope evaporated with the crucifixion of Christ. After all, he could not lead the people from the grave and God would not allow his Chosen One to die.

We do not know what the disciples did on Saturday. We can assume that, since it was the Sabbath, most of them went to the synagogue to worship. What kind of worship experience would that have been? How do you sing praises to a God who has shattered all of your hopes and dreams? What would their prayers have been like? What do you say to God when you are in great pain and life seems pointless?

These are questions that all of us ask from time to time, for we all have times when the disillusionment, the doubt, the disappointment and the despair sink in. We can deal with the Fridays when tragedy strikes because the shock dulls the pain and

our activities take our mind off what has really happened to us, but how do we deal with the Saturdays? I am convinced that much of life is lived between tragedy and triumph – between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Saturday can last a long time. For me it was three long years of pain. The stress also took a toll on my health. I caught just about every virus that came along especially during the cold months of December and January. You can just imagine how cold and windy weather feels on a sore neck. I went to one football game and paid dearly for it. I ended up giving my season tickets away for a couple of games. Eventually I even gave up my job. I was taking so much sick time that it was not fair to my employer.

We all experience some pain from time to time. We exercise more than we should and our muscles ache. We rush to meet deadlines and our head throbs. We skip a meal and our stomach growls. We forget to floss or brush our teeth and we sit in a dentist's chair. These types of pain usually last only a short time. We can easily cope with that kind of pain and, if we have trouble coping with it, then we can take pain killers and it will go away. However, some pain does not go away so easily. I know that, for many people, Saturday can go on for a very long time, even a lifetime. Some pain simply never goes away. How do you cope when the pain is excruciating and pain killers do not help much?

Not all pain is physical. Emotional pain can hurt worse than physical pain. This type of pain is common to all of us as well. Who of us has never been misunderstood? Who of us has never been lonely? Who of us has never been rejected or ignored? Who of us has never been abused or ridiculed? Who of us has never been separated from a loved one? Who of us has never been anxious or depressed? Although emotional pain is not so easily dealt with using by pain killers, it often goes away quickly as well. However, for some, this pain lasts an incredibly long time. Often physical and emotional pain go together. It has been that way for me. Normally I have recovered quickly from any illnesses and injuries that I have suffered. That is why I expected to be back soon after the accident, but it did not work out that

way. It was very frustrating to feel so weak and helpless. I went to a counsellor who helped a great deal. However, I cannot help but think of others who have been injured worse. Even at the worst of times I have been able to take care of my own basic needs. No one had to bathe me or brush my teeth. How must it feel for people who have been paralyzed?

Fortunately, I am not a person who gets depressed easily. Even when I do experience bouts of depression, they do not last very long. However, the same is not true for anxiety. I know that I am supposed to cast all of my anxiety on God, but it is not easy. When I was with World Vision, I often felt a little ill just before I was about to travel. Now, it is worse. When I am about to start a new job, I get very anxious the night before I start. I often have trouble sleeping, particularly if I have to get up early in the morning.

There are many different kinds of pain. There is physical and emotional pain. There is acute and chronic pain. Most of us can deal with physical pain. It is the emotional pain that really hurts. Also, most of us can deal with acute pain. It is much easier to deal with something that we know will end soon. How do we deal with pain that seemingly will never go away? My intention in this book is to deal with the many varieties of chronic emotional pain – feelings like rejection and loneliness that plague our hearts and souls. How do we deal with this kind of pain?

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:17, “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” That is why I am writing this book. We all need to know that we are not alone in our pain. We also need to be reminded that suffering is part of life. It is an essential part of God’s refining work in us. All believers experience some emotional pain, even the giants of faith – people who do great works in the name of God. In fact, I believe that their pain is greater than the rest of us.

The Bible is full of stories of men and women who struggled with this kind of pain. Their stories can be a comfort to us. Knowing that someone else went through a similar experience

and survived can be a great help. Let us look at these individuals and their stories and see how they encourage us in our pain.

The people of God throughout history have found solace from emotional pain through poetry. Some have vented their emotions in poems. The Psalms are one evidence of that. Much of the book of Job is also poetry and there are other instances in Scripture as well. Fortunately, many of the modern translations of the Bible point that out for us. Many Christians have found relief by writing and/or singing hymns or choruses. The apostle Paul exhorted his readers to “Speak to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians 5:19). He knew the emotional healing power of poetry. While I have no musical talent, and thus cannot even sing, let alone write songs, God has enabled me to write poetry. This has helped me with my emotional pain. That is one reason why many of the following chapters include a poem written by me on the subject of the chapter. It is my hope that these poems might bring you some emotional solace. Here is one that I wrote on my greatest emotional problem: anxiety.

WORRY

Why does anxiety fill my mind,
When Jesus has always been so kind?
Why is it that I often borrow,
Trouble that belongs to tomorrow?

I know I should cast my care on him,
But sometimes my hope grows very dim.
If I want to find peace I must,
Find someone solid that I can trust.

Jesus, please come and calm all my fears.
May your near presence dry up my tears.
May a true sense of awe and wonder,
Replace all the darkness I ponder.

Chapter 2: The Pain of Silence - Job

Most of life is lived between tragedy and triumph. Often we have little trouble dealing with tragedies when they come. Our friends and relatives comfort us. But what do we do when our friends have left and the pain is still there? The time for mourning is over and we are supposed to get on with life, but we find it difficult. We still feel empty inside and no one seems to care anymore. Most, if not all, of us have had that kind of experience.

There are many different kinds of pain, many different “Saturday” experiences. One thing that makes these experiences more painful is the feeling that you are all alone, that no one knows or even cares how you feel. One of the purposes of this book is to let you know that you are not alone. Many people, including some of the great heroes of the faith, have had similar experiences. By examining how they dealt with their pain and how God helped them in their sorrow, we can find relief from our anguish.

Let us begin with one of the first and greatest sufferers in the Bible, Job. No one knows for sure who wrote the Book of Job or when it was written, but we do know the person Job lived a long time ago. The events recorded in the book took place during the patriarchal age, perhaps even before the time of Abraham, certainly before the time of Moses. None of the Bible had been written at that time.

The story of Job is well known. He was a rich and powerful, God-fearing man. He had a beautiful family and a wonderful life. However, Satan, with God’s permission, took it all away. He first took his wealth and his children. Then he took his health. Job responded to the first set of trials by falling down and worshipping God. Let us examine his response to the second set of trials.

For some of us the most painful part of Job’s experience would have been the loss of his great wealth. In our materialistic age, a great deal of importance is put on possessions. For more of us the most painful part of Job’s experience would have been the

loss of his children. We love our families and the thought of losing them grieves us deeply. For some of us the most painful part of Job's experience would have been the loss of his health. This was the final trial and the one thing that Satan thought would finally break Job. However, none of these losses, painful though they were, was the greatest trial for Job. The most painful part of his experience was the silence.

The first people to comfort you when you are in pain usually are your immediate family, your spouse and your children. That is one of the reasons why God instituted the family. God himself said, "It is not good for the man to be alone..." (Genesis 2:18). He knew that there are times when we need someone close by to comfort and console us. After all, who is closer than family?

However, Job did not have that comfort, that consolation. His children died when the house in which they were feasting collapsed on them (Job 2:19). Job cared deeply for his children. He sacrificed for them and he prayed for them (Job 1:5). He would have felt their loss deeply. Normally they would have been among the first to comfort him when he lost his possessions. However, he lost them as well. Their voices of comfort and consolation were silenced. This was the first silence that Job felt – the silence of family.

The silence of family can be very painful. Has your spouse ever given you the "silent treatment"? We all need to hear words of encouragement and love from our families. When those voices are silenced, whether it is because of distance, loss or estrangement, the pain is great. Imagine how Job must have felt at this time.

Job's family was not totally silent. Satan took his children, but spared his wife. However, she was not a voice of comfort to Job either. Instead of speaking words of encouragement, she spoke words of bitterness. She said, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" We do not know what kind of a woman Job's wife was, so we do not know what to make of her response. It is possible that she had lost her faith and was taunting Job to give up on life and give up on God. Or it may be that she just saw death as the only way out of Job's misery. In

either case, she had given way to bitterness and defeat, which is what Job refused to do. Despite all that happens to Job, he never gives up on life (although he did wish for death) and he never gives up on God.

How do you feel when you experience the silence or bitterness of loved ones? How do you respond? Do you give in to despair or do you cling to faith in God? Job clung to his faith in the midst of very severe trials and tribulations. Will you do the same?

After your immediate family, the next best source of comfort and consolation is your friends. Job had three good friends. They came from some distance away to be with him when they heard of his plight. They each came from a different country and met together before going to see him. We do not know what they said when they met together, but we do know what they said when they first met Job in his pitiable condition – absolutely nothing. At first, they had trouble recognizing their friend because he was so disfigured by whatever disease Satan had afflicted him with. When they did recognize him, they wept, they tore their robes and they sprinkled dust on their heads, but they did not speak. They uttered no words of encouragement or consolation for seven days and seven nights (Job 2:13).

Thus, Job was faced with another silence. Apparently, no one would bring him words of encouragement and consolation. No one would try to ease his pain. The silence of his family turned into words of bitterness. The silence of his friends turned into words of accusation. His friends, one after another, charged him with sin. Since all suffering is the result of sin and Job was suffering terribly, therefore, Job must have committed some vial sin. Finally, Eliphaz even started suggesting sins that Job might have committed: “Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless? You demanded security from your brothers for no reason; you stripped men of their clothing, leaving them naked” (Job 22:6f). These accusations were obviously no comfort to Job. While their initial silence was painful, these accusations were worse. He cried out to his friends, “If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom” (Job 13:5).

Unfortunately, Job's experience is unusual only in its intensity. I would like to tell you that the Christian Church is a wonderful support network where people who have experiences like Job find comfort and consolation from their friends in the church. I would like to tell you that, but I cannot. All too often, when a Christian is in pain, particularly if it is emotional or mental pain, all he hears from his brothers and sisters in Christ is silence at best. Often he hears accusations like, "If you really had faith in Christ, then you would be healed." That is about the only difference between the Christians of today and Job's friends. Instead of questioning his righteousness, we would question his faith. Either way it amounts to kicking him while he is down. Someone once said that the Christian army is the only army in the world that shoots its own wounded.

What is your attitude to those in pain around you? Many Christians are hurting today in one way or another. Most of us have little trouble comforting those in obvious physical pain. But what about those who are suffering from some kind of mental illness? Do we encourage them and pray for them? How about those many people today who are suffering from stress? How do we respond to their pain? Do we tell them that they should have taken better care of their bodies? Do we quote verses of Scripture that tell them to rely upon God? Or do we provide genuine heartfelt words of encouragement and comfort?

The most painful silence for Job was not the silence of his family which turned to bitterness or even the silence of his friends which turned to accusations, but the silence of God. Job had a vital relationship with God. He said in Job 29:4, "Oh, for the days when I was in my prime, when God's intimate friendship blessed my house."

Job understandably felt that God had abandoned him. To Job, the silence was a deafening blow, a tortuous breach in his relationship with the God he loved. Job wanted vindication. He longed for some response from God that would make sense of what had happened to him. He desperately wanted to plead his case directly with God. He says in Job 9:33-35, "If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us

both, someone to remove God's rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot." He also said in Job 23:3-5, "If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say." Again he said in Job 24:1, "Why does the Almighty not set times for judgment? Why must those who know him look in vain for such days?"

The silence of God is difficult to endure, especially for someone who has had an intimate relationship with him. God did eventually break his silence and answer Job, but he never did explain why Job was afflicted. He reminded Job that he could never comprehend the mysteries of the universe. A full explanation of things would be beyond his grasp. God did vindicate Job by saying that he had spoken rightly while his friends had not (Job 42:7). Job, at least, had that satisfaction. God also blessed Job with health, wealth and family again. However, Job never did get a full explanation of his suffering.

How do we deal with the silence of God? We see injustice all around us and God does not appear to be dealing with it as we would like. Do we insist on answers to life's questions or do we realize that God's thoughts are beyond our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9)? Do we trust God for our eventual vindication or do we demand answers here and now? True faith waits for the final answer.

Eventually every one of us is going to suffer in one way or another. Some of you may be suffering now. How we deal with our pain shows our faith. Can we trust God to take us through the trials that come our way or do we demand instant relief? Can we deal with the silence of family and friends in our anguish? Can we deal with the bitterness and accusations of those around us? More importantly, can we deal with the silence of God while we wait for an answer? This is the ultimate test of faith – the silence of God. How strong is your faith? How strong is mine?

SILENCE

I am sitting here all alone,
And yet I am far from alone.
My wife and my God are with me,
Yet neither is speaking to me.

My wife is silently asleep.
But my God is never asleep,
So why doesn't he speak to me?
Why does he leave me so lonely?

Why does silence rule this planet,
When we have phones and Internet?
Even though words are plenty,
All our sentences are empty.

Everyone asks, "How are you?"
While they're sipping their morning brew.
An honest answer would surprise,
So no one ever really tries.

It would be nice to discover,
How we can talk to each other.
Then there would not be so much strife,
Filling each and every life.

What if God wanted to talk to us?
Would we have something to discuss?
Or would we just whine and complain,
And talk about all of our pain?

Would we hear what he has to say?
Do we stop to listen when we pray?
Would we recognize his voice,
If speaking to us was his choice?

Maybe God's silence is our fault.
We'd hear if we all called a halt,
To our ever increasing pace,
That now has plagued the human race.

Chapter 3: The Pain of Grief - Mary and Martha

There is another type of pain that we all experience at one time or another. This is the pain of grief. John 11 relates the wonderful story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. This incident took place not long before Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. In fact, it would appear that this miracle was a key factor in the decision to have Jesus put to death. This story is found only in John's gospel. The other gospels relate two other examples of Jesus raising the dead: Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:22-43 and the widow's son in Luke 7:11-17. However, in neither case had the victim been clearly dead for so long. This miracle unmistakably showed Jesus' power over death and Hell. That is why Jesus, despite his love for Mary, Martha and Lazarus stayed where he was for two days after he heard the news of Lazarus' illness. If we did not know the whole story, then Jesus' delay would seem cruel and uncaring to us. When tough circumstances come into our lives, we never know the whole story. That is why we often think that God is cold and uncaring when he does not respond immediately to our cries for help.

However, I will not focus on the resurrection of Lazarus, as significant an event as that was. Instead I will focus on the grief that Martha and Mary experienced when their beloved brother died. Grief is a very common experience. Sooner or later we all lose a loved one. One Italian proverb says, "He who would have no trouble in this world must not be born in it." Some of us have had many grieving experiences. Some time ago a man called Arthur wrote a book entitled *The Grieving Indian* which related his personal experience of grief and awakened the world to the grief that our aboriginal people share.

There are some who think that Christians are not supposed to grieve. After all, 1 Thessalonians 4:13 says, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." However, Paul did not say that we are not supposed to grieve, but that we are not to grieve like those who have no hope. We can have confidence that those who have died in Christ will live forever with him, but

that does not mean that we will not miss them. Since death is inevitable, grieving is a normal part of life. It does not mean that we lack faith. It is an expression of love for the departed.

Sometimes grief can be a very lonely experience. We want someone to share our pain and comfort us, but this does not always happen. This makes the agony of separation all that much more intense. However, when we are joined in our sorrow, the experience can be very uplifting.

Mary and Martha had each other to share in the suffering. They also had other sources of comfort to ease their sorrow. We have these same sources of comfort available to us today.

Mary and Martha not only had each other in their time of loss, they had others around them as well. Verse 31 mentions that there were people with Mary when she heard the news that Jesus had come to visit them. It also mentions that they were comforting her. That is why we have funerals. People who have experienced loss often need people around them to comfort them in their sorrow. When Mary got up to go to Jesus, the crowd of comforters followed her. They thought that she was going to the tomb of her brother, Lazarus, to mourn there and they were willing to follow her to accompany her in her grief. They had good intentions, but they were probably wrong. Mary was not going to the tomb, but to Jesus, and she probably wanted to be alone with him. When we comfort the grieving, we must be sensitive to their needs. Do they want company at this time or not? When my co-worker's husband passed away, I dropped off some cheese cake. I did not stay to visit because she was already swamped with company. After the funeral she talked to me several times about the loss of her husband and, hopefully, I was some comfort to her then. All too often we gather around the mourning at the time of the funeral and ignore them afterwards. I know from personal experience that this can be quite painful. When we are comforting those who are grieving, we must be wise in what we say and when we say it.

In Jesus' day, as many people as possible attended a funeral. Jewish funerals used to be elaborate and expensive until the time of a Rabbi named Gamaliel II. He gave orders that he was to be

buried in the simplest linen robe. Many Jews today still remember him for this great gesture. Funerals today often last an hour with maybe an hour or two for the committal service and the lunch afterward. Then, the deep mourning lasted for seven days, the first three of which were weeping. This period of deep mourning was followed by thirty days of lighter mourning. During the time of mourning, everyone was expected to express their deepest sympathy. In fact, it was considered a sacred duty to express loving sympathy with sorrowing friends. Thus, Martha and Mary had many people around them to console them in their anguish. This was important then and it is still important today. We must consider it our sacred duty as well to console those who are grieving.

Martha and Mary were indeed blessed. Not only did they have many family and friends to comfort them, they had Jesus as well. Verse five says, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." The heading for this section in the NIV Bible says, "Jesus Comforts the Sisters." Too often when we read this chapter in John we skim this part so that we can get to the good part where Jesus raises Lazarus. That is a mistake. This is a good part as well. We learn about the power of Jesus when he raised Lazarus. We learn about the heart of Jesus when he comforted the sisters.

When Martha heard that Jesus had come to her town she went out to meet him. Mary stayed home. It is possible that Mary had not heard of Jesus' arrival yet. Martha's first words to Jesus were, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." These words express both her sadness at her loss and her faith in the power of Jesus to heal. Jesus spoke words of comfort to her that she did not understand. Jesus was often misunderstood even by those who loved him. Martha was like most of us. She had some faith. She believed that Jesus could heal the sick. She also believed that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah, the Christ. She even believed that he was the Son of God. She believed in a future resurrection. However, the thought never crossed her mind that Jesus would raise her brother from the dead that day.

When Mary went to Jesus, her first words to him were the same as her sister's. Like most of us, both of them had expected an immediate response from their cry for help. Evidently Mary had the same limited faith as Martha. When Jesus saw her and those with her weeping, he was deeply moved. Jesus' compassion is very evident here. John 11:35, the shortest verse in the Bible, says, "Jesus wept." Tears of sympathy filled his eyes. God Incarnate, the Living Word, wept in public. He was the perfect man and yet he was not ashamed to cry in public. So deeply did Jesus enter into their sorrows, that his heart was wrung with passion. Jesus suffered much agony of spirit as he approached the grave of his friend with tears in his eyes. Here we get a glimpse into the heart of God. Jesus showed us a God whose heart is wrung with anguish for the anguish of his people. We must never view God as a distant Creator; instead we must view him as a loving Father who cares deeply for his children.

As Christians we are truly blessed. Not only do we have family and friends to comfort us in our grief, we have Jesus as well. Remember that Jesus knows and understands our pain. He walked this earth as a man. He knew the sorrow of the passing of a loved one. By the time he entered his ministry, his earthly father, Joseph, was gone. He also had suffered the loss of his friend and relative, John the Baptist. Thus, Jesus knows the pain we feel. This should be a great comfort to us in our sorrow.

In the Old Testament, the concept of the resurrection was not yet developed. The ancient Hebrews believed in an after life, but it was a kind of shadowy existence. The place of the dead was called Sheol or Hades. This existence is what is portrayed in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. There was some belief in the resurrection of the body, but it developed later and was not widespread. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees believed in the resurrection, but the Sadducees did not. Martha evidently ascribed to the Pharisees' belief, at least in some form. However, her belief in the resurrection at the last day does not appear to be wholehearted and enthusiastic. In times of bereavement, sorrow dims the prospect of future bliss.

Jesus took her partial belief and reorientated it. When Martha said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day," Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life" (verses 24, 25). In effect, Jesus said, "Take your focus off your doctrines and creeds and focus on me. Trust in me." This is important. What you believe is not nearly as important as whom you believe in. The belief in the person of Christ is the rock on which the Church of Christ is built. Both Peter and Martha knew Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God. They did not fully understand his mission and purpose, but they did know who he was. That is what was important then and that is what is important now.

We must remember that the raising of Lazarus was not an isolated miracle, but a decisive instance and clear symbol of Jesus' conquest of death and Hell. This was the ultimate comfort that Jesus brought Martha and Mary. He not only restored Lazarus to them in a powerful and miraculous way, but he also showed them that he had total authority over death. After all, Lazarus did die again. We do not know whether or not he outlived his sisters so we do not know whether they grieved again or not, but that is not important. Certainly they lost loved ones again. Death is an unmistakable fact of life. However, now they knew for sure that Jesus had conquered death.

Paul, in 1 Thessalonians 4:13, wrote, "Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope." Christians should not grieve like others. We lose loved ones from time to time and they leave an emptiness behind. Therefore, we do experience sorrow and loss. However, we have hope. We have the promise that those who have repented of their sins and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour will rise again. We know that Jesus conquered death and Hell for us. He showed it when he raised Lazarus from the dead and he showed it again when he rose from the dead.

The death of a loved one can be very painful. There is a gaping hole left behind. Experiencing sorrow and anguish at that time is normal, natural and good. However, we have many

sources of comfort to ease the pain and loneliness. We have the comfort of family and friends who love us and want to console us. They may not say the right things at the right time, but they do show that they care, and that is what counts. In times of grief we must show others that we care as well. We also have the presence of Jesus. We know that he cares and understands how we feel. We know that God feels our anguish and pain and wants to comfort us as well. We must lean on him in times of loss. Finally, we have the promise of the resurrection. We know that for the committed Christian, death is not the end, but the beginning. Jesus conquered death for us. This means that we will see our loved ones again in heaven if we have both repented of our sins and confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Do you have that hope? Are you trusting in Jesus now or are you grieving without hope? You can have hope now if you commit your life to him.

