

HOLDING ON



Hope

with patient

EXPECTATION

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BY GREG LAURIE

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CHRISTOPHER

July 24, 2008. It was a sunny day in Southern California. We were at home. My wife, Cathe, was doing a Bible study with Brittany (my oldest son Christopher's wife) and Brittany's mom. I was watching our granddaughter Stella. Christopher David Laurie was headed to work as the head of the Graphic Design Department at our church, but we hadn't heard from him. We tried to call him. He didn't answer. I texted him, "Where are you?" There was no answer. And there was no answer because around 9:01 AM, our son left this world in an automobile crash, and went into the presence of the Lord.

Only if you have lost a loved one will you understand that the word devastated doesn't express how bad it actually is. It is the worst suffering that I have ever experienced. It's interesting to note that if you have lost a husband, you are called a widow. If you have lost a wife, you are called a widower. If you have lost your parents, you are called an orphan. But they don't have a name for people who have lost a child—probably because it hurts so much. You never plan on something like this. It is the worst-case scenario for a parent. When we heard the news, needless to say, we were devastated. It is like your worst nightmare come true. I am going to be candid with you. To pick a casket out for your child, and a place to bury them, is unthinkable. It would be hard enough to do it for your parents or your spouse. But your child? You always thought they would be doing that for you.

As a longtime pastor, I have actually been with parents when they have heard the devastating news. Once I was with a couple in a hospital waiting room during their child's surgery when the doctor came and revealed that she had not made it through. Absolutely heartbreaking.

So I had been up close and personal with that terrible moment. And I thought I had a sense of what it would be like to hear it. But when it happens to you, time just stops. I went into an immediate state of shock. I collapsed to the floor. I could not stand. I don't even know if I cried. I was just stunned. I couldn't believe this was happening. It is not possible, I thought. Within minutes it seemed our home was filled with well-wishers, family, and friends, the phone was ringing, and everyone was trying to bring help and comfort. But it was just a blur of noise to me. I got away, I went to my office over our garage, and I fell on the floor and cried out to God for help to get through—not the day, but the minutes. It just seemed like, how can I survive this? If a person could die from hearing words, I could have died from what I just heard. I lost my appetite. I couldn't sleep. It just seemed to go on forever. It is like a nightmare and you keep hoping that you will wake up from it. You know when you have a bad dream, your heart is racing, you wake up, and you say, "It's OK. It is just a dream." I wanted so badly to wake up from this dream that was not a dream at all. It was reality.

When Cathe and I got married, we wanted to do everything to make our marriage strong. I was determined not to follow the example of my mother, who had been married and divorced seven times; I was determined to have a successful marriage. And I am thankful to say that Cathe and I have been married now for more than 40 years. God has been so good to us. Christopher was our first son, and then ten years later, along came Jonathan. And because I never had a father growing up, I wanted to be Superdad. I am not implying that I think I succeeded because I don't think I did at all. But I wanted to be a hands-on father. I wanted to be a loving father. I wanted to be a present father. I wanted to teach my sons in the way of the Lord but I wanted to have fun with them too. And no question about it, I

spoiled Christopher. I bought him too many toys. I think one of the reasons I bought so many was that I wanted to personally play with those toys too. Like Dr. James Dobson once said, “Every parent owes their first child an apology.” I’m sure there is some truth to that.

Christopher was a good-looking young man. He took after his mother. He was precocious and he was always getting into trouble. And he had a time in his twenties when he rebelled against the Lord. He was never rebellious outwardly with us, but I know he was living a double life. We spent many sleepless nights, and we prayed. Thankfully, God got hold of him and he made a recommitment to Christ. And life couldn’t have been going better for Christopher. He married a girl named Brittany and our first granddaughter, Stella, was born. It was so exciting to be a grandparent. And then little Lucy was on the way. He was also doing a Bible study in his home. He had opened it up for people to come and study the Bible. He was excited about working on a documentary about my tumultuous childhood called *Lost Boy*, which chronicles my life as the son of an alcoholic mother and my coming to Christ. Christopher was just doing so well.

He was also calling me up with questions about the Bible. One of his last texts to me was, “Dad can you get me a *MacArthur Study Bible*?” Now that is something a dad wants to hear from his son. “Can I get you a *MacArthur Study Bible*? I will have John MacArthur hand it to you in person! What are you talking about? It is my joy.” He was a father, a dedicated husband, a Christian, a son, and a talented graphic artist. He was only 33, on his way to work on that Thursday in July when the Lord called him home. Suddenly. Unexpectedly. Inexplicably.

Why him? Why then? Why not someone that is old or sickly or that is not contributing to society or trying to

follow God? The vile person. The atheist. The insane.
“Why him, God? Why not some other person?”