Not all losses are the same. When someone who has had a long and happy life and was a committed Christian dies, the loss is easier to bear than when someone is cut down in the prime of life. When a loved one has had a long and painful illness, we might even be relieved that he is in the presence of the Lord. However, when a tragic accident suddenly takes a loved one, we feel quite differently. Probably the hardest loss to bear is when we lose a loved one to suicide. A few years ago, I was asked to officiate at a funeral for such an occasion. I wrote the following poem to express our feelings at that moment.

MIKE

We do not know the reason why,
We have gathered to say, "Good-bye."
We did not understand your pain,
Or what you thought you might gain.

We all know that it is quite sad,
You tried hard to be a good Dad.
Yet life dealt you such a cruel blow,
And today we all miss you so.

Now we do not know what to say,
To Laureen and your sons today.
We would like to bring words of cheer,
To try to diminish their fear.

At least your sons have a mother,
And we can comfort each other.
Let us surround them with our love,
And let us trust in God above.

We send you to God's loving care
He knows the pain you could not bear.
If we just turn in faith to Him,
Then the hurt will someday grow dim.

Chapter 4: The Pain of Injustice - Habakkuk

Injustice is an issue that we all must deal with at one time or another. Who among us has never cried out, “That’s not fair!”? We have been victims of injustice. Your sister may have gotten a bigger piece of cake than you did. The referee may have made a bad call against your favourite team. Your boss may have promoted someone else when you deserved it more. You may have been afflicted with a terrible disease. You may have tragically lost a loved one. I bet that at least one of these examples of injustice has happened to you. Most of them have happened to me.

When I was with World Vision Canada, I did many different presentations in schools and churches. I enjoyed them all, but my favourite one was the Poverty Simulation Game. The students pretended to be poor, struggling farmers in a developing country. What I did not tell them before the game, but they soon realized during the game, was that the rules were stacked against them. One of the purposes of the simulation was to teach them that life is not fair, that there are many examples of injustice in the world.

Sooner or later, you are going to be a victim of injustice. How are you going to handle it? How are you supposed to handle it? The Bible definitely deals with the subject in its many forms. The Book of Job deals with the suffering of the righteous. There are many other passages that deal with the prosperity of the wicked. Asaph deals with the subject in Psalm 73. Jeremiah complains about it in Jeremiah 12. However, the best treatment of the subject is found in the Book of Habakkuk. In fact, injustice is exactly what the book is about.

Habakkuk is an unusual and fascinating book. Usually when we think about prophets we think of them as bringing God’s message to their fellow man. Habakkuk instead took his people’s message to God. Habakkuk loved God, but he was prepared, as few others would be, to question him about the rightness of his actions. Most believers, at one time or another, have had their doubts. Some have even questioned him. However, few have ever dared to openly debate with him as Job did. Habakkuk even

went beyond that to challenging God. How could anyone dare to challenge God? Why would such a challenge be recorded so faithfully in God's Word, the Bible? Well, believe it or not, God is not afraid of a challenge. He is not threatened by our questions. In fact, instead of rebuking Habakkuk as some would have done, he answered his questions and made sure that both Habakkuk's questions and his answers were recorded in his Word.

Many Christians believe that it is wrong to question God. However, is it not better to be honest with God? We all have feelings and questions. We can either express them or suppress them. God knows our hearts. Why pretend that everything is fine with us when he knows different?

We know almost nothing about the man, Habakkuk. We do know that he lived in a very ominous time in Judah. We also know that his name traditionally means, "to caress, embrace or wrestle." His parents probably gave him that name in the hope that he and/or his people would embrace God. However, although Habakkuk did embrace God, we know him more for his wrestling with God. In his wrestling with God about the prosperity of the wicked, he learned some truths about injustice that we could all take to heart.

The book begins with a lament or psalm of complaint where a need is described and help is sought from God. From Habakkuk's viewpoint what was happening around him did not make sense. He expressed an attitude that many people of God have had. He was perturbed by the violence and injustice in his society. After all, if God does not punish the wicked and reward the righteous, then why be righteous? Habakkuk's understanding of God and his purposes meant that God should be utterly appalled at the violence and oppression in the land of Judah and should be actively involved in putting an end to it. The prophet believed that Yahweh, his God, was a God of justice and righteousness. Therefore, he could not think of him failing to deal with the obvious wickedness that reigned in his nation of Judah. However, the evil continued unabated and unpunished. The poor people of God were being continually oppressed. The

severity of the oppression is indicated by the piling up of synonyms of injustice. The continued injustice resulted in the law being paralysed. The law which should have acted as a brake against oppression lost its effectiveness because it was no longer being observed by the nation. This reminds me of the time when stores were forbidden by law to be open on Sunday. Every Sunday West Edmonton Mall was opened. The merchants were charged and fined, but the fines were so small that the merchants just counted them as a cost of doing business and opened again the next Sunday. The law was powerless to stop them.

Habakkuk had cried for help in the past and continued to do so in the present. Habakkuk 2:1 says, "How long, o LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?" The Hebrew word rendered, "Violence!" means wrong and harm, both physical and ethical. Habakkuk was seeking an answer to a profound philosophical question, "If God really exists, then why does he allow violence?" This question is still being debated today. I remember dealing with it in my Philosophy of Religion class in Bible College.

This question has some answers. Since evil reigns in every heart, in order for God to eliminate injustice, he would have to destroy the whole world as he did in the time of the Flood. Obviously, we do not want him to do that because our best friends live here. We forget that we are not only victims of injustice, but we are also perpetrators of injustice. From time to time we have taken the bigger piece of cake. Therefore, God must deal with us if he deals with injustice. However, he is patient with us. That is why injustice abounds and always will be with us. This reminds me of a time when I was doing another presentation for World Vision. This presentation dealt with the human causes of hunger. Toward the end of the presentation I asked the class for the one word that would sum up all of the causes. That word was *greed* and I remarked that all we would have to do to eliminate hunger is eliminate greed. One student commented that this would mean he would first have to deal with his own greed.

When Job questioned God about his suffering he received a response from God that does not really answer his questions. God never did tell Job why he suffered. However, when Habakkuk asked God why injustice prevailed in Judah, he did receive a direct answer. Habakkuk was informed that an unprecedented event was about to take place by the hand of God. Those looking on the scene would be dumbfounded by what they saw. God told him that the wicked oppressors would be punished. In fact, he even revealed to Habakkuk how they would be punished. He informed the prophet that he had chosen the Babylonians to dispense his justice. These Babylonians had the power to deal severely with the wicked in Judah because they had a ruthlessly efficient army. This reminded Habakkuk that God is sovereign over the whole earth. Even nations and individuals that do not serve him or even know him ultimately do his will.

Understandably, this answer raises more questions in the prophet's mind. In Habakkuk's thinking, the "cure" of Babylon is worse than the "disease" of Judah's sin. In his mind he could find no justification for the course of God's action. How could God use the Babylonians who were even more wicked than the people of Judah? How could he use the heathen to punish his own covenant people? Why punish oppressors with worse oppressors? This reminds me of George Orwell's story, "*Animal Farm*." The farmer was oppressing the animals so they had a revolution and the pigs took over. Unfortunately, the pigs turned out to be more oppressive than the farmer.

We do not always understand how God works. Like Job and Habakkuk, we have questions. We see injustice and oppression around us and it disturbs us. Often we are unfairly treated, at least in our eyes. Sometimes it seems that God is not doing anything to right the wrongs that abound, but God is at work. We do not always see his hand, but that does not mean he is inactive. Just because God does not respond when and how we like does not mean that he is not concerned about, or that he does not care about injustice. God does deal with injustice and oppression in many different ways. Often God surprises us just as he surprised Habakkuk. Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is being sure of what

we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” Faith means trusting that God is at work even though there is no apparent evidence of his activity.

When Habakkuk did not like the answer to his first question, he asked another. He asked God how could use the Babylonians. He said, “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?” (Habakkuk 1:13). The Hebrew word translated “look” means to regard favourably. Habakkuk did not understand why God would use such an unholy instrument, so he asked God. He then said that he would wait for the answer from God. Like a watchman peering from his watchtower, he would look for the response to his latest complaint.

God did answer Habakkuk’s second complaint as well. He instructed Habakkuk to write down the revelation. The inscription on tablets was to be made in plain writing. It was to be legible and written in well-defined letters large enough to be read at a glance. Its message would not have an immediate effect. It would happen at the appointed time. Habakkuk, like most if not all of us wanted a response right away, but he was told to wait for the fulfilment of the prophecy. However, while the fulfilment would be delayed, Habakkuk could still count on it coming to pass.

Faith means waiting for the fulfilment of God’s promises. Remember, “God is never late, but seldom early.” That is why faithfulness, firmness, steadfastness and fidelity is the way to live. Habakkuk 2:4 which is quoted three times in the New Testament says, “The righteous will live by his faith.” In Habakkuk the triumph of faithfulness is contrasted with the arrogant restlessness of the wicked. While the righteous man will live by his faith, those possessing the attributes of the Babylonians have no future. As Habakkuk 2:4 says, “Woe to him who piles up stolen goods and makes himself wealthy by extortion!” The wicked may prosper in the short term, but their doom is sure. Asaph discovered the same truth in Psalm 73:16, 17: “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me

till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.” The righteous who place their faith in Christ may suffer in the short term as Job did, but their final destiny is glorification. They will live forever with their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The wicked may prosper in the short term like the Babylonians, but their final destiny is destruction.

Injustice always has been a part of life and always will be until Jesus comes again to take us home. Injustice abounds because we live in a sinful world. We may complain when we are victims of injustice, but we tend to gloss over the times when we are perpetrators of injustice. Life is not fair because our hearts are evil and we exploit one another in many different ways. In order for God to eliminate injustice from the world, he must change all of our hearts. That will not happen until we are conformed to the image of his Son.

God deals with injustice in many different ways. He is sovereign over the whole universe and can use many different people and nations to accomplish his purposes, even if those people and nations do not even know him. The ways that God deals with injustice and oppression do not always seem right to us as they did not always seem right to Habakkuk, but as Isaiah 55:8 says, “God’s ways are higher than our ways. We do not understand how he works and we never will because we know only in part.” (1 Corinthians 13:12).

God’s timing is different from ours. He is much more patient than we are. We want him to act right away and he is willing to wait. Sometimes it looks like he is not concerned with our problems because he does not appear to be acting on them. Faith means trusting in him in those times. Faith means depending upon God to ultimately bring vindication and justice. Those who live by faith will ultimately win the victory and the wicked will eventually be punished, but we do not know when this will happen. We must wait in faith.

We must also remember that Jesus, our Lord and our example, was a victim of injustice. He was falsely accused, tried and convicted as a common criminal. He silently bore the injustice for our sakes. Isaiah 53:7, 9 expresses this beautifully: “He was

oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ... He was assigned a grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth.” He silently bore the injustice that was inflicted upon him in order that we might receive mercy instead of the justice that is due us. Isaiah 53:4-6 relates that wonderful truth in a powerful way: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The petty injustices that we complain about daily are nothing compared to the injustice that was inflicted upon our Saviour. Finally, when we cry out against injustice we must contemplate what true justice would really mean. If God was just with us instead of merciful we would all be bound for Hell. Do we want that?

INJUSTICE

I watched the game the other day,
Something to while the time away,
The official made a bad call,
His mistake cost my team the ball.

Sometimes such things make me quite sad,
Or else, they make me fairly mad.
You think that I could simply trust
The referee to do what's just.

However, he's only human,
He is doing the best he can.
And it's true everywhere,
That life's never been very fair.

Justice does not always prevail,
Even the best of us can fail,
To do what we know to be right,
Though we try with all of our might.

Some years ago on Calvary,
They hung a man upon a tree.
He was innocent as could be,
Yet through him the guilty go free.

He came, the victory to win
He paid the price for mankind's sin,
We did not get what we deserved,
Yet God's justice was somehow served.

So when things do not go our way,
And we are so tempted to say,
That our life should always be fair,
Think that he came, our sins to bear.

Chapter 5: The Pain of Estrangement - Joseph

In this book I have looked at various kinds of emotional pain and how believers in the Bible responded to it. Job was faced with the silence of his family, his friends and his God. Mary and Martha suffered grief at the loss of their brother, Lazarus. Habakkuk reacted to the injustice he saw all around him. These are all problems that are familiar to us. If you have not experienced this kind of pain before, then you at least know someone who has.

In this chapter we will examine another kind of emotional pain. It is also a very familiar type of pain although it goes by a relatively unfamiliar name, the pain of estrangement. It is interesting that, when I looked it up in the *Canadian Junior Dictionary* it was not even listed there. However, I found a multitude of references to it on the Internet. *The Hyper Dictionary* defines it as the feeling of being alienated from people or separation resulting from hostility and gives as synonyms words like alienation and disaffection. *Roget's II: The New Thesaurus, Third Edition* defines it as an interruption in friendly relations and gives as synonyms words like alienation, breach, break, disaffection, fissure, rent, schism, split. It is interesting that I found a website called www.estrangement.com which offered much information about estrangement. It defined estrangement as the act of breaking away from a previously friendly relationship or the state or feeling of being no longer friendly. It mentioned that the word is derived from the French word, *estranger*, which means to treat as a stranger.

All of us at one time or another have experienced some kind of estrangement. We may have forgotten our wife's birthday and received the "cold shoulder treatment." We may have disciplined one of our children too harshly and seen him go sulking into his or her room. Or the estrangement may have been more severe like the breaking off of an engagement or the total alienation of a child. We understand what it means to be estranged and it is not a pleasant feeling.

Of course, the deeper the attachment we have had to the person we are estranged from, the more painful the feelings of estrangement. No one can hurt you or make you more angry than someone you love deeply. When you are estranged from someone you love, there is a profound void in your life that is not easily filled. That painful feeling of emptiness and loss understandably makes you reluctant to risk getting hurt again. Many people who have been badly hurt build walls around themselves to protect them from further anguish. That means that they miss out on many of life's joys.

Of course, many people in the Bible experienced many different kinds of estrangement. However, the most notable example of estrangement in the Word of God is Joseph. His estrangement was probably worse than most of you will ever experience. Very few people have been hurt as badly as Joseph was, and it was his close family members who were responsible. Let us look at Joseph's experience.

Joseph was introduced as a specially chosen member of the family. His father's love was not equally given to all. Jacob learned nothing from his early experience of favouritism. He favoured his wife, Rachel, and her children more than his other wives and children. He put them at the back to protect them when he was fearful of his meeting with Esau. He gave Joseph the coat of many colours (Genesis 37:3) which was, at the very least, an ostentatious and provocative act. Did this coat indicate that he intended to give Joseph precedence over his brothers and make him the chieftain of the tribe? His brothers' reaction suggests that they thought that this was going to happen. Yet it seems that Jacob had no knowledge of his sons' animosity toward Joseph. This was the beginning of Joseph's estrangement. His brothers were jealous of him because he was the favoured son. He also had no mother to comfort him because she had died with the birth of Benjamin.

The situation which was already bad enough was made worse by Joseph's own actions. The favouritism of his father must have been a temptation to pride for Joseph. The dreams that Joseph had were wonderful, but Joseph, like most of us would have

done, considered himself and not God as the “hero” of the story. These dreams were not tales of human success, but of divine sovereignty. They were given to Joseph to show him that God was in charge of his life. However, Joseph foolishly and pridefully related them to his brothers and infuriated them even more. When I was in seminary, one of my counselling professors used to remark, “True statement, but is it helpful?” Nothing good was accomplished by Joseph relating the dreams to his brothers. Pondering them in his heart as Mary did later would have been the more prudent action.

Jacob’s favouritism and Joseph’s bragging made his brothers jealous. That is understandable. Their actions though, are not understandable. I am sure you all know the story of how Joseph ended up being sold as a slave into Egypt. The scene of the conspiracy took place a day’s journey from Shechem where Jacob was. Their cry, “Let’s get rid of him,” is the venting of their vexations. The plot to put Joseph out of the way, the substitution of slavery for death and the ghastly device of deceiving Jacob were perfectly natural steps in the course of crime once the brothers had set upon it.

This was the beginning of the road of anguish, frustration and uncertainty for Joseph. His dreams were signs from God that he would eventually be somebody, but now he was only a slave. Because of his father’s favouritism and his pride, he was estranged from his family seemingly with no hope of ever seeing his brothers or his father again. Indeed, it was more than twenty years before he saw any of them again. Think how he must have felt. He was separated from his father who loved him dearly. He was being carried off as a slave into an unknown land with no hope of ever returning.

This should be a warning to us. Favouritism and pride often lead to estrangement. Yet both of these are strong temptations in all of us. One child is often better behaved or more talented or better looking than the others and we are tempted to treat him or her as special. We are also tempted to flaunt our gifts and abilities. Remember what Ephesians 2:10 says, “... not by works, lest any man should boast.” God knows that we are all tempted

to boast. Therefore, we must be on our guard against both favouritism and pride because they are sins and because they lead to estrangement.

Joseph, the favoured son, became a lowly slave. However, Joseph made up his mind not to sulk or wallow in self pity, but to make the best of the situation. He ended up serving a man named Potiphar. We do not know what Joseph's tasks were, but we know that he served his master well, eventually gaining a position of great responsibility. He spent perhaps seven to nine years in Potiphar's house, growing in stature and appearance until Potiphar's wife set her eyes upon him. She made several advances, but he refused her. His refusal was twofold. One thought honoured the rights of the marriage partner and the other thought honoured the rights of God. By calling her proposition wickedness he made his stand clear. He also called it a sin against God as well as his master. Many times in the Bible we are commanded to faithfully serve those in authority over us. Thus, loyalty to our boss means loyalty to God unless, of course, he asks us to do something against God.

Joseph eventually had to flee to escape her advances. His flight, unlike a coward's, saved his honour at the cost of his prospects. 2 Timothy 2:22 tells us to flee from lust. When the greatest of temptations assailed Joseph, he came off victorious. He kept his integrity free at great risk. Now he could do nothing but trust God to eventually vindicate him even though his prospects did not look good. However, it could have been worse. Slaves who had committed heinous acts like the one that Joseph was accused of were normally executed. The fact that he was not immediately put to death is significant. His reprieve may have been due to the respect that he had won from his master or to Potiphar's mistrust of his wife, or both. Certainly Joseph's imprisonment took the temptation away from her. This partial deliverance was a sign that God was watching over Joseph. However, it must have been a frustrating time for him. He had gone from being a favoured son to a lowly slave, but he had worked his way up to a person of influence. Now he was at the bottom again. Instead of being a slave, he was a prisoner and a

servant of his fellow prisoners. How much lower could he go? How could his God-given dreams possibly be fulfilled?

Joseph had been estranged from his brothers partly due to his father's favouritism, partly due to his showy pride and partly due to their spiteful jealousy. Now he was estranged from his boss due to his master's wife's wickedness. He had served Potiphar faithfully and well, but now he was separated from him. He had kept his integrity and he had refused to dishonour God, but he had lost his position of honour.

Joseph spent some time in prison, more than two years. He was compelled to wait for his deliverance and to depend upon God to eventually deliver him even though that seemed incredibly unlikely. Once again Joseph made the most of the situation instead of wallowing in self-pity. We must remember not to dwell on past misfortunes, but to make the most of our present circumstances. While in prison, he interpreted the dreams of two of his fellow prisoners, the butler and the baker. There was a common belief in Egypt that dreams were predictive and a body of writings grew up on the art of interpreting them. Joseph, as a prisoner, of course had no access to these writings, but he did not need them. God gave him the ability to interpret dreams. His interpretation of the prison dreams and their predicted outcomes certified him as a divine spokesperson. Joseph asked the butler to mention him to the Pharaoh, but the butler forgot. Joseph's attempt to help God along in the fulfilment of his dreams did not work. However, God, who had given Joseph his dreams, was working toward their fulfilment.

All the events in Joseph's life constitute one of the most majestic and Godlike movements of providence in history. At least two years after his release, the butler remembered his own experience in jail and tells Pharaoh about Joseph. Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams and was elevated to the highest position in the land. This seems strange to us. How could a man go from being a lowly prisoner to a prime minister in a matter of hours? However, the history of "kings' favourites" is too well known to make the elevation of Joseph incredible. Nelson Mandela went from being a prisoner to ruling the country.

However, the whole thing must have been a shock to Joseph. He would have thought that the butler had forgotten him, which he had. We regard all of the events from the standpoint of full revelation, but Joseph would not have known or understood what was happening to him, at least at first. However, Joseph had to wait nine more years following his exaltation before his brothers stood before him. During that time he received a wife from Pharaoh who bore him two sons. The names of these two sons reveal to us Joseph's attitude while he was in Egypt. Manasseh means forgetting. Joseph realized that he must forget the land of his birth, Canaan and concentrate on making the most of the situation in Egypt. Ephraim means fruitful and Joseph was determined to be fruitful in Egypt.

The long testing of his brothers has been the subject of much discussion and the most ingenious arguments for the justification of Joseph. This justification is unnecessary. Joseph was not perfect and the Bible makes no claims of perfection for him. Some of his actions may have been harsh and wrong, but that is not the point. The point is that God was using him to bring about the deliverance of his people. The certainty that God's will and not man's was directing the course of history was Joseph's guiding light. His brothers were quick to see God's hand in his actions even before they knew that he was their brother.

Joseph eventually forgave his brothers and provided for them. Pharaoh's words were the royal confirmation to Joseph's plans. However, the real planner was God. God's providence required the presence of Jacob and his clan in Egypt and God orchestrated the events of history to bring this about. Joseph's dreams were fulfilled, even though their fulfilment seemed unlikely if not impossible.

Joseph became estranged from his brothers due to his father's favouritism, his own pride and their jealousy. He became estranged from his master due to his master's wife's wickedness. However, he never became estranged from his God. God never deserted him even though at times it looked like he had. The events of Joseph's life are a clear indication of that. They are strange but providential.

Joseph's experience was unusual only in its intensity. Many people throughout history have been estranged from their families. Many people are today. Perhaps you are experiencing some estrangement from your family. Also, many people have been estranged from their bosses. This is particularly true today. There is a considerable amount of stress in the workplace today and employers are making greater and greater demands while showing less and less loyalty and consideration. However, what was true of Joseph is still true of God's people today. No matter how much estrangement you experience in life, you will never be estranged from your God. Jesus said in Matthew 28:20: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." God promised in Hebrews 13:5: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Romans 8:38, 39 says that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Life may deal us many severe blows just as it did for Joseph. We may end up estranged from our families and from others, but we will never be estranged from God, just as Joseph was never estranged from him. He will always be with us. He will always work things out for our good (Romans 8:28). He will never forsake us even though everyone else does. Nothing can ever separate us from his love. We can have the confidence to make the most of our circumstances, whatever they may be, just as Joseph did because we know that God's providence will direct our lives just as it did for Joseph. Let us go forth boldly in the name of Jesus who is with us always. Let us also remember that Jesus Christ experienced estrangement as well. John 7:5 says, "For even his own brothers did not believe in him." It was only after his resurrection that Jesus' brothers came to believe in him and his mission. Therefore, we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus understands our feelings of estrangement.

ESTRANGEMENT

I went to a funeral the other day.
I went because someone had asked me to pray.
But what could I say when sister and brother,
Were no longer speaking to one another?

I don't know why loved ones inflict so much pain.
I can't figure out what they could hope to gain.
It really does not matter who is to blame.
Innocent people will get hurt all the same.

Tension abounds in each and every nation.
But Jesus came to bring reconciliation.
He calls us to be kind to each other.
He who says he loves God must love his brother.

It is often so easy to take offence.
That is why sometimes neighbours put up a fence.
But Jesus says that we should freely forgive.
He tells us that this is the way we must live.

Chapter 6: The Pain of Abuse - Paul

When I was growing up, I do not think that I even heard the word abuse. Things were fairly safe then. I remember one elderly man from our neighbourhood whom us children used to call, “The Peppermint Man.” He probably lived in the seniors home nearby and he used to go walking in our neighbourhood. Whenever I would run up and say, “Hi,” to him he would give me a peppermint. He did the same to the rest of the kids. I never knew his name, but no one ever told me that it was not safe to talk to him. I used to play in Mill Creek Ravine without adult supervision as well. In some ways I had a great childhood.

Other children have not been so fortunate. My wife, Linda, and I were foster parents for some time and we learned how badly abused children could be. I even wrote a paper on “Foster Parenting Victims of Incest.” Things are not as safe now. The statistics are alarming. Some years ago I heard that one in four adult females and one in ten adult males have been sexually abused. That in itself is tragic, but it does not include physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect. Some abused children survive the abuse and with some help grow up to live relatively normal lives. Others are scarred for life. Many prostitutes and drug addicts come from abusive families. Unfortunately, a great number of people who have been abused pass on the pattern of abuse to the next generation. Chances are a number of you have been abused in some way as well.

The Bible says very little about child abuse. However, it is by no means silent on the subject of abuse in general. Most of the Old Testament prophets were subject to verbal abuse and many of them to physical abuse. It was not an easy life. In this chapter dealing with the pain of abuse I could be talking about Jeremiah, Amos or Isaiah or one of the other prophets. Instead we will be looking at the Apostle Paul. Few people have ever endured the abuse that he suffered.

In 2 Corinthians Paul defends his apostleship. Some false teachers had invaded the church at Corinth and were making great claims for themselves and their teaching. They were also

attacking Paul in his absence. Paul felt obligated to respond to these attacks because these false teachers, by criticizing the messenger, were criticizing the message. Paul chose to meet his opponents on their terms. 2 Corinthians 11 is an unusual chapter. It is very uncharacteristic of Paul. In it he boasts about his credentials. He feels greatly embarrassed in doing so, but the circumstances have given him little choice. These false teachers were not only braggarts, but tyrants, determined to enslave their victims. Paul certainly did not want to see his friends in the Corinthian church in bondage to them. Therefore, Paul stooped to their level and boasted that his credentials as an apostle were far superior to theirs. He confessed that it is not in the spirit of Christ to boast and that boasting is certainly not a fruit of the spirit. In fact, he had written to these same Corinthian Christians earlier, "Love does not boast" (1 Corinthians 13:4).

Paul stated that he had undertaken more numerous and arduous evangelistic campaigns than the false teachers at Corinth. He also said that pertaining to birth, rank, education and labours, the false teachers would find that he would not shrink from comparison. We will not dwell on Paul's eminent qualifications for his ministry since that is not our purpose. Instead we will focus on his trials, the abuse that he suffered for the cause of Christ and the gospel. Paul's list here is more exhaustive than Luke's account in Acts, but Luke left much out. When we read the catalogue of all that Paul endured, the one thing that stands out is how little we know about him. It is a pity that we do not have a more exhaustive account of these varied experiences of Paul and there are undoubtedly more that Paul did not mention, as well as the ones that happened after he wrote this letter.

We can easily see that Paul suffered much for his Lord and Saviour. Like Jesus, he was familiar with suffering. He knew what it was like to experience abuse in many forms and from many sources. Paul had many enemies, many people who mistreated him.

Verse 29 says that Paul was beaten with rods three times. This was a typical Roman punishment. However, under Roman law, it was a crime to scourge a Roman citizen and Paul was a Roman

citizen. Several times he reminded his fellow Romans of that fact. Unfortunately, he did not always get a chance to do so before the beating began and brutal Roman magistrates often disregarded this privilege, particularly when the local population was putting pressure on them. Scourging and/or imprisoning the accused was often a way of appeasing an angry mob. In verse 23 Paul “boasted” that he had been flogged more severely than the false teachers. He also said in that verse that he had been in prison more frequently. Clement of Rome said that Paul was imprisoned seven times. However, we do not have a record of that many imprisonments.

Let us look at some of the abuse that we know about. In Acts 16, we have the account of Paul’s visit to Philippi. There he encountered a slave girl with an evil spirit who was apparently able to predict the future. This girl kept pestering Paul and his companions until Paul cast the evil spirit out of her. This meant a loss of livelihood for the girl’s owner who dragged Paul and Silas before the authorities. The magistrates ordered Paul and Silas beaten and thrown in prison. Their feet were put in stocks and they were carefully guarded, but God caused the chains to come loose. This experience eventually led to the conversion of the jailer. Paul and Silas were ordered released the next day. Paul told the authorities that they should not have beaten them and thrown them in prison without a trial since they were Roman citizens. This is just one example of the unjust treatment that Paul received at the hands of the Romans.

Acts 22 has another account of an angry crowd being upset with Paul. This time he was in Jerusalem. Again the Roman official ordered Paul to be beaten. This time, however, Paul spoke before he was beaten. However, Paul had already been put in chains. The commander realized that he should not have put a Roman citizen in chains.

That imprisonment went on for some time and Paul was on trial before several Roman officials. Not all of these officials were totally just and fair in their treatment of Paul. Acts 24:26 mentions that Felix was hoping to receive a bribe from Paul.

Acts 24:27 says that Felix kept Paul in prison because he wanted to grant a favour to the Jews.

Have you ever been unjustly accused? Have you ever been punished for something you did not do? Have you ever been punished too severely? If you have, then you are in good company. This happened to Paul and it happened to Jesus. Jesus warned his disciples in Matthew 24:9, “You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death and you will be hated by all nations because of me.”

Verse 24 says, “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.” Flogging was a traditional Jewish punishment. Deuteronomy 25:3 says that this punishment must not exceed forty lashes. To make sure that they did not do so, the Jews stopped at 39. This is why the punishment was called, “the forty lashes minus one.” Jesus warned his twelve apostles when he first sent them out, “Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues” (Matthew 10:17). This seems strange to us. We would never think of beating someone inside of a church. However, many Jews were zealous about keeping their religion pure and Paul was considered an apostate.

Paul also said that he was stoned once. This probably refers to the incident that is described in Acts 14:19, 20. Paul and Barnabas were in Lystra spreading the good news when Paul healed a crippled man. The pagan crowd thought they were gods and wanted to sacrifice to them which, of course, they refused. Then some Jews from Antioch came and stirred up the crowd who stoned Paul, dragged him outside of the city, and left him for dead. This shows us how fickle people can be. The same people who hailed him as a god stoned him. The same people who hailed Jesus as king cried out, “Crucify him!” This reminds us not to take it too seriously when people praise us. Stoning was the usual Jewish method of punishment for blasphemy. When Paul was still known as Saul, before he met Christ on the road to Damascus, he witnessed the stoning of Stephen.

This passage ends with a description of Paul’s escape from Damascus. It seems anticlimactic to us when we compare it to

the beatings, floggings, imprisonment and stoning that Paul mentioned. Now Paul was the kind of man who would find this clandestine exit from the city far worse than a scourging. It must have been a humiliating experience. He started out proudly on his journey to Damascus as a conqueror over despised Christians and left it humbled as a despised Christian himself.

Remember that Paul was a Jew himself, and a Jewish leader at that. He had been a Pharisee educated at the feet of a prominent Rabbi, Gamaliel. He even had the official backing of the Jewish authorities in his persecution of Christians. Acts 26:10 says that he cast his vote against Christians. This likely means that he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. Thus, when the Jews flogged and stoned Paul, they were persecuting one of their own. This should remind us of what the beloved disciple said of Jesus in John 1:11, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."

In verse 26, Paul said that he has been constantly on the move and in many different kinds of dangers. Travel in the mountains and wilderness was perilous in spite of the wonderful system of Roman roads that had been built. The roads were safer than they had ever been, but they were still dangerous. Many of the places through which Paul travelled were infested with robbers. That is why Paul mentioned, "in danger from bandits." Jesus mentioned one such place when he related the Parable of the Good Samaritan. His own particular journeys were made all the more hazardous because he disturbed the peace. It was said of Paul and Silas that they caused trouble all over the world (Acts 17:6). Paul was definitely an adventurous person who took great risks for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

Verse 26 also says that Paul was in danger from the Gentiles. Paul was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 22:21; 26:17). Many missionaries have experienced persecution from the very people who they are trying to lead out of the darkness of sin into the light of the gospel. Jim Elliot is a notable example. He was murdered by the Auca Indians. Usually Paul's abuse at the hands of the Gentiles came about because of economic concerns. Paul's preaching of the gospel threatened their

livelihood. I have already related the story of the demon possessed slave girl whom Paul delivered. The owners made a fortune because of her fortune telling and they thought that they would lose a fortune now that the evil spirit had been cast out of her.

Another example of this kind of persecution occurred later on when Paul was in Ephesus. This was perhaps Paul's greatest success in preaching the gospel. Many people turned to Christ in repentance and faith. Acts 19:19 says, "A number who had practised sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas." Since a drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages, this would amount to at least half a million dollars today. Paul's ministry under the power of the Holy Spirit not only had a tremendous spiritual impact in Ephesus, it also had an incredible financial impact. Understandably, some of the merchants were upset. A silversmith named Demetrius was afraid that he would lose his lucrative business of making idols and he convinced some other tradesmen that a similar thing would happen to them. They started a riot and seized two of Paul's travelling companions. Paul would have appeared before them but his friends persuaded him not to.

In verse 27 Paul says, "I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked." His sleeplessness was probably due to anxiety or discomfort. If it was due to all night prayer vigils, then Paul would have dealt with it that way. Certainly a normal person who experienced the scourging, beating and stoning that he experienced would feel great discomfort. Anxiety could have come from several sources. As I have already mentioned, the Romans, the Jews and the Gentiles all persecuted him and tried to frustrate his ministry. He was also frequently in danger on the roads and the seas that he travelled. As many of you know, travelling often produces sleepless nights.

However, Paul's greatest cause for concern or anxiety was the false teachers that plagued the churches. In verse 28 Paul says, "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches." The Romans, the Jews, the Gentiles and the bandits did not wreak as much havoc on the churches as did the false teachers. They followed Paul and offered the churches "higher revelation" and "deeper insights." In verses 19 and 20, Paul sarcastically refers to their influence on the church at Corinth: "You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise. In fact, you put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face." The false teachers were exploiting and enslaving the churches that Paul had founded at great personal sacrifice, and he was understandably upset.

Paul felt responsible for the churches that he had founded. He also showed concern for other Christians as well. Paul personally cared for these people who were being abused. In verse 29 Paul says, "Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" When a brother in Christ stumbled, Paul was set on fire with grief. The false teachers were the primary cause of this stumbling. When Paul saw charlatans diverting the unwary from the path of truth or he heard of moral offences committed by Christians, he was filled with righteous wrath. This would have been similar to Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple.

Paul was daily burdened by the moral and doctrinal problems that plagued the churches. Christianity was new and the people in these churches were new converts. They did not have the full New Testament as we have. Many of them had come from pagan backgrounds. Therefore, they did not know how to think and act as Christians. Thus, they were easily led astray by false teachers who claimed more complete knowledge or who offered a better way of living. Often these churches wrote to Paul for advice and council. Sometimes Paul heard of reports of problems in the churches. Paul's letters to the churches mention both the letters and the reports that he received. In them he deals with both moral and doctrinal problems.

Things have not changed much since Paul's day. We have the benefit of the complete New Testament to solve our moral and doctrinal problems, but heresy and immorality still plague the church. False teachers are still enslaving and extorting people. In fact, there has never been a time in the history of the Christian Church when it has been free from treachery within. We need to keep a constant vigil just as Paul did.

While many of us can claim to have been abused and persecuted, Paul's list would put us to shame. In fact, it seems almost too incredible to be true. How could one man go through so many trials and tribulations and still keep going? Why would someone who suffered so much keep doing the things that brought about the suffering? Some people in Corinth would have felt the same way. They would have questioned his record. Therefore, Paul, in verse 31, says, "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying." He called God to witness the truth of his record. It was almost as if he was swearing an oath.

Paul was abused by his fellow Roman citizens who beat him, imprisoned him, and chained him often without a trial. They considered his rights as a fellow citizen as unimportant compared to appeasing an angry mob. Paul was abused by his fellow Jews who considered him an apostate and a traitor. They whipped him and stoned him because he was preaching the gospel to the god-fearing Gentiles. Paul was abused by the very Gentiles he was trying to reach with the good news. They stirred up dissension in many places where he went because he threatened their livelihood. Paul was abused by the false teachers who extorted and enslaved his new converts and wreaked havoc in the churches that he founded. This caused him considerable anguish because he cared deeply for these people.

Yet Paul kept on travelling over those same hazardous roads and dangerous seas. He kept going to cities where he risked beatings and imprisonment. When he had been warned in Ephesus that he would be arrested and imprisoned if he went to Jerusalem, he was still determined to go. He said to the elders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20:24, "However, I consider my

life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.” Do we have that same dogged determination to go when we suffer abuse? Will we be as faithful to the cause of Christ when others persecute us? We can endure as Paul endured if we trust in Christ. Paul was not a strong man. Many people considered him weak. Yet he endured much affliction because Christ gave him strength. God can give us strength as well. Let us keep working for his kingdom just as Paul did. Let us never give up or give in.

ABUSE

Why would someone abuse a mere child?
Why would you attack the meek and mild?
Why must a child suffer all his life?
Why is he afflicted with sin and strife?

Why does sexual molestation,
Plague this great and wonderful nation?
An innocent child suffers with shame.
Why does she often take all the blame?

How does she have hope for tomorrow,
When all she’s known is pain and sorrow?
How can we right this terrible wrong?
We must do more than write a sad song.

When a baby is shaken who cares?
Who sees when he is thrown down the stairs?
Who is there to dry all of his tears?
Who’ll be there to calm his deepest fears?

Does God see all the children’s pain,
That is inflicted time and again?
He took it to himself on the cross,
There his own Child suffered pain and loss.

Chapter 7: The Pain of Loneliness - Jeremiah

In this book, we have looked at Biblical characters who suffered from the pain of silence, grief, injustice, estrangement and abuse. Some Christians have trouble with the concept of pain in general. They think that Christians should always be healthy and any suffering must be due to sin or to a lack of faith. This is not a new problem. Job had so-called friends who thought that way and he lived thousands of years ago. Many Christians who accept the idea that Christians can suffer physical pain have trouble accepting Christians suffering emotional pain. If a believer has a heart attack, friends and family will visit and the church will send flowers. If a believer has a nervous breakdown, people do not know how to respond. Sometimes they will even question his faith, which is hardly a helpful response.

While there is no record in the Bible of a believer having a nervous breakdown, this could be partly due to the fact that the term did not exist in Biblical times. Certainly, as we have seen from our study so far, many believers experienced intense emotional anguish even though they had more faith and were more righteous than most of us. Job was the most righteous person on earth in his day and yet he said in Job 6:2, 3, “If only my anguish could be weighed and all my misery be placed on scales! It would surely outweigh the sands of the seas – no wonder my words have been impetuous.” Jesus Christ was the perfectly sinless Son of God and yet he said, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Matthew 26:38). Isaiah 53:3 refers to him as “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.”

Life in this fallen world is often harsh and cruel. Abuse and injustice abound. Therefore, it is perfectly natural for Christians to experience grief and sorrow from time to time. If we did not, then there would be something wrong with us. Those who do not feel pain, whether it is physical pain or emotional pain, are cursed. We should pity such people. Sometimes people experience intense physical pain and sometimes people

experience intense emotional pain. This could be the result of something that they have done, but more likely they have had something horrible happen to them. These people need comfort and understanding, not accusations and advice. We do not need to play the role of Job's friends. Their attitude was condemned severely by God.

Jeremiah was a believer who experienced intense emotional pain. We know a great deal about the pain that he suffered because his book gives a fuller account of his life and ministry than do the books of the other prophets. There we learn that he was born in the small village of Anathoth, which was a priestly town a little northeast of Jerusalem. He was called to the prophetic office while still a youth. He was probably about twenty years old at the time. He prophesied for at least forty and probably fifty years. He showed some reluctance in accepting his call. Like Moses, he had some misgivings about his ability to speak. There are about forty direct quotations of his prophecy in the New Testament.

In the Bible we learn more about Jeremiah's personal life and feelings than we do any other prophet. He was gentle and tender in his feelings, but he was called to proclaim a very stern message. This caused some emotional conflict. He was an ardent and loyal patriot, but he was called to prophesy the destruction of his nation. This disturbed him greatly. Jeremiah, like many prophets, and probably more so than most, was called to live a life of loneliness.

We all want companionship. God did not create us to be alone. Instead, he created us as social beings with a need for others. "It is not good for the man to be alone." (Genesis 2:18).

The very message that Jeremiah was called by God to preach was the source of much emotional conflict and loneliness. The words of God brought pain and suffering to his heart and he would have preferred not to utter them, but they burned like fire in his breast. He said in Jeremiah 20:9, "But if I say, 'I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,' his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones." He loved his people and his nation, yet he was compelled to proclaim their doom.

Though he was a patriot, he was treated as an enemy of his own nation. He was often charged with sedition. Jeremiah 38:4 gives us one example. “Then the officials said to the king, ‘This man should be put to death. He is discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city, as well as all the people, by the things he is saying to them. This man is not seeking the good of the people but their ruin.’”

There were many prophets in Jeremiah’s day, but most of them were false prophets. They proclaimed peace and safety when God was about to bring death and destruction. This made Jeremiah stand alone. Also, his prophecies of doom were not immediately fulfilled. Therefore, he was the one that was viewed as a false prophet when he was the one true prophet. Jeremiah 23 shows Jeremiah’s reaction to the false prophets that surrounded him. God told him that these prophets were filling the people with false hopes and that their words were their own and not God’s. These false prophets were a source of perpetual conflict for Jeremiah.

Jeremiah’s unpopularity with the people was largely due to his “Temple Address” in Jeremiah 7:1-8:3. He prophesied that the city and the temple would fall. Since the temple was sacred and protected by God, this prophecy was viewed as sacrilege. The storm of protest that arose almost cost Jeremiah his life. It was only because someone remembered a similar prophecy from Micah that his life was spared. Unlike the false prophets who tolerated and often encouraged wickedness, Jeremiah was uncompromising in his condemnation of iniquity. This and his prophecies of doom meant that the tide of popular feeling was against him. It made him stand alone against a wave of falsehood and wickedness. He was in a state of almost perpetual sorrow as he proclaimed the fate of a nation determined to keep on rebelling against God and his laws. His despair can be seen in Jeremiah 9:1, “Oh that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people.”

There was much opposition to the message that Jeremiah was proclaiming. It was considered treason, an act punishable by

death. Jeremiah 26:10 says, “Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, ‘This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!’”

Think of how Jeremiah must have felt. He loved his people, but he was called by God to prophesy their doom. The other prophets were proclaiming good news and he was proclaiming bad news. He was reluctant to speak, but the words of God burned like a fire in his heart. He was alone in a sea of false prophets and wicked priests.

Sometimes we feel that we are all alone in standing up for what is right. Elijah thought so until God opened his eyes. Fortunately, God always has a faithful remnant of believers. It may seem like everyone around us is enslaved by falsehood and wickedness, but this is not true.

Jeremiah felt much hostility. In Jeremiah 15:10 he called himself, “a man with whom the whole land strives and contends.” It was not only his own countrymen who wanted Jeremiah put to death, his own relatives were opposed to him. God warned Jeremiah in Jeremiah 12:6, “Your brothers, your own family – even they have betrayed you; they have raised a loud cry against you. Do not trust them, though they speak well of you.” The people from his hometown and his near relatives considered him a dangerous fanatic. Often when others turn against you, your neighbours and relatives will stick with you. This was definitely not the case with Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was forbidden by God from many normal social interactions. Jeremiah 16:5 says, “For this is what the LORD says, ‘Do not enter a house where there is a funeral meal; do not go to mourn or show sympathy, because I have withdrawn my blessing, my love and my pity from these people,’ declares the LORD.” He was also told in Jeremiah 16:8, “And do not enter a house where there is feasting and sit down to eat and drink.” Jeremiah lived a life of isolation. He, like all of us, needed to love and be loved, but his calling frustrated that desire. He was even forbidden to marry. God told him in Jeremiah 16:2, “You must not marry or have sons and daughters in this place.”