It has been over ten years now since that tragic day, and I am still mourning. It still hurts. You might ask, “Is it the same as it was back then?” No. It isn’t. It is different. Is it better? In a way it is, but it is still very painful. There is still a gaping hole in our lives that was once occupied by Christopher. But I have learned a lot about grieving and loss and daily pain. I have learned how to live with pain, how to cope with it. Hardly a day goes by when I don’t encounter someone or hear from someone who has also lost a loved one and they are asking for some kind of help. So I have learned much about these things. I have learned a lot about mourning, but what I have learned a lot more about is hope. I have hope.

Have you lost a loved one? Are you facing a crisis? Are you going through hardship? Are you in a time of great trial right now? If you are not, you can be sure it’s coming. What I am going to share with you in the following pages is not from an ivory tower of theory. This is from the valley of the shadow of death, where I have personally found the hope promised to us in Scripture—that is where we find the hope we need. We find it in God’s Word. And my hope today is stronger than it has ever been at any other time in my life.

But what is hope? Here is an acronym to help you remember. HOPE: Holding On with Patient Expectation. Have you lost all hope? Maybe you are just barely holding on, and you don’t feel like you could ever go on, or even put your hope in God. I want to help you find this hope. To bring some words of comfort and encouragement and perspective to those who are facing crisis right now. To point you to the One that will help you hold on with patient expectation when you put your hope in Him.

YOUR PAIN, HIS PURPOSE

When I was a kid, I lived in Hawaii for a few years, which is a pretty cool place to live. One of the things that I remember is how it could be incredibly sunny and beautiful and, suddenly out of nowhere, the skies would turn dark and it would rain like crazy with a torrential downpour. The streets would even flood and it would be a big mess. Then all of a sudden, the sun would come out, the clouds would part, and it was over. If you didn't like the weather, you could just wait 15 minutes and it would probably change.

They were tropical showers, so we didn't mind too much. When you are a kid, you don't care about getting wet. There was a fringe benefit: when all of this rain would come down, all of the frogs would come out of hiding and be hopping around. Then when the sun came out, they would be out in the middle of the streets and cars would run them over. You say, "What kind of a fringe benefit is that?" Well, the sun would bake them and you would find them lying flat, so they were like little Frisbees. However, they were only good for about one throw. That was it.

Life can be like that. You can be in the midst of a horrible storm. Everything is going as badly as it possibly could. Suddenly the clouds open up, the sun comes back, and your life is going wonderfully. Then again, it can be just the opposite. Everything is going your way and suddenly the bottom drops out. A tragedy happens. The death of a loved one. The doctor calls you and says you have to come in immediately; they just got the results of your tests. Your boss calls you and says, "We need to talk now," and he tells you that your job has just been terminated. Life can change in an instant.

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis writes, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” God can use pain to bring us closer to Him even though we don’t like hurt and pain. That is why a lot of us don’t go to the dentist as often as we ought to. Or we want to get in better shape so we go to the gym and say, “Is there a way to work out without actually breaking a sweat? I don’t like pain.” But you have heard that expression, “No pain, no gain.” And what is true of the gym or the health club is also true of life. And it is certainly true of the Christian life. There will be pain.

One person who lost three members of his family in a tragic car crash wrote, “We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. Catastrophic loss by definition precludes recovery. It will transform us or destroy us, but it will never leave us the same. There is no going back to the past, which is gone forever, only going ahead to the future, which is yet to be discovered.” I agree with that. Maybe you have heard of Dave Dravecky, a former baseball pitcher and a great man of God. Dave lost his arm and shoulder to cancer. I was talking with him once and Dave told me about phantom pain. He said, “I feel pain here,” and he gestured to where there was no arm at all. “I feel pain here all the time. I feel it so clearly. And they call it phantom pain.” I thought that was amazing. I had never heard of anything like that.

And I have a phantom pain right now as well for my son. It feels as though he is gone on a long trip and I am waiting for him to knock on the door or give me a call. *Hey Dad. What’s going on? Where have you been?* But it is not going to happen.

Pain reminds us of a deeper need. For instance, I will get hunger pangs. You can set the clock by my stomach.

Pretty much at 11:00 AM my stomach says, “Lunch is coming, so get ready.” And it is reminding me. So maybe I will say to my wife, “Are you working on lunch, or do you want to go to lunch?” And she will say, “Lunch? It’s lunch time already?” I say, “Are you kidding me? I have been aware that lunchtime is coming for the last four hours.” There are those hunger pains bringing it to your attention.

In the same way, when we have pain in our life, it reminds us of a deeper need: the need for God.