Although he lived in a time when normal social intercourse required marriage, Jeremiah remained single all of his long life.

Often Jeremiah's life was in jeopardy. Chapter 26 records one instance when he was threatened with death. Chapters 37 and 38 record another. Jeremiah was all too aware of the hostility of his own people. In Jeremiah 18:23 he cried out to God, "But you know, O LORD, all their plots to kill me . . ." We know that these threats and social restrictions took their toll on Jeremiah's emotional state. His book lays bare the turbulent emotions of a man selected somewhat against his will to proclaim an unpopular message to a wayward and stubborn people. In Jeremiah 20:14-18, he cursed the day of his birth. He wished that he had never been born. This dissociation from normal social contacts and the emotional stress of being threatened and oppressed forced Jeremiah to find refuge in God. He had almost no one else to turn to. Just as Jeremiah was alone in his message, he was alone in his personal life.

Jeremiah had a deep sense of loneliness. This probably made him more attuned to the voice of God since God was virtually his only source of comfort.

Right from the beginning, Jeremiah felt unequal to the task to which God had called him. He said in Jeremiah 1:6, "Ah Sovereign LORD, I do not know how to speak! I am only a child." However, God strengthened him for his role as a prophet. He said in Jeremiah 1:18, "Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests and the people of the land." He warned Jeremiah that he would have opposition, but he also promised him that the opposition would not overwhelm him. We know that both this warning and this promise came true. We have already talked about the opposition that Jeremiah encountered from his relatives and countrymen. We have looked at some of the threats on his life. We have not even dealt with the times when he was imprisoned. Jeremiah led a difficult and lonely life, but God gave him the strength to do so. God promised him in Jeremiah 15:20, "I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you

but will not overcome you, for I am with you to rescue and save you,' declares the LORD."

This God-given strength enabled Jeremiah to withstand all of the attacks against him. Even though he naturally had no desire to be a prophet of calamity, he remained firmly committed to his prophetic calling. It was his conviction that he was called by God that gave Jeremiah the strength and endurance to keep proclaiming his unpopular message to a wicked nation even at the risk of his life. And Jeremiah spent his whole adult life proclaiming God's message of judgment. He spent at least forty years and probably fifty years preaching to a people who refused to listen to his message. Lesser men would have given up much earlier, but Jeremiah persevered for decades because God had given him the strength of iron.

Jeremiah was alone in his message. He was alone in his personal life. He was alone in his steadfastness. And the same God that gave Jeremiah the strength to carry on promises us the same kind of strength. Will we be as faithful as Jeremiah? Will we persevere as he did?

Jeremiah had a difficult and lonely life. The book that bears his name gives us a very detailed account of the suffering that he endured and his response to it. His pent-up emotions found expression in emotional outbursts against his lot in life. He cried out in Jeremiah 15:18, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" He complained in Jeremiah 20:8, "So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long." He said in Jeremiah 11:19, "I had been led like a lamb to the slaughter." Yet despite his complaints he never gave up. Despite his loneliness, he remained true to his mission. Despite the threats against his life, he kept on prophesying.

Jeremiah is a good example for us to follow. He has often been compared to Christ. He is an example of faithfulness and steadfastness. However, we must not think of him as one stoically enduring all that happened to him. His book is full of emotional outbursts. His heart is often laid bare before us. This too is an example for us. Just as Jesus felt free to weep openly and Jeremiah felt free to cry out in anguish, we should feel free to

express our emotional pain. God made us emotional creatures, and for us to deny our emotions is deny the way that God made us.

Jeremiah's life is also a reminder that loneliness is often the fate of those who are called by God. Missionaries are often lonely. They find themselves surrounded by people who do not believe or even talk as they do. We should be praying for them, telephoning them, writing to them and emailing them to ease the loneliness that they must feel.

Loneliness is very much a part of life. We were created for social interaction but we feel alone in a sea of people who do not really know or understand us. Part of this is because we are afraid of revealing our inner selves to others – of becoming vulnerable. Since we do not open our hearts to others, they do not understand us and since they do not understand us we feel lonely and our loneliness makes us feel more vulnerable. Then we are afraid of being hurt and wary of exposing ourselves to others. It is a vicious circle. That is why we need to lay our souls bare before God who deeply cares for us. He knows and understands us and he will comfort us and ease our loneliness.

LONELINESS

My wife just called me on the phone,
And now I feel so all alone.
It seems a twist of cruel fate,
She told me that she's working late.

God created all that we see,
All there is in land, sky and sea.
Everything he said was good,
Except one thing was not so good.

It was not some trivial whim,
When God made us to worship him.
He wants us all to walk with him,
To fill our void right to the brim.

That's why we feel so all alone.
He made our hearts within us groan,
Until he fills them full of love,
That can only come from above.

When you're feeling awful lonely,
And missing your one and only,
Maybe why you are feeling so blue,
Is that God wants to speak to you.

It is easy for me to say,
That all you have to do is pray.
But what I say is very true,
That God so wants to speak to you.

Chapter 8: The Pain of Meaninglessness - Ecclesiastes

For several chapters we have been talking about the believer's experience of emotional pain. We have dealt with common feelings like grief and loneliness. These are emotions that we can all understand. In this chapter we will be dealing with a common emotional pain that is seldom talked about in casual conversation although it is discussed a lot in philosophical circles. This is the pain of meaninglessness or purposelessness. We all want our lives to have purpose and meaning and, when they do not, it causes much mental anguish. Sometimes it even leads to despair and suicide.

Hundreds of years ago, a man wrote a very good book on the subject of meaninglessness. The title of the book in the Hebrew Old Testament is "Qoheleth" which is the word translated "Teacher" in Ecclesiastes 1:1. Our title, Ecclesiastes, is a transliteration of the title in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. It means "speaker of the called out assembly." It is derived from a word that is translated in the New Testament as "church." Thus, the term, "Preacher" (K.J.V.) might also be an accurate translation.

The author is never specifically named in the book, but most conservative scholars attribute it to Solomon. If you believe the author to be Solomon, then this book was written toward the end of his life. Ecclesiastes is the most philosophical book in the Old Testament.

A major problem in interpreting Ecclesiastes is understanding the apparent internal contradictions and vicissitudes of thought in the book. At times the Teacher seems to be gloomy and pessimistic and at other times he urges his readers to enjoy life, be at ease and enjoy their labor. Though there seems to be a pessimistic tone to the book, the author's faith in God is evident throughout (2:25; 3:11, 17; 8:12, 13; 11:9; 12:13, 14). While Qoheleth has been described as a pessimist, perhaps it is best to call him a realist.

Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom literature of the Bible. Like the book of Job and like most wisdom literature, Ecclesiastes

deals with man's search for meaning and purpose in life. In fact, this is the theme of the book. The author concludes that without God, life is futile and meaningless. This is the result of the Fall. Mankind was cursed with fruitless, unproductive work.

The book of Ecclesiastes is full of the author's search for meaning and purpose in life. He tried various paths in pursuit of meaning, but found them all useless. He tried wisdom (1:12-17), pleasure (2:1-11), work (2:17-24) and wealth (5:8-6:12) and found them all meaningless. His conclusions about these various pursuits are quite interesting. He said about wisdom: "For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief" (1:18). He said about pleasure: "I denied nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labor. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind, nothing was gained under the sun" (2:10, 11). He said about work: "So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind" (2:17). He said about wealth: "Whoever has money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless" (5:10). In fact he begins his book by saying, "'Meaningless! Meaningless!' says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (1:2).

Qoheleth knew that every thinking person is haunted by questions like, "Who am I?" and "What is the meaning of life?" Ecclesiastes has as its central concern that the basic hunger of man is to see if the totality of life fits into meaningful patterns. Its conclusion is that there are no apparent meaningful patterns. This is a decidedly uncomfortable conclusion. We are uncomfortable with statements like: "All things are wearisome, more than one can say" (1:8), "I saw that all labor and achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbor. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." (2:4), and "The more the words, the less the meaning, and how does that profit anyone?" (6:11). Conclusions like the following shake us to the core:

“Therefore, a man cannot discover anything about his future.” (7:14) and “Then I saw all that God has done. No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning. Even if a wise man claims he knows, he cannot really comprehend it” (8:17).

We must remember that though Ecclesiastes is part of the Bible, that does not mean that we must accept all of its conclusions. It was written from man’s point of view. The phrase, “under the sun,” which occurs frequently in the book reminds us that the author is looking at things from a limited, human perspective. He was examining life as it appeared to be. Life, from an earthly perspective, does not make sense. The righteous are not always rewarded. The wicked are not always punished. Justice is not always served. It takes faith to trust in God when life is apparently futile and meaningless and the author does call us to a life of faith.

Yet for centuries before and after the writing of Ecclesiastes, people have been desperately seeking meaning and purpose in life. Victor Frankel’s experiences in a Nazi prison camp led him to write “*Man’s Search for Meaning*.” He observed that people who had found some meaning for life, some purpose for their existence, survived the camp while those without meaning and purpose perished. Yet it is especially difficult to find meaning and purpose in such a situation. What is the meaning of injustice? What is the purpose of suffering? Can this age of Satanic rule and the eternal age to come both be accepted, enjoyed and understood as part of one plan? How can the justice of God be reconciled with the seemingly unmitigated prosperity of the wicked? Ecclesiastes deals with these questions. The author saw oppression (4:1-3) and injustice (7:15) and concluded that life does not apparently make sense.

Have you ever pondered the meaning of existence? Have you ever wondered why you were placed on this earth? Have you been perplexed at the injustices of life? If so, then you are far from alone. Everyone who has ever stopped to think has considered these questions at one time or another. Some people are bothered constantly by them and some spend most of their

lives virtually ignoring them, but we have all considered them. This is the way that God intended it. He put the desire to find meaning and purpose into our hearts. Some have called it a “God shaped vacuum.” Others have called it a “void” or “emptiness.” Solomon said that God had put eternity into the hearts of men, but man cannot understand God and his purposes (3:11). We are meant to be puzzled by the eternal questions of life. Solomon’s pursuit of meaning and purpose should be our pursuit as well.

Qoheleth writes about his attempts to find peace and joy in temporal things. He waxes eloquently on the emptiness of earthly pursuits. He concludes that, from an earthly secular perspective, life is futile and meaningless. Wisdom, pleasure, alcohol, human achievement, great riches and sex are all ultimately meaningless without a proper relationship with God. Ecclesiastes 1:14 says, “I have seen all things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

Solomon’s consideration of life without God led him to the conclusion that life is unjust. Oppression goes on, the wicked prosper and the fruits of a man’s labour pass from his control (2:21; 4:1, 8; 6:2; 7:15). Thousands of people throughout history have confirmed the Teacher’s findings. Many people, as they reflect on life from their own experiences, say that life at its best is really only one big mystery. The word rendered “meaningless” (NIV) or “vanity” (KJV) in Ecclesiastes is a word which emphasizes that which is empty and passing. The phrase that often accompanies this word, “a chasing after the wind,” is a good commentary on its meaning. Life is like the morning mist, an evaporating cloud. The pursuit of pleasure, achievement, wisdom and understanding is meaningless, worthless, futile, vain and empty.

No matter how hard we try, we cannot be indifferent or detached from the futility which besets us. It is an inescapable fact of our humanity. This results in an abyss of despair which most of us try desperately to avoid. Because people lack a sense of purpose and meaning, when they stop to think, they feel empty inside. There is a cavernous void in their lives that they desperately try to fill. Solomon tried various methods of filling

that void. He tried seeking wisdom and understanding. He tried work and achievement. He tried pleasure and joy. However, none of these filled the emptiness within his soul. People today try different paths to fill the void in their lives. Some of us plunge ourselves into our work and become workaholics. Others cram our lives with things like television, music or computer games. All of these things can be just noise. They can be simply distractions so that we will not feel the silence and loneliness that we are trying to crowd out of our existence. Still others seek meaning through serving others by working on charities or in our local church. However, these activities can be just as meaningless as any other activities. They can be just ways of preventing us from stopping to think about life.

There is certainly nothing wrong with work. Television, music and computer games are not necessarily bad. These things can be used for good or evil. Church and charitable activities are often necessary. Someone has to do them. However, how often do we examine our motives for involvement? Do we do these things out of love and gratitude or out of duty and obligation? Are we just trying to squeeze out the void in our lives?

This book encourages believers who have sought earthly pleasures to return to the LORD. Pleasures themselves are not wrong. Ecclesiastes 2:24, 25 is one example of Qoholeth encouraging the enjoyment of life: "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?" However, this advice is not the same as the hedonistic saying, "Eat, drink and be merry" (Luke 12:19). As Jesus said, this is the way of the fool. The hedonist says, "Enjoy this life for it is all you have." Qoholeth says, "Enjoy this life as the gift of God." Note, also that Solomon often encouraged the enjoyment of work. You should find fulfilment in accomplishing things, in making a positive difference in the world. Life is to be lived to the fullest, but life's joys and pleasures need to be kept in perspective. They are to be viewed as gifts from God and not wages for what we have done.

The Teacher encouraged his readers to live life to the fullest. However, they were to keep the pleasures that they enjoyed in perspective. Their first responsibility was to serve God. Paul reminded Timothy that God created good things for man to enjoy (1 Timothy 4:4, 5). Psalm 37:4 says, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Jesus said in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Qoheleth exhorted young people to follow God while they were still young (12:1). They must keep in mind the fact that God will evaluate everything that they have done, even the things that no one else has seen (12:14). Our main duty is to “Fear God and keep his commandments” (12:13). Our primary focus is serving God, but that should not stop us from enjoying life. In fact, serving God is the key to enjoying life to the fullest. The key to the abundant life is to remember that the good things of life are God’s gifts to us and not our wages. We are also to remember that the pleasures of life are fleeting and fragile. Everything that we enjoy can be taken away on a moments notice. This is the thrust of chapter twelve. Old age and infirmity come all too quickly and our capacities for serving God and enjoying life are both diminished.

For centuries man has been seeking meaning and purpose for his life. People have often asked the key questions of life. Questions like: Who am I? What is the purpose of my existence? Where am I going? Solomon, the wisest man that ever lived, also asked these questions. Like most people he tried to find answers in pleasure, work, achievement, wisdom, wealth, etc., but his search came up empty. All of these things he found “meaningless, a chasing after the wind.”

All of us have a desire for meaning and purpose. We are born with it. God has placed it there. We have a void, a vacuum within that we try desperately to fill. Some of us try to fill that void with things and go through life in an endless pursuit of toys, gadgets and possessions. Others try to fill the void with noise to squelch the silence that would remind us of the void, the emptiness in our lives. Still others try to find meaning in work

and achievement. They spend long hours at work or in politics, community service or church work, striving at least subconsciously to fill the void with busyness so that they do not have to stop and think about their meaningless and purposeless life.

When we stop and look at life from our limited perspective, it does seem to be meaningless. We look for justice and find only injustice. Things do not often make sense. Wicked people enjoy long life and an abundance of pleasure and possessions. Good people have terrible things happen to them. Everything that we do seems to be “a chasing after the wind.”

However, that is only because our perspective is limited. God causes things to happen in their seasons (Ecclesiastes 3), according to his purpose and timetable. Because our minds are finite, we could never grasp what that purpose and timetable is, even if he told us. God has put the desire for eternal truths and understanding within us, but we will never achieve this desire on our own. We cannot possibly understand God (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Therefore, the key to real meaning and purpose is by surrendering to God’s will for our lives. The key is to stop striving to find answers on our own and to wait patiently for God’s answers. The path to meaning and purpose is to serve God and enjoy the life that he has given us. Remember, it is vitally important to do both. To try to serve God without enjoying life is to deny God’s gifts to us, to put aside the abundant life that Jesus promised us (John 10:10). To attempt to enjoy life without an acknowledgment of God is hopeless. One can only attempt to fill the void with noise.

FILLING THE VOID WITH NOISE

Everything is empty and meaningless.
Life is an endless quest for substance.
Yet no one can find what is not there.
We anxiously pursue what is unattainable.
We are driven by desires deep within us.
We desperately want things to make sense.
But there is no meaning in this existence.

We cannot find answers to the questions that plague us.
Loneliness and isolation eat away at each of us.
We grasp at straws in our search for pleasure.
When all we really want is to dull the pain.
We cannot find peace no matter how hard we try.
We think that people can help us find the way.
But often we find that they are just as lost as us.

Why is life so puzzling?
Why are the answers so few?
Why has God not shown us?
Why is He so distant from man?
Why can we not see Him?
Surely Jesus came to reveal Him.
But now even He has gone.

Is God too big to understand?
Is He lonely like us?
Is He looking to meet us?
Is He seeking to find us?
To talk to us one to One?
Does he really need us?
To fill up the void in His life?

What is the purpose of life?
Why do we run to and fro?
Do we really accomplish anything
In all of our hurrying about?
Why are we always so busy?
Is it because we are afraid
That we only have meaning in doing?

And what is the purpose of doing?
Why do we strive to attain?
What is it we are seeking to gain?
We know that nothing will satisfy;
Nothing will fill up the void.
Yet we jam activities and possessions,
Into that cavernous hole.

Many seek meaning through thinking;
Through pondering the questions of life.
They only discover more questions,
And a meaningless confusion of answers.
Yet those who think they know the answers,
Have not even honestly asked the questions,
Or they would know that they do not know.

Are there any certainties to life?
Or do we only know that we cannot know?
Are there absolute truths that all know?
Or is everything all relative?
Is eternity to be grasped?
Or only to be pursued?
What is the meaning of faith?

Is loneliness the true meaning of life?
Are not all relationships frustrating?
How many true friends does anyone have?
Who can we depend upon to be there?
Who will heal our broken hearts and lives?
When all that is left are memories,
That make us lonelier still.

All of us feel empty and void.
All of us strive for purpose and meaning.
All of us try to satisfy
The longings and aches of the heart.
Some seek pleasure and possessions;
Others seek destiny and purpose.
Yet the void is still there.

We try different ways to fill the void.
One engages in endless activities;
Another serves some great cause;
Still another may seek people,
And surround himself with throngs,
Who neither know him or are known by him.
All of these paths are the same.

All attempts to find meaning are useless.
There is no way to really fill the void.
There are only ways to crowd out the emptiness,
That gnaws away at our hearts and souls.
The things that we pursue do not satisfy.
They only try to fill the void with noise.
Anything to dull the pain of the heart.

Why are there no answers?
Why is everything so empty?
Why does life lack meaning?
Why does no one understand?
Why can't I have a friend?
Why am I so lonely?
And why I am writing this poem?

Chapter 9: The Pain of Being Misunderstood - Isaiah

In this chapter we are dealing with an emotional pain that we have all experienced – the pain of being misunderstood. How many times has someone misinterpreted an innocent or even a positive comment of yours and became angry with you? How many times have you given what you thought were good directions and had the person get confused? These are all too common experiences, but they can still be very frustrating nevertheless.

How would you like it if you were continually misunderstood instead of just occasionally? That was the experience of many of the Old Testament prophets. Isaiah is one notable example. Isaiah 6 described his call to the prophetic office. It is one of my favourite passages. It was read at my ordination service and I have preached on it myself. However, I have usually stopped at verse eight. This verse describes God's call of Isaiah and his acceptance of his call. In this chapter I am going to concentrate more on the latter verses of this chapter. These verses describe what his prophetic ministry was going to be like.

Isaiah's call came to him "in the year that king Uzziah died." Uzziah was a good and righteous king. His rein had brought peace and prosperity to Judah. Now Isaiah had to face a weak and decaying nation. What message did God want Isaiah to bring to his people at such a time?

First of all, Isaiah had to come to an understanding of what God is like. This was why he received the vision of God. He saw God as he was – holy and glorious. Holiness means separation, otherness. It is that quality that sets God apart from creation. Only God is holy. People and things can only become holy because God makes them holy when he sets them apart for his service. The holiness of God dominated Isaiah's ministry. In his book, he frequently referred to God as "The Holy One of Israel." Glory means revelation or manifestation. God reveals himself in all of creation. Note that Isaiah's response to his vision of God was fear and trembling. To really know God is to

know him as awesome, majestic, holy and powerful. The only natural response to a vision of God is fear and trembling.

Second, Isaiah saw himself as he was – a sinful creature. He saw the seraphim praising God as holy and glorious and he realized that he was definitely not holy. He saw himself as impure and unclean. He was conscious of his own unworthiness to stand in the presence of God. In fact, he felt condemned, undone and doomed to die. Psalm 24:3, 4 says that it takes clean hands and a pure heart to come into the presence of God.

Third, Isaiah saw his people as they were, just as sinful as he was. He was aware of the infinite distance between the holy God and sinful man. He was conscious, not only of his own unworthiness, but also of the unworthiness of the people of God of his day. Because Isaiah had seen God as he really is, he was able to see himself and his people as they really were.

These are the requirements of God's spokesperson, whether he or she is a prophet, a minister, an evangelist or anyone witnessing for God. He or she must see God as he is – holy and glorious. He or she must see himself or herself as he or she is – an unclean sinner. And he or she must see his or her people as they are – unworthy people who have wandered away from God.

Verses nine and ten are quoted, at least in part, in the first six books of the New Testament. Matthew 13:14, 15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-41; Acts 28:26, 27 and Romans 11:8 all refer to this passage. This makes this passage especially important. These two verses tell Isaiah that his message would not be appreciated or even understood. They remind us that, no matter how hard we try, all our efforts to understand God are doomed to failure. For centuries people have been trying to reach up to God. The tower of Babel is a notable example. Yet, no one has ever succeeded. Because of the infinite distance between God and man, we can never understand him. As God says through Isaiah later on in this book, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). We can only understand God as he reveals himself to us. Fortunately, he has

revealed himself to us in his Word, the Bible, and in his Son, Jesus Christ.

The message that God called Isaiah to proclaim was not an easy one. Such a message never is easy. We all like to be understood. We all like people to respond positively to what we say. However, God warned Isaiah that he was going to be continually misunderstood and that the people would never respond positively to his message. By looking at the reasons why people misunderstood Isaiah we can examine the causes of misunderstanding in our world.

Note that Isaiah said, “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips . . . ” (verse 5). He did not excuse his sinfulness by the sinfulness of those around him. “Everybody is doing it,” heightened his guilt instead of lessening it. We often compare ourselves to others and feel that because we are no more sinful than they, it means we are okay. We may even consider ourselves less sinful. However, that is the wrong standard. We are to compare ourselves to Jesus Christ who was perfectly sinless. He set the standard. We are all sinful (Romans 3:23). Even Christians still sin (1 John 1:8).

This statement by Isaiah also means that he recognized that sin is a social matter as well as an individual matter. He knew that, at least to some extent, he was accountable for the sins of his nation, because they were his people. In today’s individualistic society we have lost that sense of corporate responsibility. We may profit from the dishonesty of our employer, but we accept no responsibility for it. We see abuse and injustice and do nothing about it because it is not our concern.

Isaiah’s sin was symbolically purged by a live coal on his lips. Fire is a frequent symbol of purification in the Bible. We even sing about “Refiner’s Fire.” This reminds us that redemption has a cost. God never overlooks sin. Our cleansing, our purification, cost him the cruel and agonizing death of his Son.

When Isaiah received his commissioning from God, God said to him, “Go and tell this people . . . ” Note that God neither referred to the people of Judah as “my people” or “your people.” The people of Judah had forfeited the right to be called the people

of God due to their wickedness. It was this wickedness that made them unable to understand the message of Isaiah. If you read the book of Isaiah, then you would find that his warnings to his people were straightforward. His approach was plain and systematic. Yet his warnings were disregarded and his message rejected. The lack of understanding was not the result of either his message or his delivery. It was due to the spiritual and moral insensitivity of the people. Their blindness was the result of their own depravity. Not long ago I was listening to another pastor who lived in Richmond for a while. His house was not near the airport, but he often visited people who did live by the airport. He would stop talking when a plane flew overhead, but they did not. They no longer heard the plane. The noise that had at first been obnoxious and almost unbearable was no longer a problem. They had become insensitive to it. In the same way, the people of Judah had become insensitive to the warnings of the prophets.

The same is often true today. The reason why people often do not respond to the gospel message is not because the message is not simple enough. After all, people of less than average intelligence often respond. The problem is that wickedness clouds their reasoning. It makes them spiritually blind and deaf. Jesus often referred to the Pharisees as blind because of their wickedness when they thought that they were righteous. In fact, by many standards, they were the most righteous people of his day. Today, the hardest people to reach with the gospel are those that think they are good enough.

One of the reasons that we do not understand one another is because of our own sinfulness. Our wickedness causes us to be insensitive to not only the voice of God, but also to the needs and desires of one another. It was the wickedness of man that brought about the confusion of languages at Babel. That is just one way in which our misunderstanding of one another is rooted in sin. In heaven we will all speak the same language, but as long as we are wicked and sinful creatures, we will often misunderstand one another.

In this passage in Isaiah, the fate of the people of Judah was foretold in words that cannot be misunderstood. Doom was

certain. There would be no further healing. The prophet's preaching would render them blinder, deafer and more insensitive. Their hearts would be made more callous. There is an interesting arrangement in verse ten. It goes from heart to ears to eyes and then from eyes to ears and back to heart. Isaiah offered sight and understanding to a blind and ignorant people, but they refused to accept his offer. Because they refused to listen, they became deaf. Because they refused to see, they became blind. Because they refused to understand, they became insensitive. Jesus said in John 9:39, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." The preaching of the gospel, the proclamation of the truth of God, will produce either one result or the other. It will either open up people's eyes to their need of God and salvation or it will blind them to their own sinfulness. Repentance is the first step of salvation and no one will repent until he first sees himself as a sinner. On the Alpha videos, Nikki Gumbel talks about John Wimber's conversion experience. He did not think of himself as a sinner until he saw his wife confessing her sinfulness. Then he cried out to God for salvation in words that he could not even express.

At the heart of misunderstanding is often an unwillingness to listen. "There is none so blind as those who will not see." I recall trying to explain something to someone and the individual turned on the radio and kept turning up the volume to drown me out. That is a classic example of our unwillingness to listen. Of course, that may be because I was not listening to the individual. In order for there to be an understanding, there must first be a change of heart. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."

Just as our unwillingness to listen is one cause of our misunderstanding of the truths of God, our unwillingness to listen is one cause of our misunderstanding one another. How often have you listened to an argument when it appears that neither side is listening to the other? There can be no

understanding until there is a willingness to listen. This means that, in order for us to understand one another, our hearts must be changed. Just as we must be willing to confess our sinfulness and repent in order to receive salvation, we must be willing to admit our faults in order to listen and understand one another.

Verse ten begins with, “Make the hearts of this people calloused . . .” Isaiah was called to prophesy to a people whose hearts would get harder as he preached to them. The nation had so hardened its heart that it contained within it the seeds of its own destruction. Prophets in the Old Testament often had an audience that was stubborn and corrupt. Hebrews 4:7 reminds us that we must not harden our hearts when we hear the voice of God. And we must remember that Hebrews is addressed to Christians. Often we think that only non-Christians harden their hearts to the voice of God. Unfortunately, Christians sometimes harden their hearts as well. God asks them to tithe, witness or go to the mission field and they refuse to listen. Christians can be just as stubborn as non-Christians.

One cannot help but admire Isaiah for his willingness and readiness to serve God even though he was told that his labours would be fruitless. Thus, his question in verse eleven is understandable, “For how long, O Lord?” Often when we are faced with an unpleasant task, we ask, “How long?” We want to get it over with as soon as possible. However, I am sure that Isaiah did not receive the answer that he was looking for. He was to keep on preaching until the land was utterly forsaken and there was virtually no one left in it. Since Isaiah began his ministry when Judah was at its peak territorially and was enjoying prosperity and peace, he knew that this meant a long time. We must remember that Isaiah loved his people. Watching his own nation destroy itself through disobedience to God must have had a tremendous impact on him. This is another indication of the stubbornness of the people of Judah. Isaiah kept on warning them of God’s judgment and the nation was besieged time and time again, but the people still did not listen. They became even more stubborn, even more resistant to the voice of God.

One of the main causes of misunderstanding is the stubbornness of our hearts. Time and time again we hear the same message, but it never sinks in. This happens in our spiritual life when God speaks to us in various ways, but we refuse to listen. This happens in our family life when we do the same hurtful things over and over again. We must admit that we, like the people of Judah in Isaiah's day, are a stubborn people. We refuse to change because we do not even want to admit that we need to change.

This passage reminds us again of the terrible inevitability that rejection of God produces. When people stubbornly refuse to listen to hear God's voice and will not repent, they will be punished sooner or later. As Jesus says in John 3:18, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." Whenever God's Word is proclaimed, people always have two choices. They can listen, repent and believe or they can refuse to listen and stubbornly resist the voice of God. Repentance and belief leads to salvation by the grace of God. Refusing to listen hardens the heart and leads to condemnation. Whenever God's Word is proclaimed either by witness or by preaching some listen and some refuse to listen.

It is not our responsibility to make people listen. Only the Holy Spirit can do that. It is our responsibility to spread the good news. The way that we show that we love people is to declare to them the whole counsel of God in any way we can. That means warning them of God's judgment as well as telling the good news of salvation. Genuine love for people means that we tell them the truth. Unfortunately, the same opportunity which could lead to their salvation could lead to their condemnation if they refuse to listen and harden their hearts.

When people misunderstand the Word of God, it is not usually the fault of the Word or the one proclaiming it. Their own wickedness as well as the wickedness of the world around them clouds their minds. They refuse to listen and stubbornly resist the warnings of God. These same factors cause us to misunderstand

one another. Our own sinfulness clouds our minds. We refuse to listen to one another and we stubbornly refuse to change the way that we think. Our mind is made up that it is someone else's fault and we will not be confused with facts.

MISUNDERSTANDING

When we talk to our spouses every day,
Do we really listen to what they say?
After all, when I know that I am right,
It really matters that I win the fight.

And yet when it is time for us to pray,
We want God to listen to what we say.
How can he listen when our hearts are hard?
His image in us is so badly marred.

What about when God wants to talk to us?
When he has something he wants to discuss?
Do we listen to what he has to say,
When we worship, read our Bibles and pray?

I know that, if I tried, I really could,
Know why I'm so often misunderstood.
How can I expect them to understand,
When there's so much wickedness in the land?

If we really want to communicate,
Then, we must ask God to remove the hate.
As long as it matters that I am right,
There will always be a good reason to fight.

We should all know that in this earthly life,
That there is continuous pain and strife.
Until the time when we see Jesus come,
We will hear the loud sound of the war drum.

Chapter 10: The Cry for Vindication - The Imprecatory Psalms

The Bible has many passages that trouble people. Some do not like the frank discussions of sex in Proverbs 5 and the Song of Songs. Some do not like its condemnation of homosexuality in Romans 1. Probably the most troublesome passages, at least for Christians, are the Imprecatory Psalms. These psalms are basically prayers to God invoking God's wrath upon the wicked, particularly the wicked who are persecuting the psalmist. The tone of these psalms ranges from the plaintive to the ferocious. There are five psalms that are classified as imprecatory: 7, 35, 69, 109 and 137. Otherwise beautiful psalms of praise also have imprecations in them which is particularly troubling. There are imprecatory passages in other Old Testament books, but these psalms are the most disturbing. The sudden transition from humble devotion to fiery curses creates an embarrassing problem for Christians who believe in both the love of God and the divine inspiration of Scripture.

There are several explanations as to the presence of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Bible. Some say that they reflect a lower ethical standard than the New Testament. These were included in the old canon because of the sub-Christian ethic in those days. Now, we have higher standards. They appeal to the idea of progressive revelation. However, while progressive revelation does teach that God does reveal himself to mankind in stages, these revelations are consistent. The Imprecatory Psalms would not be alright with God in Old Testament times and wrong today. Others say that these psalms are written in the indicative mood and merely state what would happen to the wicked. They were not actually asking God to destroy the wicked. However, this certainly does not seem to be the mood of the psalms. They definitely appear to be appeals for justice and vindication. Others say that the Imprecatory Psalms are an accurate record of what the psalmist felt and that there was no divine approval of their sentiments. Inspired by God does not necessarily mean endorsed by him. The speeches of Job's three friends would certainly be

examples of sentiments included in Holy Scripture, but not approved by God.

There are several considerations that we must take into account when we study these psalms. They were written long ago before we had the full revelation of God. We look back at them from the light of the New Testament forgetting that the psalmist did not even have the full Old Testament. The psalmist did not have the full assurance of the resurrection and the final judgment that we have. The psalmist did not have the good news of the gospel of Christ to share with his enemies and so, perhaps, convert them. Thus, it is understandable that he would cry out for justice. We feel his desperation in dire circumstances.

We must also remember that these psalms are poetry, not prose. The language of the poetry of that time and place was one of exaggerated passion. The reaction of the psalmist to personal injury is normal and natural, but exaggerated for emphasis. We have resentment expressed with the perfect freedom that we usually find only in children today.

One thing that the imprecatory psalms teach us is that there must be room in our Christianity for moral indignation. The Jews of the psalmist's day cursed more bitterly than the pagans around them, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. If the wickedness of our world does not disturb us, then how can we say that we are righteous? However, we must separate indignation from personal vindictiveness. The imprecations are not just personal appeals for vindication, but are also calls for justice and the honour of God's name.

The harshest imprecatory psalm is probably Psalm 109. It is clearly the psalm of one who is deeply, deeply disturbed. However, some have said that the psalmist is quoting the words of his enemies in verses six to 19. If so, then this psalm is not as fierce and hateful. Then, Psalm 69 becomes the most fierce one. However, there are good reasons for believing that these verses are actually the words of the psalmist himself. Jeremiah's curse in Jeremiah 18:21-23 is just as cruel as is David's curse on the house of Joab in 2 Samuel 3:29. It is interesting that both Psalm

69 and Psalm 109 are quoted in the New Testament. This makes it very difficult for us to treat them as irrelevant.

Whether we like it or not, bad things do happen to good people. God's people are from time to time persecuted. This is abundantly clear from Scripture. Sooner or later we will become victims of injustice. How should we react when we are attacked?

In Psalm 69:6, David wonders what will happen to God's people and his name when a servant of his can be insulted with impunity. When God's people are persecuted, then God is also being persecuted. The Apostle Paul, when he was still known as Saul and was persecuting Christians, learned this truth on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4, 5).

In both Psalms, David's sense of helplessness is overwhelming. He was suffering an all-out attack on his character which had reduced him to a shadow. Psalm 69:3 says, "I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail looking for God." Psalm 109:23, 24 says, "I fade away like an evening shadow; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt." David wore himself out appealing to God for deliverance from his enemies. Remember that this was the same David who killed Goliath and won many battles over the enemies of Israel. Even brave and powerful men can collapse under the weight of slander and injustice.

Psalm 109 is particularly clear that slander was David's problem. He was a victim of a betrayal almost worthy of Judas (verses 3-5). The word for accuser is prominent in the psalm. It is used in verses 6, 20, and 29. This same word is translated as Satan in other places in the Bible. David was accused without any justification. Psalm 109:2, 3 says, "For wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues." Psalm 109:23 says that David feels doubly humiliated, a puny and repulsive creature, so withering was the effect of the contempt that he experienced.

When we are accused of wrongdoing, we are tempted to lash out against our accusers. We are tempted to fight back with accusations of our own. Instead, we should commit our cause to

God. Romans 12:19 says, “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

Psalm 69:5 says, “You know my folly, O God, my guilt is not hidden from you.” Even though David knew that he was a victim of injustice, he also knew that he was not perfect. Slander is difficult to endure. Cursing, though people do it lightly, has a terrible reality about it. It takes something out of you. It is almost impossible not to be affected by it. The natural tendency to strike back, even if it is not acted on, may fill our hearts and minds with wicked thoughts. Remember Jesus words on the subject during his Sermon on the Mount. “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:21). We need to ask God to purify our minds and hearts of any wicked thoughts and desires.

Psalm 109:4, 5 indicates that David had tried to remedy the situation. He had extended friendship. He had been good to his accusers. Sometimes we are slandered and attacked even though we are innocent of wrong doing. Sometimes people take offence when we have acted with the best intentions. However, often the hostility that is directed against us is at least partially our fault. We may be blinded to our role in the dispute so for this we need to turn to God who searches our hearts.

1 Peter 3:16 says, “Keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander.” The best offence against slander is a totally clear conscience. When you know that you have done nothing wrong, the accusations do not sting as much. Also, people will eventually see that the charges against you are false and you will be vindicated. Perhaps even those who have attacked you will be convicted. Keep your conscience clear and trust in God for your eventual vindication.

When God does vindicate us, it is our responsibility to thank him and tell others about what he has done for us. Psalm 69:30 says, “I will praise God’s name in song and glorify him with thanksgiving.” Verse 31 says that God is more pleased with this kind of personal and explicit praise than with expensive

sacrifices. Verse 32 says that such testimony cheers the hearts of others in need.

Psalms 109:30 also promises praise to God for his deliverance: "With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng I will praise him." The Psalms often express the rightness and indeed the responsibility of giving public thanks for personal blessings. Not only is God honoured by such praise, other believers are encouraged as well. It bolsters our faith to know that, "The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people" (Psalm 69:33). This is especially true if we hear of real life, recent examples of God doing just that for his people. When we hear of God answering the prayers of others, then it gives us more faith that our prayers will be answered.

All of us at one time or another will be victims of slander and/or injustice. These accusations hurt deeply. We need to know how to properly respond to them. Rather than lashing out or trying to vindicate ourselves, we should appeal to God for justice. This not only helps us feel better by giving us an outlet for our frustration, it is far more likely to achieve the desired results than our own efforts at achieving justice. As Romans 12:19 says, we should trust God to avenge us. Remember that God's name is being maligned when God's people are unjustly attacked. God will intervene to bring honour to his name. However, he will do so in his time and not in ours.

We should also examine our own hearts and minds. Perhaps we are not as totally innocent as we think. We should ask God to reveal to us whether or not we have had some role in the conflict. If that is the case then we should make some efforts to remedy the situation. We should also remember that slander definitely has an emotional impact upon us and ask God to keep us from bitterness and anger. As 1 Peter 3:16 says, we should keep our own consciences clear so that God's name is honoured and our accusers are convicted.

Finally, we should praise God when he does deliver us. This is pleasing to God and encourages others in their time of need.

VINDICATION

It's just not right, the things they do to me.
Sometimes, I wish people would let me be.
Someday I'd like to win this lifelong fight.
I'd like God to show people that I'm right.

These words don't seem to have a Christian sound.
After all, it's happiness that we've found.
But we must know when we made our decision,
That we then embarked on God's true mission.

If all the other religions are true,
Then we are a people who must be blue,
It'd be a shame if we found that we're wrong,
And that we have been singing the wrong song.

It's not wrong to ask God to vindicate.
After all, we don't trust in cruel fate.
We must ask him to guide us on the way.
If we think we're right, we're likely to stray.

Chapter 11: The Pain of Disappointment - The Disciples

We have examined the lives of many godly men and women in the Bible who struggled with emotional pain at significant times in their lives. We were reminded time and time again that godliness and holiness does not spare the believer from pain. God allows troubles to come into the lives of his chosen people for many reasons. Sometimes we do not even know the reasons for our suffering.

The people we studied were among the elite of the Bible. We looked at Job, the most righteous man of his day, and his struggles with the pain of silence. We dealt with Mary and Martha, close friends of Jesus, as they struggled with grief at the loss of the beloved brother, Lazarus. We examined the prophet Habakkuk's struggle with the injustice that was rampant in his day. We studied the patriarch Joseph's feelings of estrangement. We touched on the apostle Paul's wrestling with the abuse that he suffered from many different sources. We also investigated the loneliness of the prophet Jeremiah. We glanced at the book of Ecclesiastes' treatment of the pain of meaninglessness. We also looked at Isaiah and the pain of being misunderstood.

In this chapter I will be dealing with one of the best loved resurrection stories, Luke 24:13-24. This passage describes what happened to two disciples of Jesus when they journeyed from Jerusalem to Emmaus. One of the disciples is called Cleopas who is not known apart from this story, the other is not named in the text. Many have speculated that the unnamed disciple may have been Luke himself. Although this is a strong possibility, we cannot be certain. We also do not know why they were going to Emmaus that day.

We do know, however, what they were talking about as they travelled. In Jerusalem, everyone was talking about the crucifixion of Jesus. Jesus was a very public figure and even those who did not believe his message would have been talking about his execution as a common criminal. It was a well known, very dramatic event. While everyone was talking about Jesus' death, there were significant differences in the way that they

talked about it. Some, like the religious leaders who arranged for his execution, would have been talking with a spirit of triumph. Many others would have been talking about it with a spirit of idle curiosity. The crucifixion of such a well known person would certainly be worth talking about. Still others, like those who followed Jesus, would have been talking with a spirit of profound disappointment. These two disciples were definitely in the latter group. The whole situation seemed to have no explanation to these two. Why had their beloved teacher been executed as a criminal when he had done nothing wrong? Now that their leader was no longer with them, who were they going to follow?

The disciples had great hopes and plans. They followed Jesus thinking that he was the answer to all their dreams on conquest, victory and liberation. Now he was dead and their lives were in ruins. They had given up everything to follow him and he was gone. Their hopes and dreams were shattered. Now they had nothing to live for. Their plan for the redemption of Israel and their high places in the kingdom seemed hopeless. We can see their disappointment in one phrase which came from the lips of Cleopas, "... we had hoped ..." What could be sadder than people without hope? Why were they so deeply disturbed? What lay behind their profound disappointment?

Verse 16 says, "But they were kept from recognizing him." It has been suggested that the glare of the setting sun obscured their vision. This is possible, but we do not know the real reason. On a number of occasions, the risen Jesus was not recognized by people who knew him. Probably part of the reason that they did not recognize Jesus was that they were not expecting to see him. After all, he was dead and who expects to meet someone who is dead walking along the road? Their Master had been crucified contrary to their expectations and now he had risen from the dead contrary to their expectations. Thus, we can see that their problem was one of expectations. Their hopes had been dashed by the death of Jesus because they were expecting the wrong kind of Messiah. They had expected a conquering king who would deliver them from their Roman oppression. They were expecting an earthly king who would bring about an earthly deliverance.

Instead, Jesus came as a heavenly king to bring about a heavenly deliverance. Instead of freeing them from Roman oppression, he came to free them from sin, death and guilt.

Note that Cleopas called Jesus, “a prophet, powerful in word and deed.” Even though Peter had confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Cleopas still called him a prophet and not the Messiah. This tells us clearly that the disciples did not really understand who Jesus was. They saw Jesus work miracles and they listened to his wonderful teaching so they said that he was “powerful in word and deed.” They even recognized that his power came from God, but they did not know as we know, that he was the Son of God. Undoubtedly, his death had convinced them that he was not their Messiah after all. How could someone who was supposed to live forever die? How could the Messiah be crucified like a common criminal? Jesus had told them that he would die and that he would rise from the dead, but either they were not listening or they did not understand him, likely the latter.

Jesus rebuked them for their lack of understanding. His rebuke was strong, “How foolish,” literally means without sense. “Slow of heart,” means slowness to comprehend or to act. It implies dullness of mind. Jesus then explained what the prophecies of the Messiah really meant. He explained to them that the suffering and death that he experienced were part of God’s plan from the beginning. The very things that disturbed them about Jesus were the strongest proof of his Messiahship.

Today, mankind’s main problem is still the same. People do not understand who Jesus was. They may call him a prophet as Cleopas did. They may even acknowledge that he came from God as the Muslims do. They may call him a great teacher as most people do. However, they do not recognize him as the unique Son of God and their Lord and Saviour. This is why they go through life disillusioned and disappointed as these two disciples did. It is quite natural to have one’s expectations and hopes dashed when they are based on false beliefs and assumptions.

Even Christians, those who acknowledge that Jesus is their Lord and Saviour, do not always grasp what this means. They put their hopes and expectations on human beings, or on job promotions or on winning the lottery. Understandably, they are disappointed when their expectations are not met. If you want to avoid disappointment, avoid false expectations. Trust in Christ and not in people or things.

Cleopas also said, “Some of our women amazed us.” He related briefly the women’s visit to the tomb on Easter Sunday morning. However, he made it clear that he did not really believe the women’s story. Their story had been verified at least as far as the empty tomb went, but that was not enough for the disciples. They needed more evidence than that to believe in something so incredible as Jesus’ rising from the dead. Even though Jesus had predicted that he would rise on the third day and the women had been told by the angels that Jesus had risen on the third day, this was not enough for them. Even though Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, they did not believe that he himself had risen. This shows us that the disciples were far from gullible. They were practical men who needed tangible proof. The story of the women was all too indirect and uncertain for them. Note that when the women related their encounter at the tomb to the Eleven, the apostles did not believe them. Their words seemed to them like nonsense. Luke, the physician uses a medical term here for nonsense. It means the babblings of a fevered and insane mind.

Cleopas finished his account with these words, “Him they did not see.” The emphasis on him means that the disciples apparently went to the tomb expecting to see Jesus, but did not. This threw some doubt into what the women had said. At this point Jesus had not appeared to any of the apostles. His appearances to them were what convinced them of the reality of his resurrection. Remember Thomas would not believe until he had seen Jesus himself. Their lack of belief is a comfort to us. Since they were not easily convinced, we can be sure that their testimony was founded on sure facts. As Paul related in 1 Corinthians 15, the many appearances of the risen Jesus Christ to

groups of down-to-earth, practical men mean that we can more easily accept their testimony.

Note also that while Jesus rebuked them harshly for their lack of understanding, he did not condemn them for their doubts. Many people in the Bible expressed their doubts to God without being condemned. God responds to honest doubt. He is willing to answer our questions of faith if they are sincere. However, many so called doubts and questions arise out of a refusal to believe or a refusal to repent. This elicits a different response from God.

One of the main reasons why disappointment creeps into our lives is our lack of faith. Things do not turn out the way that we expect them to and we have trouble trusting God in the difficult times. Just as the word of the women and the predictions of Jesus were not enough for the disciples, the promises of God in the Bible are not enough for us. Even though God has answered many of our prayers and delivered us from many troubles, when troubles come and our prayers are not immediately answered the way that we want them answered, we come to doubt either God's power to deliver or his love for us. That is when the darkness of disappointment sets in.

Jesus told the disciples that their problem was that they did not believe the prophets. He says that the root of their problem was their failure to understand and accept what was clearly taught in Scripture. The prophets had spoken plainly enough, but their minds were not quick enough to grasp what was meant. He explained that the necessity of the Messiah's death was foretold in prophecy. He related and interpreted the predictions of his passion in the Old Testament. Note that Jesus said, "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things ... ?" Jesus' crucifixion was not just a possibility that might or might not become an actuality, it was a necessity. It was part of God's plan right from the beginning of time and the Old Testament had predicted it many times and in many different ways.

Jesus then began a systematic Bible study focusing on the suffering on the Messiah. Luke does not say which passages Jesus chose for his study, but makes it clear that the whole Old

Testament was involved. The expression, “Moses and all the Prophets,” means the entire Old Testament. They responded positively to his explanation. Verse 32 says, “They asked each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?’” Though they were blind to the truths about Jesus’ death and resurrection, they were open to having them explained to them.

The disciples’ problem is not unique. Many people today do not really understand the Bible. That is because, they like the disciples, approach the Bible with preconceived ideas rather than open minds. Prejudices cloud people’s minds. Twisted thinking has been used to say that the Bible supports such things as slavery and segregation. Even Christians often misunderstand the Bible for the same reason. Two common examples of Christians not understanding the simple truths are Hosea and Job. Many Christians say that God could not possibly have commanded the prophet Hosea to marry an immoral woman even though that is plainly what Hosea 1:2 says. Also, Christians have often said that Job somehow deserved the suffering that came upon him even though God himself said that he did not in Job 2:3. I have even heard Christian speakers quote the words of Job’s friends to back up their ‘health and wealth gospel,’ even though God in Job 42:8 said that they had not spoken correctly.

Confusion over what the Bible actually says can lead to many problems. People who think that the Bible promises them a life of continuous victory can be deeply disappointed when defeat enters their lives. People who think that the Bible promises them health and wealth can be deeply disappointed when they get sick and lose their jobs.

Almost all of us have, like the disciples, been taught erroneous things about the Bible. The people that have fed us these errors may have even been sincere in their misguided beliefs. My study of the Bible has forced me to change some of the beliefs that I held in childhood because I found that they were not actually supported in Scripture. Do you approach the Bible with an open mind or do you allow prejudices and preconceived notions to cloud your understanding?

The two disciples had to persuade Jesus to stay with them. Actually, persuade is not a strong enough word. Compel would be better. This reminds us that Jesus does not force himself on anyone. If we do not want to listen to him, that is our choice. It was probably at the home of one of the two where they went to eat that night.

It was when Jesus broke the bread that he was recognized by the disciples. Some have suggested that this was a celebration of the Lord's Supper, but there is no support for this suggestion. The two disciples were not even present when Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. We have every reason to believe that it was an ordinary meal in an ordinary home.

When the disciples realized that it was Jesus and that he had indeed risen from the dead, they immediately went back to Jerusalem to tell others the good news. The arguments that they had used with Jesus about the lateness of the hour and inadvisability of travelling at night no longer had any impact upon them. They were too excited.

It is interesting that, though the disciples did not believe the women, they believed Simon Peter. Perhaps that is because he actually saw the risen Christ. In any case their disappointment had been turned into excitement, their defeat into victory. They had begun to understand who Jesus was. They eventually believed what the women had told them. They finally understood the truth about the Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah.

Has disappointment crept into your life? Do you really understand who Jesus was and is? Is your faith in God as strong as it used to be? Have you allowed prejudices and preconceived ideas to cloud your understanding of the Bible?

The biggest reason why the disciples were so disappointed and discouraged was that they did not understand Jesus' mission and purpose. They expected the wrong kind of Messiah. They did not know who Jesus really was and why he came to earth. This issue is still relevant today. If people really understood who Jesus was and is there would not be the problems that there are. This was expressed beautifully in a Traditional Spiritual that I found on the Internet, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy."

SWEET LITTLE JESUS BOY

Sweet little Jesus Boy,
they made you be born in a manger.
Sweet little Holy Child,
didn't know who you was.

Didn't know You come to save us, Lord;
to take our sins away.
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see,
we didn't know who You was.

The world treat You mean, Lord;
treat me mean, too.
But that's how things is down here,
we didn't know 'twas You.

You done showed us how,
we is trying.
Master, You done showed us how,
even when you's dying.

Just seem like we can't do right,
look how we treated You.
But please, sir, forgive us Lord,
we didn't know 'twas You.

Sweet little Jesus boy,
born long time ago.
Sweet little Holy Child,
and we didn't know who you was.

Robert MacGimsey

Chapter 12: The Pain of Despair - Elijah

The Bible typically exposes the weaknesses of the heroes of faith. Elijah was one of these heroes whose human frailty is well known to us. He is dropped into history from obscurity. He suddenly appears on the scene with the sole information that he is a Tishbite. Yet he was a powerful figure who exerted influence far beyond his generation. James 5:17 says, "Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and one half years. Again he prayed, and heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops." He prophesied a drought which would only end when he said it would and that is exactly what happened. He then had the boldness to challenge the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah on Mount Carmel. 1 Kings 18 relates this well known story. Elijah proposed a test to prove who was the true god, Baal or Yahweh. Elijah would represent Yahweh and Baal would be represented by his four hundred and fifty prophets. Each side would prepare a bull for sacrifice and call on their god to consume the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal shouted louder and louder to no avail. Elijah taunted them and the false prophets became frantic, but there was no response. Then Elijah repaired Yahweh's altar and placed a bull on the altar and poured water on it. Yahweh sent fire down and consumed the sacrifice. Then Elijah slaughtered the prophets of Baal and called for the rain to come.

This was a great victory and Elijah was energized enough to run ahead of Ahab's chariot all the way to Jezreel. Unfortunately, Elijah's exhilaration did not last long. His great courage gave way to fear and his excitement to despair. Faced with threats to kill him and continued opposition from the royal house and apostasy in Israel, Elijah fled. He prayed that he might share the common fate of mankind in death. It is interesting that the prophet who was running for his life prayed for death. Elijah appears to have exhibited the signs of what is now called bipolar depression and used to be called manic depression. Clearly, he was a man just like us, full of human frailties. No one can be on

top of the world all of the time. None of us live a life of continuous victory. Eugene Kennedy, author of "*On Becoming a Counselor*," entitled his chapter on depression, "The Everyman Illness." That is because, at one time or another, everyone gets depressed. We all have our down times. Fortunately, for most of us, the feeling of sadness does not last long – a few hours or maybe even a day or two. For some, depression lasts a long time – weeks and even years. The symptoms or consequences of depression are many: hopelessness, fear of the future, worry, pessimism, irritability, inability to concentrate, lack of confidence, constant headaches, loss of physical energy and withdrawal from people. When these symptoms continue for some time, the individual needs counselling. When they continue for years, the individual needs medication.

Human depression is complex and caused by many different things. As Christians, we often look for spiritual factors, but the cause may be physical, mental or emotional. Environmental influences may also play a part. Let us look at Elijah's depression and its causes. This may help us when depression comes to us as it most certainly will, at least for a while.

Many physical causes of depression have been documented. S.A.D.D. or Seasonal Affective Depression Disorder affects many people and is caused by the lack of sunlight in the winter time. Lack of sleep and improper diet are often causes of mood swings and can even lead to long term depression. Chemical imbalances are the causes of many mental illnesses including depression. This may be particularly true of bipolar depression. That is why some clinically depressed individuals need medication to restore the balance. Hypoglycemia, hypothyroidism, hormonal imbalance, viral infections and drug misuse are also contributing factors in depression.

It is interesting to note that God's first treatment for Elijah's depression was rest, food and drink, more rest and more food and drink. God knew that at least part of Elijah's problem was that he was tired and hungry. This should not surprise us. Our physical condition often affects our emotional state. When I miss a meal I get more irritable and impatient. Others are grouchy before they

get their first cup of coffee in the morning. I remember hearing one pastor say that many cases of so-called spiritual depression can be cured by a good night's sleep or a good dose of laxative. One of the reasons why there is an increase in emotional problems and stress in North America is that our diet is so poor. When we do not get the right amount of vitamins and minerals, not only does our body suffer, but our mind suffers as well. Most people do not get all the sleep that they need either. Our busy lifestyle is reeking havoc on our emotional well-being. Many people do not even take a good vacation every year. This is not the way God meant us to live. He instituted not just one but several different types of Sabbath rests and holidays. Our minds and bodies need to take a break from time to time.

Our emotional state also impacts our physical well-being. Proverbs 17:22 says, "A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones." Our mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health are all connected. When one of these suffers, the rest suffer as well. That is the way God built us. He wants us to take care of our bodies. If we really believe that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit as 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, then we will take care of them. God is not pleased when we misuse our bodies and we often pay a terrible price.

One of the symptoms or consequences of depression is withdrawal from people. Unfortunately, loneliness and isolation is also one of the causes of depression. That is one reason why, often people who are depressed, get more depressed and stay depressed for some time. It is a downward spiral into darker and darker moods.

This was true of Elijah. Although he was a man of power, he did not seem to fit anywhere. He was a loner. This was one of the things that made him the man he was. In the end it was one of the things about him that God had to change. A big part of Elijah's heartbreak was that he was alone. There was no one to confide in or help him. Note also that he was exhibiting that classic sign of depression. He withdrew from people. Although one of his problems was his isolation, he isolated himself still

further. He made sure that there was absolutely no one around him. This did not help his depression at all.

Elijah not only was alone in his depression, he felt alone in his mission. Note how he complained to God in verse ten, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left and now they are trying to kill me." He said this again in verse 14. None of us are strong enough to live for God totally on our own. We all need the help and support of other Christians. That is why Hebrews 10:25 says, "let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Elijah thought that he was alone. He complained that he was the only one true prophet of God left. In fact, he was the only true believer left in Israel. God told him that he was badly mistaken. He said to Elijah in verse 18, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel, all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him." Have you ever felt alone like Elijah? Have you ever felt that you were the only one who was faithful or the only one with integrity? Sometimes we do feel like we are alone in a sea of wickedness. However, we must remember that God always keeps for himself a faithful remnant. There are always other people who are true to God. We just have to find them. We also have to keep getting together and encouraging each other.

Note also that one of God's cures for Elijah's depression was to end his isolation. He told him to anoint Elisha to succeed him. Elisha became his support and confidant. The apostle Paul avoided travelling alone. Note that when he split up with Barnabas he took Silas with him. God said in Genesis 2:18, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." We always apply this verse to marriage and rightfully so, but its implications are broader than that. God never meant us to live life alone. He designed us as social creatures. He built within us a need for fellowship with him and with one another.

If you find that you are feeling blue, then do not withdraw from people as you might be tempted to do. Instead find a friend to confide in. Find someone to lean on and lift you up.

Elijah's depression can be traced to inadequate health, improper diet and lack of sleep. He may have also had a chemical imbalance leading to bipolar depression. Inadequate support was also a factor. He was a loner and had no one to confide in or help him. However, the biggest factor in his depression was his inadequate perspective. He had that problem that is common to most people with frequent bouts of depression – all or nothing thinking. Elijah had clearly demonstrated the power of Yahweh. He had called for a drought that would only end when he said it would. He had defeated the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel when Yahweh consumed his sacrifice. He presumed that this would be the beginning of a great revival. Now that he had clearly proven that Yahweh was the one true God, he naturally thought that many people would turn to him in repentance and faith. He had expended himself in service to God and therefore thought that God would honour his efforts by bringing about revival. However, despite the people's cheers and enthusiasm on Mount Carmel, the next day they were no different. There was no mass conversion to the true God. Elijah's great victory over the prophets of Baal just made Jezebel more determined to kill him. The Queen and the people were obstinate in their sin. The unbelieving human heart is incredibly resistant to truth. Carnal hearts hardened by sin against God are not always convicted by evidence no matter how good it is.

Elijah's problem was one of expectations. He had presumed an outcome far different from the one that he was now confronted with. No wonder that he had a profound sense of futility. Think of what he had done in the name of Yahweh. The drought, the consuming of the sacrifice and the rain were not enough to turn the hearts of the people and only made Jezebel more determined to get rid of him. Nothing that Elijah had done seemed worthwhile. All of the great wonders that he had done in the name of Yahweh apparently accomplished nothing.

When bad things keep happening no matter how hard we try, we are prime candidates for the Elijah complex. We become prone to all or nothing thinking. Since we did not get the results that we wanted, we complain that we have accomplished nothing. This kind of all or nothing thinking is factually incorrect. Just as Elijah was wrong in thinking that he was the only one who had not fallen prey to Baal worship we are wrong in thinking that our efforts have been all for naught. Often we do not see the results of our work for God, but they are there none the less.

Elijah focused on himself and what was happening to him. Naturally this led to self-pity. Unfortunately, Elijah's usefulness as a servant of God suffered when he developed his attitude of self-importance. He let his depression destroy his perspective. This is another part of the downward spiral of depression. Our inadequate perspective brings about a depression and depression destroys our perspective. We become more and more prone to all or nothing thinking.

Depression is indeed complex. There are many possible factors that contribute to a blue mood. Unfortunately, the resulting despair often intensifies the very factors that brought about the depression in the first place. An improper diet destroys our mood and then we do not feel like eating. We feel lonely so we withdraw even further from human contact. Our distorted thinking affects our emotions and our low emotional state distorts our thinking even further.

What is the way out of depression? First we should try and determine the cause or causes of our despair. Are we eating the right kind of foods and getting enough sleep? Do we need to take vitamin and or mineral supplements? A physical check-up may be in order to determine if there is some physical cause. Do we have an adequate support structure or are we trying to live life alone? Do we have friends to confide in and lean on in times of difficulty? Is our thinking distorted? Do we expect too much from our efforts or from our friends and/or spouses? Are we focused too much on our own problems? If we find the cause of our depression, then we are well on our way to finding the cure.

Second, we should strengthen our support network. Instead of isolating ourselves from others we should seek fellowship. We should get involved in worthwhile activities. We should attend Bible studies and prayer meetings. We should keep in touch with family and friends by email and telephone or better yet, in person.

Finally, we should try to strengthen our relationship with God. Elijah realized that his primary need was for God to meet him. God did meet him, but not in the way that he expected. God was not in the spectacular manifestations of power that Elijah expected, but in the still small voice. Psalm 34:18 says "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." David testified in 2 Samuel 22:17 that God drew him out of deep waters. Paul said in 2 Corinthians 7:6 that God comforts the downcast. Draw near to God in your time of need and he will draw near to you. Seek his face when you are downcast and he will comfort you.

There are some that say that depression is sinful and that Christians should not get depressed. However, Jesus said to Peter, James and John in Matthew 26:38, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." This means that, in Gethsemane, Jesus was deeply depressed. Of course, he knew that he was going to be betrayed by Judas, denied by Peter, deserted by the rest of the disciples, condemned by the Jewish authorities and executed by the Romans. Who would not feel sad at a time like that. He also knew that he was going to take on the sins of the whole world. No wonder he was depressed. He would not have been human if he was not and Jesus was fully human. He was also fully divine, but that did not spare him from normal human emotions. Isaiah 53:3 says, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering." Since Jesus was not spared the anguish of sorrow, why should we expect to escape it?

Psalm 42-43 is the record of another man's personal battle with depression. While these are two separate psalms in our Bible, it is better to treat them as one psalm. It is likely that they were originally one psalm that was later divided for some reason or

Psalm 43 was written later to complete Psalm 42. In any case, the two psalms are one in language and theme. They share the same chorus or refrain. They are so closely connected in content and style as to defy separation.

This is a very beautiful poem. It constantly mingles longing and hope. It is said that it is the one of most sadly beautiful songs in the Psalter. We all know the appeal of a good sad song. This psalm is the first of a series of psalms ascribed to the sons of Korah. Korah was a Levite who, together with Dathan and Abiram, led a rebellion against Moses' authority (Numbers 16). He was swallowed up by the earth, but his family line was not wiped out. They became active in the worship of God in the tabernacle and the temple. The descendants of Korah were appointed by David as musicians (1 Chronicles 6) and continued to serve in that function at least until the time of Jehosaphat (2 Chronicles 20). Thus, it is likely that one or more of the descendants of the rebellious Korah penned this poem, probably as part of his role as a temple musician.

This psalm is a maskil, which likely means that it was used as a teaching psalm. Since it deals with an individual's experience with depression, we would think that it would inform about how to handle depression, and so it does. Periods of depression, spiritual or otherwise, are a normal part of the Christian's walk with God. Thus, it is important to learn how to handle depression. There are many wrong ways of dealing with depression and the psalmist tried a couple himself before finding his answer.

This psalm opens on a note of almost unrelieved gloom. In vivid poetic language the psalmist relates his innermost feelings of discouragement, loneliness and despair. He felt a thirst for God that seemed unquenchable. Since he lived near a desert he would know what thirst meant, so he described his longing for the presence of God in these terms. As a deer cannot disguise his thirst for water, he could not disguise his thirst for God. Of course, longing for God is a good thing and these words have even been put into a praise chorus. However, when your longings are not met for a considerable length of time, it can

make you miserable. Loneliness was one of the problems that plagued the writer of this psalm. He was cut off from his friends and exiled from Jerusalem. Because of this, he felt far from God. He thought back to the days when he felt close to God. He remembered the times when he used to lead pilgrimages to the great festivals. Yet he was no longer able to do this. Perhaps he wrote this psalm during the time of the exile. In any case, the memories of the good old days were no comfort to him. Instead they seemed to haunt him. Just as it is more terrible to be poor if you have once been rich, it is more burdensome to be miserable if you have once been very happy. Nostalgia can be a cause of depression. That is why Paul said in Philippians 3:13, 14 that he forgot about the past and pressed on toward the future. He knew that this was part of his secret of contentment.

The psalmist had always associated God with the temple. That is where he felt God's presence most keenly. He found it difficult to meet with God anywhere else. Both Psalm 27:4 and Psalm 84:10 describe that same longing to meet with God in his house. When the psalmist could no longer go to the temple, he felt isolated from God. He wanted badly to return to Jerusalem so that he could worship God as freely and as joyously as he had in the past.

Unfortunately, those around him did not share his thirst for God. In fact, they continually taunted him with the thought that God had somehow forgotten him. They said in effect, "Where is your God when you need him the most?" He had openly declared his faith in God and this made him vulnerable to their verbal jabs. Satan used this kind of taunt in his temptation of Jesus. Twice he said, "If you are the Son of God . . ." In effect he said, "Can you prove that you are special in God's eyes?" This is indeed a fearsome challenge. It does not always appear that God blesses those who are his own. Sometimes it does look like God has abandoned his children. We all know that this can never happen, but appearances can seem very real.

The psalmist tried looking within himself for the answer to his depression, but found no comfort there. His memories only

haunted him. His nostalgia and self pity only made him feel worse. Job expressed this same feeling of despair in Job 29:1-5.

Who among us has never felt this way? All of us at one time or another long for happier days gone by. However, it does no good to look back. We cannot find the answer to depression by contemplation any more than the psalmist could.

Since he could not find the answer to his loneliness and depression within himself, the psalmist tried another approach. He started complaining about his misfortune. He switched his focus from himself to God.

The psalmist saw all of his problems as the result of God's actions. He blamed God for all of his troubles. He still wrestled with doubt and distress, but he no longer looked within himself for the answer. The fact that he now directed his anger at God we may see as something terrible, but it is better than wallowing in self pity. We are on the road to emotional and spiritual recovery when we are able to talk to God again even if only to question him.

The psalmist's question, "Why have you forgotten me?" is a natural one under the circumstances. It is not unusual to question God when things do not seem right. David, in Psalm 22:1, asked, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus asked the same question when he hung on the cross. Job asked in Job 3:11, "Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb?" Jeremiah asked, "Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?" (Jeremiah 15:18). The prophet Habakkuk cried out, "Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong?" (Habakkuk 1:3). Sometimes it does seem like life is unfair. It often appears that the wicked flourish while the righteous suffer. We may feel that God has indeed forgotten us. God does not forget us, but sometimes it may seem like he does.

The writer was by the river Jordan, not far from its source on the slopes of Mount Hermon. There the river rushes among boulders and over falls. This scene reminded him of the way that he felt. He felt like he was overwhelmed by God and the waves reminded him of the unceasing taunts of his enemies.

In the “Peanuts” story, “It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown,” Linus waits in a pumpkin patch for the Great Pumpkin to appear. His friends laugh at him for his foolishness. Finally, in his anguish, Linus cries out, “O Great Pumpkin, where are you?” This is how many people who trust in God feel from time to time. People may laugh at us and say that God does not exist or that he is not concerned about us. They may call us foolish for trusting in him when he does not seem to be answering our prayers. Yet we must cling to our faith in God even if that means questioning him. We must cling to our Rock because he is the only refuge in the storm.

The psalmist found out that blaming God for all of his problems really did not help. Complaining was not the answer to his troubles. He was right to speak to God about his situation, but he was wrong in the way that he spoke to him.

He realized that, instead of complaining to God about his circumstances, he should be asking God for his help in the situation. He asked God to deliver him from his enemies. He prayed for vindication. He said in effect, “God, show them that I am right and that they are wrong.”

He voiced two desires. He wanted freedom from persecution and he longed to return to the temple. He still thought of the temple as the best place to meet with God. In this poem, God’s light and his truth are personified as heavenly messengers who will lead the psalmist back to the near presence of God. Note the progression from the holy mountain (Zion), to God’s dwelling place (the temple), to the altar, and finally to God himself. He perceived the journey back to God as a gradual process and not a sudden transformation. He also knew that his approach to God was by way of the altar of sacrifice. There are no short cuts to fellowship with God. We must come through the altar of thanksgiving and praise.

The answer to the problem of emotional and spiritual depression for the psalmist was communion with God. However, this is no magic formula. The road back to God may be difficult. There may be something hindering our relationship with him. This may be some hidden sin or negative attitude. If this is the

case, then we need to find out what the problem is and deal with it. That is why we need light and truth to guide us into his presence. This is where the Word of God can be so illuminating. We also may feel isolated from the presence of God because we have been casual in our worship of him or neglecting it entirely. We may not have kept up our private devotional life. There again the Bible can help us as we meditate upon it. Psalm 107:20 says, "He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave." The ultimate refuge of the believer is the Word of God. We can deal with the misfortunes of life when we are convinced that God is on our side and will eventually deliver us from all of our troubles.

We all have periods of discouragement. Depression is an increasingly common experience from which Christians are not exempt. Remember even Christ himself was a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3). We may see our despair as a Satanic attack and this may be true, but not always. A number of different physical, emotional and spiritual factors can cause depression and we cannot always determine what is behind our bout of despair.

However, the cause is not as important as the cure. The road back to emotional and spiritual health is what matters most. There are several wrong paths that we can take toward that goal. We may try looking within ourselves as the psalmist did, but usually we will only feel worse. We may try looking without at the circumstances that surround us and only get more discouraged. Or we can find our way back to fellowship with God and win the victory over our depression.

DESPAIR

How often do you feel lonely and blue?
Have you ever wished your life would be through?
Is all of your life now filled with stress?
Do you find yourself in deep distress?

Then count yourself in good company.
Depression has afflicted many.
So do not think you are all alone.
Try calling a good friend on the phone.

You may think that your problem is deep,
When you just haven't had enough sleep.
Maybe, if you're willing to try it,
You might try to improve your diet.

Here's an idea you can borrow.
When you think that there's no tomorrow,
And you are alone in your sorrow,
Jesus too was a man of sorrow.

Chapter 13: The Pain of Fear - David

1 Samuel 21 describes a very dark time in the life of David. He had learned from his friend, Jonathan, that King Saul intended to kill him. Therefore, he was fleeing for his life. Surprisingly, he went to Gath. This was, to say the least, an interesting choice of hiding places. It was the hometown of Goliath whom he had courageously slain in the story we all know so well. This shows us the desperate nature of David's plight. There was nowhere in his homeland of Israel where he felt safe, so he fled to the land of his enemies, the Philistines. This was a period of intense loneliness and fear for David. His life was in danger no matter where he went. He had been anointed king, but he was running from the current king. He had killed the champion of the Philistines, but now he found himself alone in their territory and at their mercy. He pretended to be insane because of his great fear (1 Samuel 21:13).

David wrote two psalms about this terrifying experience: Psalm 34 and Psalm 56. One is very well known and the other is not. Perhaps this is because Psalm 34 is very uplifting and Psalm 56 is darker in tone. Psalm 34 is an acrostic poem. Each of the verses with the exception of the last begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It alternates between personal testimony of God's deliverance and repeated calls to join in the praise and increase your own faith in God. This psalm is quoted in 1 Peter 2 and 3.

In Psalm 34:4 David uses a strong word for fear. It is similar to the word translated terror in Psalm 31:13. It could refer to the events that are dreaded or to the dread itself. David, the young man who had courageously fought the giant Goliath when all the men of Israel's army were afraid to face him was now terrified. This reminds us that even the bravest of men find themselves in fearful circumstances.

We all have different fears. Some people are afraid of the dark or enclosed spaces (claustrophobia). Some are afraid of open spaces (agoraphobia). Some are afraid of heights (acrophobia). Some more exotic phobias include ailurophobia (cats),

antophobia (flowers), astraphobia (lightning), brontophobia (thunder) and ophidiophobia (snakes). The list is almost endless. Some things that bring terror to some are laughed at or ignored by others. I do not know what makes you afraid, but I do know David's recipe for overcoming fear. He describes it well in Psalm 34.

Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them." The angel of the LORD is a term regularly used in the Old Testament for God himself coming down to earth. God surrounds his children. He encircles them with his protecting power. The sixth chapter of 2 Kings tells an interesting story. Elisha had succeeded Elijah as the prophet of God for Israel. The king of Aram was at war with Israel. Elisha kept warning the king of Israel of the king of Aram's plans. This, of course, frustrated the king of Aram and he thought that one of his men was betraying him. However, one of his officers replied to the accusation, "None of us, my lord and king, but Elisha. The prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom." (verse 12) Then the king ordered him to find out where Elisha was so that he could capture him. Elisha went out one morning to find himself surrounded by a huge army. His servant was very frightened, but Elisha said, "Don't be afraid. Those who are with us are more than those who are with them" (verse 16). Then he prayed that God would open his servant's eyes. God did so and he saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire around Elisha. Elisha's servant saw and believed. However, as Jesus said to Thomas in John 20:29, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him." 1 Peter 2:3 says, "Now that you have tasted that the Lord is good." Peter referred to tasting as the first venture into the life of faith and encourages his readers to go further. David encouraged his readers to sample what God had to offer. Trusting in him would bring blessing because he is good. God knows our fears. Trying to hide them from him and pretending to be brave is useless. Instead, we

should confess our fears to him and acknowledge our dependence on him. The first step to deliverance from fear is appropriating the power of God in the midst of a fearful situation.

Psalm 56:3 says, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you." Faith is seen here as a deliberate act in defiance of one's emotional state. In verse four, David asked, "What can mortal man do to me?" When David contrasted his powerful enemies with the power of God, he saw them as frail flesh. They could still hurt him as he confessed in verse eight, but they could not defeat him. This should remind us of Paul's question in Romans 8:31, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

If we want to win the victory over our fears, then we must first acknowledge them to God. We must confess our weakness and turn to him for strength. God equips his servants for war. He fortifies them against their enemies. We can trust in him to deliver us despite the forces that are allied against us.

The biggest temptation that we face when we are afraid is the temptation to be deceitful. It is hard not to try to lie your way out of whatever difficulty that you are in, but that is precisely what we should not do. Instead we should keep our integrity. Psalm 34:15 says, "The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears attentive to their cry." Verses 19 to 22 emphasize the great divide between those whom God accepts and those whom he rejects. He protects the righteous and punishes the wicked.

In Psalm 56:5, 6, David complains about those who were conspiring against him. They twisted his words and constantly watched him. This unrelenting pressure was the worst part of his ordeal. At such times we are tempted to take the easy way out. How often have you been tempted to lie your way out of a difficult situation? The temptation to be deceitful is greatest when we are afraid. However, true deliverance comes from keeping our integrity in these tough times. David makes this quite clear in Psalm 34:12, 13. God's eyes are on the righteous, but his face is against those who do evil (Psalm 34:15, 16).

Trouble may come to the righteous, but God will deliver him (Psalm 34:19). Trials come to us to test our integrity. Will we

take the easy way out and try to lie our way out of difficulty? Or will we keep our integrity and trust in God to deliver us? The choice is ours.

Psalm 34:1 says, "I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips." "All times" literally means "at every time." David said that he would praise God in every situation in which he found himself. This should remind us of Paul's admonition in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will in Christ Jesus." Paul also exhorted us in Philippians 4:4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" This is the whole point of Psalm 34. David penned it so that people might join him in praise of God. David was celebrating his deliverance and inviting others to join in the celebration.

David said in Psalm 56:12, "I am under vows to you, O God; I will present my thank offerings to you." When God delivers us from a fearful situation, we are under obligation to praise him for his deliverance and to tell others about what he has done for us. Psalm 34 is a personal testimony about God's deliverance. It was also written to encourage others. David said, "Taste and see that the LORD is good." He said in effect, "This was my experience; it can be yours. God rescued me. You too are safe in his arms." God wants us to taste his goodness and to personally experience what he can do for us.

All of us at one time or another are afraid. Different things inspire fear in different people. David was not afraid to face the giant Goliath, but he was afraid of King Saul when Saul tried to kill him. But David learned how to overcome his fear and we can as well. We can follow David's steps to overcoming fear.

First, we must remember that God is greater than our fears. Our enemies, the things that terrify us are no match for the omnipotent God. We must open the eyes of faith and see the mighty army of angels around us. Second, we must keep our integrity in times of fear. When we are in a fearful situation, we are severely tempted to try to lie our way out, but we must not give into the temptations. God protects those who keep their integrity. He honours the righteous and punishes the wicked.

Finally, we must praise God for our deliverance. God deserves our praise, and our thanksgiving encourages others who find themselves in difficult situations.

FEAR

There are many different things we fear.
Many issues over which we shed a tear.
Our lives are filled with things that frighten us.
Some of which we're reluctant to discuss.

As children, we were afraid of the dark.
Maybe now we're afraid of bosses that bark.
There are many things that people might fear,
Does the list grow each and every year?

When our fears make us seem so impotent,
Why don't we trust in the Omnipotent?
When we're afraid, we must ask, "Who's greater?"
The things that we fear or their Creator?

Chapter 14: God With Us in our Pain

In this book, I have looked at grief, abuse, estrangement and many other emotional problems that plague believers today. For each of these problems, we examined a biblical character who experienced that problem. Each of these biblical characters was a firm believer in God. Thus, we cannot attribute their problems to a lack of faith or some other simplistic explanation. We learned that we are not alone in our pain. Not only did these biblical characters deal with the same issues that we face, others within our congregation admitted that they had the same struggles. This is important. Living with emotional pain is bad enough. Feeling that one is alone in the struggle makes it far worse.

In this chapter, I would like to look at one biblical character who experienced many of the same struggles that we face. He is Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Isaiah 53:3 is a good summary of some of the emotional pain that he experienced as he walked this earth. It says, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” If Jesus was “a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering,” then why is it that Christians have to pretend that they are always on top of the world? Why is it that we never admit the pain that we are going through? Why is it that we think that emotional health is our God-given right and that to confess that we are suffering is tantamount to denying our faith?

One of the names that was given to Jesus was Immanuel. This means God with us. This is because, in Christ, God came down to earth to live among us (John 1:14). There were some early heretics who denied that Jesus’ earthly existence was real. They affirmed his divinity, but denied his humanity. They even said that he made no footprints as he walked in the sand. However, we know that this is false. We know that he got tired and fell asleep in the boat. We know that he wept at the graveside of Lazarus. Let us look at some of the emotional pain that Jesus experienced. This will help us remember that he was a real human being as well as the Son of God. It will also help us

remember that God is with us in our pain. We are never alone. He does understand how we feel because, in Christ, he felt the same pain.

Soon after Jesus fed the five thousand he talked to a huge number of people who were following him about the bread of life. The response from many of them is given in John 6:66, “This is a hard saying. Who can accept it?” Jesus made it clear to them that he claimed to be the very life of God come down from heaven. No one could live this life or face eternity without submitting to him. Jesus’ discourse resulted in a parting of ways for a great number of his disciples. Some have said that the problem was that they could not understand what he was saying, but the ordinary disciples never fully understood Jesus. Their problem was they did not want to make a whole-hearted commitment to following him. The twelve did not understand him either on this occasion, but Peter said, “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 6:68, 69). It is not intellectual difficulty that keeps people from becoming Christians; it is the height of Christ’s moral demand. Jesus was well aware that some would not only reject his offer, but reject it with hostility.

Jesus knew what it was like to have people turn against him. In fact, we all know that one of his close followers, one of his friends, would later betray him. Many of us have felt the pain of estrangement when our friends or loved ones no longer talk to us. Jesus knew that pain as well. Jesus’ life shows us that God is with us in our estrangement.

In Matthew 13 the words of Isaiah 6 are quoted. Jesus spoke in parables to confuse the masses. These parables were only stories to the hostile and merely curious. However, to those who were his committed followers, Jesus revealed their great hidden truths about the kingdom of God. To know the truth about the kingdom of heaven is to know secrets. Paul later picked up on this idea to say that God’s truth comes only by revelation and not by natural instinct.

Jesus knew that the multitudes did not really understand him and that they only followed him because of the miracles. However, even his own close disciples did not fully understand his message. Although he spoke about a spiritual kingdom, they were looking for an earthly kingdom. James and John wanted to sit on his left and right in the kingdom. Even after his death and resurrection, they were still expecting an earthly kingdom (Acts 1:6). Jesus showed us that God is with us in our being misunderstood.

In John 11 we have the familiar story of the raising of Lazarus. Although Jesus was a friend of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, he still did not immediately respond to the sisters' summons, but allowed Lazarus to die. When Jesus did show up, both Mary and Martha greeted him with the conviction that he could have healed Lazarus if he had been there. However, even though Jesus said to Martha that he was the resurrection and the life (verse 25), Martha either did not believe or did not understand what he was saying. In times of bereavement, present sorrow clouds our minds. At such times, we are often overwrought. Death, not life, dominates our thoughts. When we are in intense emotional pain we often feel that there is no relief in sight, like our pain will never end. This, of course, makes the pain worse.

After Martha spoke with Jesus, she went and told her sister Mary that Jesus had arrived. Mary went immediately to see him and greeted him with the same words of partial belief. Verse 33 says, "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled." The phrase, "deeply moved in spirit and troubled," is unusually intense in the original Greek. Jesus was very emotionally disturbed. His emotional disturbance cannot be explained either as an expression of human sympathy or as due to sorrow by the limited faith of his friends. There would seem to be some indignation and even anger in this sorrow. He was angry at the sad fact of death and the iron grip in which mankind is held by the last enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Verse 35 says, "Jesus wept." He suffered much agony of spirit as he approached the grave of Lazarus with tears in his eyes and

anguish in his heart. Jesus knew what it was like to lose a friend. He knew our pain of bereavement and our anger at the apparent finality of death. Jesus showed us that God is with us in our grief.

Depression has been called the “everyman illness.” Everyone gets depressed at one time or another. We all have our down times. Pastors typically get depressed on Monday mornings. So do many other people, but for different reasons. You might think that the Son of God who had the power to walk on water, feed the multitudes and raise the dead would not get depressed, but you would be wrong. In Matthew 26:37 we read that Jesus began to be sorrowful and troubled. These words hardly do justice to the Greek verbs which suggest an anguish of wretchedness. In verse 38 he says, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.” “To the point of death,” probably indicates the scale of his grief. Luke, the physician, describes the pain that Jesus felt at that time in Luke 22:44, “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”

Jesus knew what it was like to be deeply and profoundly depressed. We cannot pretend that God does not know the pain that we go through. Jesus showed us that God is with us in our despair.

The same three that accompanied Jesus at his transfiguration accompanied him to the garden of Gethsemane. This time it appears that they were with him simply for companionship. The Son of God wanted the support of three humble fishermen at his time of trial. It is said that misery loves company. We generally appreciate the presence of friends and loved ones when we are in pain. However, Jesus knew that they would not stay with him. In fact, he had predicted that all of his followers would fall away (verse 31). “On account of me,” indicates that it is Jesus’ own ordeal that would trip them up. It was not just fear for their own safety, but their failure to grasp the purpose of Jesus’ suffering that caused them to stumble.

When Jesus needed his friends the most, they fell asleep on him. They also deserted him when he was arrested, tried and

executed. Think of the loneliness that he must have felt. However, the height of his loneliness can be seen from his words on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Even when our friends and loved ones abandon us, God is still near. However, in Jesus' time of great trial, even God, his Father, forsook him. We will never know that kind of loneliness. Jesus showed us that God is with us in our loneliness.

Jesus was first tried by the Sanhedrin, the ruling Jewish council. They found him guilty of blasphemy because he claimed to be the Son of God. However, while this was definitely an offense punishable by death under Jewish law, the Romans reserved the right of execution. Therefore, they took him before Pilate, the Roman governor. It is interesting that no mention is made in this narrative of the accusation against Jesus by the Jews to Pilate except the protest that they would not have brought him before a Roman tribunal unless he was guilty in their judgment of a criminal offence. The refusal of the Jews to enter Pilate's residence and so defile themselves before the Passover allowed Pilate to interview Jesus in private. He did not question about blasphemy which was not a capital offence under Roman law, but about sedition. If Jesus had indeed claimed to be the king of the Jews, then he was a political revolutionary and a potential danger to Rome. However, Jesus' kingship was not of this world. His followers were not fighting the Romans. Thus, Pilate said in John 18:38, "I find no basis for a charge against him."

However, Jesus was still executed as a common criminal. A great miscarriage of justice was perpetrated. An innocent man was put to death. Jesus showed us that God is with us when we face injustice.

Since he could not find any reason for a charge against Jesus by questioning him, Pilate tried to obtain evidence by having him flogged. At the same time, he hoped that the Jews would be satisfied with this treatment of the prisoner and withdraw their demand for a death sentence. His soldiers also indulged in mockery. After placing a crown of thorns upon Jesus' head, they put a purple robe on him. Purple symbolized royalty. Then they

kept coming up to him and saluting him as king, but instead of offering the kiss of homage, they hit him. Then Jesus was brought before the multitude in the hope that his pitiful spectacle might elicit their pity. The famous sentence, "Here is the man!" carries the implication, "Look, here is this poor fellow. Can you really regard such a pathetic figure as a rival king?"

However, Pilate's tactic did not work. The Jews still demanded that Jesus be crucified. Many of us have been abused at one time or another, but few of us have been abused like Jesus. Jesus showed us that God is with us when we suffer abuse.

We are not alone in our emotional pain. Others have gone through similar circumstances. We can take comfort from that and know that we can get through our times of difficulty. More importantly, we know that God is with us in our pain. He is with us in our estrangement. He is with us when we are misunderstood. He is with us in our grief. He is with us in our despair. He is with us in our loneliness, our injustice and our abuse. God understands the pain that we are going through because, in Jesus, he experienced the same pain. We can draw comfort from that and come to him in our pain to find both understanding and relief. God is with us! Rejoice in that good news!

Chapter 15: The Pain of Betrayal

Of all the chapters in this book, this one is the one that I have been the most reluctant to write. Actually, although it will not be the last chapter in the book, it will probably be the last chapter that I write for this book. I am even adding it after the book has already been published online for some months. Why have I been so reluctant to write this chapter? There are two reasons. The first reason is that for every emotional pain I have chosen a biblical character who has experienced that pain in a powerful way and the obvious choices for betrayal are Jesus and David. I do not want to keep using the same characters over and over again. The second reason is that betrayal can be the most intense pain of them all, depending upon the intimacy of the betrayal. I have been betrayed several times and those betrayals hurt me deeply, but I have recovered from each of them. I have never really experienced an intimate betrayal. In over three decades of marriage, my wife has never betrayed me in any way. For those of you who have been betrayed by a spouse, I can only imagine the pain that you feel. I can only pray that God will use this chapter to ease your pain.

History abounds with stories of betrayal. Benedict Arnold is but one example. Betrayal is part of life as we now know it. How could you write a decent mystery or suspense novel without the possibility of betrayal? Does not the same thing apply to a television show or a movie? Betrayal in one form or another has been a part of life for centuries.

Betrayal also has many aspects and degrees. One may betray his country in time of war with tragic consequences. A pastor or a counsellor may betray a confidence and violate his or her ethics. Unfortunately, even family and friends betray one another. Jesus predicted that this would happen frequently in that last days before he returned. In Matthew 24:10 he said, "At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other." In Mark 13:12 he said, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child. Children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death."

In this chapter I will focus on two betrayals, Absalom's betrayal of his king and father, David, which is portrayed in 2 Samuel 15 and Judas Iscariot's betrayal of his Master and friend, Jesus, which is portrayed in Matthew 26. Both of these were intimate betrayals. Both Absalom and Judas betrayed someone whom they should have loved and obeyed. Also, both of these men were loved by those whom they betrayed even after they betrayed them. This makes their betrayal even more severe, even more tragic. Their tragic deaths served to illustrate the tragic nature of their betrayal.

Let us first look at Absalom's betrayal in 2 Samuel 15. Absalom had already shown himself to be a man of violence by having his half-brother, Ammon, killed for the rape of his sister, Tamar (2 Samuel 13). After this incident, he fled and went into exile for a while. After he was reconciled to his father, he conspired to turn the hearts of the people against him. Absalom stood by the side of the road leading to the city gate waiting for the people coming with their complaints to his father, David, the King. He advised them that their complaints were valid, but that there was no representative of the king to hear them. 2 Samuel 6 says, "Absalom behaved in this way toward all the Israelites who came to the king asking for justice, and so he stole the hearts of the men of Israel." After some time, Absalom declared himself to be king and the conspiracy eventually turned into armed rebellion. David had to flee for his life, but it was actually Absalom who ended up dying.

Why would a son conspire against his own father? Unfortunately, at that time, this happened with alarming frequency in the nations around Israel. If a king's son grew impatient in his desire to ascend to his father's throne, then his only recourse was to kill him. Ambition drives people to do terrible things to achieve goals. This may be one reason why later monarchs in Judah's history shared their throne with their sons in the later years of their kingship. Absalom may also have known that he was not the one chosen to be David's successor. We know from history that Solomon was chosen by David. We also know that despite Absalom killing his half-brother, Ammon,

and rebelling against David so that David's own life was in danger at one point, David never stopped loving Absalom. We see this in his mourning his son's death in 2 Samuel 18:33, "The king was shaken. He went up to his room over the gateway and wept. As he went, he said, 'O my son Absalom! My son, my son my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you – O Absalom, my son, my son'"

Next, let us look at Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus in Matthew 26. At Bethany, a sinful woman poured an expensive perfume over Jesus' feet. His disciples were indignant at such a waste of money that could be used to feed the poor. Matthew did not single out Judas, but John did. John 12:4-6 says, "But one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, who was later to betray him, objected, 'Why wasn't this perfume sold and the money given to the poor? It was worth a year's wages.' He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." After this incident Judas went to the chief priests and agreed to betray Jesus for thirty silver coins. Thus, we can easily see that it was greed that motivated Judas to betray his Master and friend.

The next scene in Matthew's gospel is the Lord's Supper. It was a time of great significance. This was the celebration of the Passover and Jesus' last meal with his disciples. Jesus knew that he was about to be betrayed and he knew who was going to betray him. In Matthew 26:21 he says, "I tell you the truth, one of you will betray me." This statement, of course, upset his disciples. They began to question themselves and their loyalty to him. Jesus' statement in verse 23 intensified the pain of betrayal, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me." Sharing a meal with someone meant fellowship, intimacy. Sharing the Passover meal meant a special intimacy. When Judas betrayed Jesus, he broke a very special bond of fellowship that was more than Master and disciple.

After they celebrated the Passover meal Jesus led his disciples (minus Judas Iscariot) to Gethsemane where he prayed. Judas Iscariot led a large crowd armed with swords and clubs to the

place where Jesus was praying. Jesus woke up his disciples and said, "Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" Judas came up and greeted Jesus with a kiss. Jesus replied, "Friend, do what you came for" (verse 50). Note, that in all of this Jesus still called Judas, "Friend." Judas had broken the bond of intimate fellowship, but Jesus had not. Jesus still loved Judas even though he had betrayed him.

Unfortunately, the story of Judas ended very tragically. When he saw that Jesus was condemned he tried to return the money that he had received for betraying Jesus. Then he went out and hung himself. His remorse drove him to despair and suicide.

It is interesting that Stephen at his moment of martyrdom spreads the blame for the betrayal of Jesus considerably more broadly than just Judas Iscariot. He said in Acts 7:52, "Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him." It was not only Judas who betrayed Jesus. The religious leaders betrayed him to the Roman authorities who put him to death. Yet Jesus cried out on the cross in Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

I mentioned that I have been betrayed several times. I will describe one of these times to you. I will eliminate the names of the people involved to avoid incriminating anyone, although there was no actual crime committed. The event occurred some years ago, but the people might still recognize themselves. Their perception of the event may differ from mine, but I can only relate things from my perspective. I was doing pulpit supply work in a small rural church three Sundays a month. Someone else preached on the other Sunday. A friend of mine who attended the church called a meeting of the church. At the time I had no idea even why the meeting was called, let alone what the meeting was about. Neither I nor the other preacher was invited to the meeting.

At the meeting, the idea of having just one preacher was discussed, or so I was told. I cannot describe what happened at the meeting because I was not there. The next Sunday after the

meeting, the church officials asked me to become their part-time pastor. I made plans to reduce my time commitment at the place where I was working at the time.

About two weeks later, at the annual meeting of the church, one of the church officials stood up and tried to withdraw the motion that he had made at the meeting I had not attended. He was told by my friend that he could not withdraw a motion that had already been passed. Apparently the other preacher had never been approached with the plan. He knew nothing of the motion. The church officials had offered me a position, but now they were withdrawing the offer without consulting me in any way. I was, of course, confused and bewildered.

This was a Saturday night. Fortunately, the next day was not my turn to preach so I had time to think. I was angry and I felt betrayed, but I did not want to make any rash decisions, so I talked with some people who I trusted. They agreed with my decision to resign immediately. That Sunday after church I telephoned one of the church officials with my decision. The one who had tried to withdraw his motion later telephoned me with an apology and tried to talk me into going back into my original three-week pulpit supply position, but I refused. I told him that he had betrayed my trust and I could no longer work with him. This was the closest that I have ever come to losing my temper. His cheap apology and his idea that things could simply go back to the way that they were before did not go well with me at all.

A denominational official got involved to try to sort things out. He could not get the church to keep their commitment to me in any way. He did manage to get the church to write me an official letter of apology, but I have never been back to that church, nor has my friend. Another friend of mine was asked to preach there after I resigned and he agreed a couple of times. However, when he found out the circumstances of my leaving, he no longer preached there after that. This was years ago and I have long since forgiven the people involved.

Absalom betrayed his king and father, David, and appeared to have shown no remorse or repentance at all. Judas betrayed his Master and friend, Jesus, and his remorse drove him to despair

and suicide. A church official betrayed me and offered me a cheap apology over the telephone. None of these responses is, of course, correct. The proper response is genuine repentance. Repentance means to turn around. In the case where I felt betrayed, repentance would have meant that the officials would have admitted that they were wrong in withdrawing the position (which they did) and resubmitting the offer (which they did not).

How should one react when one is betrayed? I mentioned that I was angry. This is a normal response. I also mentioned that I have forgiven the people involved. This is a healthy response. Staying angry only destroys you. I also mentioned that I have not been back to that church. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that the relationship can immediately go back to normal. Relationships are based on trust. Betrayal destroys trust. Sometimes time, love and counselling can heal that trust, but not always. It depends upon the intimacy and the nature of the betrayal.

By the way, enough time has passed now that if that church asked me to speak there or just visit, I would go back there. For most of the chapters in this book, I have included a poem that I have written on the subject. Some time ago, on another occasion when I felt betrayed and very hurt, I wrote a poem. It was a very dark time and I wrote a very dark poem. I have lost the poem. This is just as well because I have long since forgiven the person. Therefore, this chapter has no poem.

Chapter 16: Consider it Pure Joy

I gave one of the early drafts of this book to one of my sisters to review it. She made several comments. One of the comments that she made was that she had not found a, “so what?” in it. Christians suffer emotional pain from time to time, but what is the purpose of this suffering? What does it mean? What does it accomplish? This chapter is an answer to these questions.

In the New Testament, there are many comments made on the issue of suffering. Some of them are quite provocative. One of these is found in James 1:4, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds.” This command suggests the need to decide to take a joyful attitude. What is surprising about this command is that it applies to a situation in which a joyful reaction is not a normal response. The believer is asked to respond with joy because the trials that he encounters are being used by God to strengthen his faith. Suffering is the means by which our faith, tested in the fires of adversity, can be purified of any impurities.

The perseverance of verse five is not merely the patient endurance of trials, but the ability to turn them into occasions for glory. This is Paul and Silas singing in prison after being beaten and placed in stocks (Acts 16:22-25). Suffering for Christ certainly did not come as a surprise for Paul. Paul and Barnabas warned the disciples in Acts 14:22, “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.” Here is an example of complete honesty toward those who had confessed Christ. They were not offered an easy way. Paul actually counted it as a privilege to suffer for Christ. This was his badge of honor, the seal of apostleship. This was his boast in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33. This attitude was by no means unique to Paul. Many of the early Christian martyrs died singing.

Paul, like James, encouraged his fellow believers to take a positive attitude toward the trials that they would inevitably encounter. In the New Testament suffering is viewed as the normal experience of the Christian. In Romans 5:3-5 Paul also encouraged Christians to rejoice in their sufferings. He gave us a

linked chain of God working in the Christian through adversity to strengthen his character. This is not normal secular thinking. People will often take a grin and bear it approach to suffering, but few will actually rejoice in it.

Peter also expected Christians to respond to suffering in a positive manner. In fact, much of 1 Peter deals with the issue of suffering. In 1 Peter 1:6 he said he and his fellow Christians “greatly rejoice,” in the face of trials. Here Peter likened suffering to a refiner’s fire. Before gold is pure it has to be tested in the fire. Every trial that we face is actually a test of our faith. The situations of testing that we encounter are occasions when God refines and purifies the faith of his followers.

Of course, the refining fire that purifies the gold also separates out the dross. How we respond to adversity makes a difference. Do we respond with rejoicing like Paul, Silas, James and Peter because we know that God is using trials to test and strengthen our faith? Do we respond with anger because we are expecting a trouble free life after committing ourselves to following Christ? Do we respond with disappointment and doubt because we are questioning our faith and/or our obedience to Christ? What is your response? What is mine?

Toward the end of 1 Peter, he gave us one the strangest, if not the strangest, benediction in the New Testament. He said in 1 Peter 5:10, 11, “And the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast. To him be the power for ever and ever. Amen.” Peter, like James and Paul, expected that his readers would suffer for Christ and that this suffering would be used by God to refine their character and strengthen their faith.

Recently I was asked to speak on gentleness as part of a sermon series on the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is a series of nine qualities that grow in a Christian as he or she grows in Christ. They are not natural qualities, but the result of a Spirit filled life. How does a Christian develop the fruit of the Spirit? It grows in him or her through adversity and trial.

A few years ago, I planted a bunch of wild flower seeds in our backyard. The result was spectacular. We had a beautiful flower garden. This year, I tried the same thing in a different backyard. The result was terrible. I think that we had one flower which my wife moved to the front yard. What was the difference? This year in Alberta we are experiencing a drought. There has not been enough rain. It takes rain to produce flowers and fruit. It also takes rain to produce spiritual fruit. The Arabs have a proverb, "All sunshine makes the desert." This is true in our physical lives, our emotional lives and our spiritual lives. We will never ever develop the fruit of the Spirit unless we experience some difficulties in our lives. We will never ever be refined in our Christian character unless we go through the fires of affliction. That is not a popular truth, but it is a New Testament truth.

Note that Peter said, "a little while." How long is a little while? It varies with the individual. Some suffer longer than others. However, for each of us, the suffering is definitely temporary, especially when compared to the eternal glory that awaits us. This is what Paul said in Romans 8:18, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Few of us like rain, but we all need it. Without it we will not grow. This is why God allows suffering to enter our lives. This is why we experience physical and emotional pain. God uses these experiences to help us grow in Christ.

Chapter 17: Praising God in the Midst of Pain

We have looked at several of the great heroes of faith and their struggles with emotional pain. There are several important truths that we can learn from their experiences. First, a godly life in Christ does not spare us from pain, either emotional or physical. In fact, the reverse may be true. Paul reminded his son in the faith, Timothy, in 2 Timothy 3:12 of this truth, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” God usually delivers his followers through the pain, not from the pain. We are not promised a life free of the struggles, but rather help with these struggles. Second, God uses trials and tribulations to help us grow in Christ. Romans 5:3, 4 says, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Third, we can praise God in the midst of our pain because we know that our gain is greater than our pain. Romans 8:18 says, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Some of the great affirmations of our faith were uttered in the midst of great emotional pain, either by the person in pain or to him or her. It is in the difficult times of life that we draw closer to God. We tend to take him for granted in the good times and lean on him in the bad times. That should not surprise us. We often do the same thing with our spouses. I have written this book to let you know that God is with you in the midst of your pain. In fact, in Christ, he has experienced great emotional pain so he knows what you are going through, whatever it is. Let us briefly revisit some of the great heroes of faith in their pain and look at some of the great affirmations of faith uttered at these times.

When Job lost all of his possessions and all of his children he fell to the ground in worship and said, “Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (Job 1:21). After he had lost his health as well and his three friends were accusing him of unrepented sin, he argued that

his integrity was intact. In the midst of these arguments, when he debating with his friends about the justice of God and in the midst of his pain, he uttered two famous affirmations of faith: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face." and "I know that my Redeemer lives, and in the end he will stand upon the earth" (Job 13:15; 19:25). Job hung unto his faith in God in the midst of great anguish and in spite of the false accusations of his friends.

When Martha's brother Lazarus died despite her appeal for Jesus' help, she affirmed her belief that Jesus could have healed him if he had been around, and her belief in the final resurrection. Jesus replied to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:24-26). This is one of the most comforting and affirming verses in the Bible and would it be there if it was not for Martha's pain of grief?

When Habakkuk argued with God about injustice, he was told by God, "The righteous will live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament: Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. It takes faith to trust in God when you see the wicked prosper and righteous suffer. It takes faith to trust in God when injustice and violence abound. Habakkuk was encouraged to live by faith and he responded with one of the great affirmations of faith, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17, 18). It is one thing to trust in God when things are going our way, but can we trust in God when we lose our loved ones, our livelihood, and our health as Job did? Can we trust in God when injustice abounds as Habakkuk did?

When things do not appear to be working out for us, we often fail to see the hand of God at work. When adversity strikes us we are tempted to think that God has abandoned us. Few, if any of us, will ever experience the estrangement from our family, the

enslavement and the imprisonment that Joseph experienced. Yet he came to know that God was at work in the midst of his pain. He said to his brothers in Genesis 45:8, “So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”

The apostle Paul related the abuse that he suffered from the Jews, the Romans and the Gentiles in 2 Corinthians 11. In the next chapter he talked about his thorn in the flesh. We cannot be sure whether the abuse and the thorn are connected, but we can be sure that God used his pain to make Paul depend upon him more. He said to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” If he never suffered the abuse that he suffered, then he would never know how much we needed God.

We looked at the loneliness that the prophet Jeremiah experienced. That was not his only emotional pain. He watched his beloved country being invaded and conquered by the Babylonians because the people had rebelled against God and worshiped idols. He saw his once prosperous nation being carried into exile. He witnessed the destruction of the temple where he worshiped his God. He observed deprivation and distress on a grand scale. He cried out in Lamentations 1:11, “All her people groan as they search for bread; they barter their treasures for food to keep themselves alive.” Yet in the same book of weeping and mourning he wrote the famous words, “Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (Lamentations 3:22, 23).

Isaiah was called to a people who would not listen and who would not understand. Their hearts were hardened to the truths that he was called to declare to them. However, his message, if they chose to listen and understand, was a message of salvation. Isaiah 1:18 says, “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be like wool.’”

Many Christians know that many of the great affirmations of faith are found in the Psalms. However, do they know that they were written in response to times of great stress? Psalm 34 was written by David when he fled from Saul into the land of his enemies, the Philistines. It was a very terrifying time for him, yet he wrote in verse one, "I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips." Psalm 109 is the fiercest imprecatory psalm. It contains the most bitter curses against his enemies that David ever used. Yet it ends with these words of affirmation, "With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng I will praise him. For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him" (Psalm 109:30, 31).

Sin has entered the perfect world that God created. Man has continually rebelled against God and all of creation suffers the consequences of this rebellion. When mankind is restored at the consummation of the ages, the rest of God's creation will be restored as well. Paul said in Romans 8:18-22, "The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time." All of creation has been affected by mankind's fall into sin. Because of this we have drought, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, and so on. These disasters cause untold hardship on an almost daily basis. I would like to say that God's children, those who have confessed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior are spared from the consequences of these tragic events, but I cannot. The homes of good, godly people are destroyed along with wicked. Committed Christians lose loved ones at these times as well as those who refuse to acknowledge God. We are also not immune to old age and disease. This means that we are not spared from emotional and physical pain.

We live in a sinful world. Hatred and greed rule the hearts of many people. In fact, we must admit that our hearts need to be cleansed of hatred and greed. Because of this hatred and greed, injustice and abuse are common, if not rampant, in our society. This also causes us who claim the name of Christ to suffer physical and emotional pain. How do we live with this pain? How do we live between the Fall and our final Redemption? How do we live between Good Friday and Easter Sunday? We trust in God to carry us through the tough times. We look to our Bible and find great men and women of God who have gone through similar difficulties and we take comfort that the God who was there for them will be there for us. I hope that this book has helped you in whatever difficulty you have found yourself in. I hope that you have found some comfort in your emotional pain. Writing it has helped me in my pain.

Chapter 18: Comfort My People

I was sitting here alone and depressed when someone came by and said, “Cheer up! Things could be worse.” So I cheered up and sure enough, things got worse. This is a lame joke, but it illustrates the fact that many of our messages of comfort are lame. Sometimes they are even worse than lame. They may even be hurtful. Someone once said that the Christian army is the only army in the world that shoots its own wounded. Instead of consoling those in pain, we attack. We may be like Job’s friends and attack their righteousness, or we may be like many modern day Christians and attack their faith. Job’s friends said that Job must have sinned or he would not be in pain. Today we say that, if he had faith, then he would be healed. This is hardly a message of comfort.

Isaiah 40 begins with, “Comfort, comfort, my people, ...” The Holy Spirit has a message of comfort for the people of God. This phrase is in the form of a command. Isaiah was here commissioned to bring words of comfort and consolation. This is the duty of all God’s people. 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4 says, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.”

In this book we have looked at many heroes of faith who experienced intense emotional pain. Job was the most righteous man of his day, and yet his pain was almost unbearable. Living a righteous life does not spare us from trouble. Elijah showed tremendous faith in challenging the prophets of Baal, but sank into a deep depression after he was threatened by Jezebel. We cannot say that having more faith is the answer to our problems. Since all of us experience emotional pain at one time or another, it stands to reason that all of us need a message of comfort from time to time. We need some soothing words to ease the pain. Yet it is difficult to find the right words when we encounter someone in pain. Obviously questioning the person’s righteousness or faith is not the right approach. Glib clichés are

not the answer either. However, Isaiah 40 does give us some words of comfort that we can use in such times.

It is interesting that God uses the phrase, “my people” in this chapter. This shows the graciousness of God. He has chosen us as his people even though we have done nothing to deserve such a choice. We belong to him. What a wonderful thought!

We are to “speak tenderly.” God calls us to bring a soothing message of reassurance. Yet this message of comfort cannot be a mere mouthing of pet phrases. There must be some meaning in our words. There must be substance to what we say. By what assurances are we comforted by God?

The first comforting assurance that is given in Isaiah 40 is the assurance of pardon. This, of course, is the most comforting promise in the Bible. The substance of the gospel is contained in one phrase in verse two, “her sin has been paid for.” What a glorious truth! Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” We are all sinners and deserve only death, but the price has been paid at Calvary. Now we are freely offered God’s gift of salvation – his forgiveness. Isaiah 55:7 says, “Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

It is significant that the verbs in this passage that talk of our being forgiven by God are all in the past tense. The price has already been paid. The plan of salvation has been carried out. It is a finished work. All we need to do is repent of our sins and self-righteousness and commit our lives to Jesus. We must turn from our sins to faith in Christ. We can have the assurance of eternal life with Jesus Christ. We can bear much pain if we are conscious of its temporary nature. It is only when the pain seems to be unending that it really hurts. Paul said in Romans 8:18, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

Verses six, seven and eight talk about the transitory nature of our existence on earth. We are tragically frail creatures. Life without God is devoid of any real dignity or meaning. Life is

short and empty, but the eternal Word of God gives believers something to live for. The promises of the Bible give human life its real significance. Jesus said that it is in the Scriptures that we find the words of eternal life. This is because the Bible speaks of God's Son who came to redeem mankind. God's Word has a permanent character. God's promises are sure and eternal. We are weak and mortal. Life is brief as we all know. However, we can have consolation in the assurance that God's promises are eternal and sure.

God's command to comfort those around us is stressed throughout this chapter. Verse one begins with the command to comfort the people of God. Verses six through eight give the command to cry out that, though man is frail, God's Word is eternal and sure. Verse nine tells to shout the good news of comfort and assurance. God knows that his people need to be comforted. They need hope and confidence in the future.

The shout of verse nine, "here is your God!" is a glorious message. We are assured of the near presence of God in times of trouble. We know that, in Christ, God experienced much of the emotional pain that we endure. We know that he fully understands the pain that we are going through. We can proclaim this to others in need of comfort. God's promise of hope and salvation is not meant to be hoarded to ourselves, but shared with all men everywhere. It is to be shouted from the highest mountains.

Verse 10 proclaims the might and power of our God while verse 11 says that he tends his flock like a shepherd. What a magnificent contrast! The almighty God gathers his children like sheep in his arms and carries them close to his heart. Such is the picture of the tender love of God. He indeed cares for his people. 1 Peter 5:7 says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you." This is a wonderful truth. The creator of the whole universe cares for you. Isn't that a great message of comfort?

God's strength has no limit. He never grows tired or weary. He promises his strength to those who trust in him. If we depend on our own strength, then even the strongest of us will fail. Our own resources, no matter how great, are limited, but God's are

unlimited. We can depend on him if we wait on him in prayer. Then we will mount up from the depths of grief and difficulties and have the strength to go on living.

We do not understand the complexities of life. We cannot fully understand God and why he does the things he does, but we can depend upon his love and care for us. We can be strengthened by him. We can have our human weakness exchanged for his divine strength and, thus, be able to meet the challenges of life head on.

Yes, God has a word of comfort to those who are in pain and to those who are facing any of life's many difficulties. We have the message of assurance that God forgives us, cares for us and strengthens us. We know that his promises are eternal and sure. This message of comfort is meant to be shared. Many people are hurting and need comfort, and we have just the message they need. God calls us to comfort those in need.