A. W. Tozer said, “It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until he has hurt him deeply.” Take the apostle Paul as an example of that. After his encounter with Jesus, Paul blazed a trail of evangelism, leaving behind many churches and converts. Paul preached to philosophers, Pharisees, rulers, soldiers, sorcerers, sailors, slaves, and most likely to Caesar himself. It is not an understatement to say that the apostle Paul changed his world. He was charged with the message of the gospel, he brought it to his generation, and he did so brilliantly.

As we look over his ministry, we know that God did miracles through Paul. One of my favorite miracles is when Paul was preaching and he was going really long. (It just kind of encourages me that even the apostle went long in his sermons!) He went so long, in fact, that a guy named Eutychus, who was sitting up on a high balcony, fell asleep. Can you imagine falling asleep while Paul was preaching? And not only did he fall asleep, but he fell to his death. So they alerted Paul. “Paul, a man just fell off of the balcony while you were preaching and he is dead!”

“OK everybody. Let’s stop the meeting.” And he goes over to Eutychus, prays for him to be raised from the dead, and then goes back and finishes his sermon. I love it! That is my kind of preacher.

We know the miracles that God did through Paul. We are aware of the fact that he wrote a great portion of the New Testament. We quote him frequently. He was God's man. But there is another characteristic that sometimes we forget about when we think of Paul: he suffered. You remember when God called Ananias to go and pray for the newly converted Saul of Tarsus (later to become the apostle Paul), but Ananias was a bit resistant. "Lord, are we talking about the same Saul of Tarsus? The Christian killer? The man that has been hunting us down?"

"Oh yes," the Lord said, "He is mine now. And I am going to use him. He is praying at this moment. Now you go to him." It says in Acts 9:15-16, "The Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake.'" That gets missed sometimes. We think of Paul the preacher, Paul the writer, Paul the miracle worker. But Paul would also suffer. Does that surprise you? We are told in Acts 14:22, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Know this: if you are going to be used of God you will be attacked. The moment you say, "Lord, here I am. Send me," the enemy will be setting the crosshairs of his sights on you.

I could give you so many examples of this it is ridiculous. One example is found in the Book of Nehemiah. Here was a city lying in ruin. The burned-out charred remains of the great city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king, is burdened to use his position of influence for good. He gets permission from the king to return to Israel. When he rides around the circumference of the city on horseback, as he looks at it, his spirit is deeply moved and we read that he weeps. And after his weeping came working. After his despair came determination. He says, "Let's rebuild the walls of Jerusalem." And immediately there is opposition.

Whenever God's people say, "Let's rise up and build," the devil will say, "Let's rise up and oppose."

And it won't always be from the enemies of the Lord. Sometimes it will be from so-called fellow believers—which comes as a great surprise to some of us. Listen to Paul's description of some of the things he had experienced, from 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 (NLT).

I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again. Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches.

Now, having read that, we see that bad things even happen to godly people. And when bad things happen, God can bring good out of bad. What kind of challenges are you facing? What kind of tribulations are you going through right now? Romans 8:28 reminds us that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (NASB). However, the good that God promises

will not be fully realized until we get to Heaven. There are some things we can look at in life and say, “That was bad, but now as I look back in retrospect I can see the good that has come from it.” But then there are other things we are going to experience in life that we will never see good come out of, at least not outwardly. And it will not be until we get to the other side and see the Lord face to face that we will understand these things.

FINDING HOPE IN HARDSHIP

I heard a story once about a man who had been slipping in and out of a coma for several months and yet his wife had faithfully stayed by his side every single day. One day he came to and he motioned for his dear wife to come closer, and she did, and as she sat by him her eyes were full of tears and he said, “You know what? You have been with me through all of the bad times. When I got fired, you were there to support me. When my business failed, you were there. When I got shot, you were right there by my side. When we lost the house, you did not leave me. And when my health started failing, you were still by my side.” And then the husband said, “You know what?” The wife drew a little bit closer and she said, “What?” And he said, “I think you are bad luck.”

From the day we are born we have trouble. And I think what we discover as we get older is life is filled with lots of trouble. In fact, when you have a conflict-free day, where there is no crisis large or small, that is a very good day. And then there are those days when it seems like the bottom drops out and what couldn't go wrong goes wrong, and then even more goes wrong beyond that. And you wonder why it's happening to you.

We look around at our world today and we wonder about things that take place. We hear about deranged

students that heartlessly shoot other students and teachers, and we ask the question, “Why?” Why would someone do something like that? Or we hear of tsunamis, hurricanes, and other natural disasters where thousands die, and we wonder why. Or maybe a friend of ours is driving home from church and a drunk driver hits them in a head-on collision, and our friend dies and the drunk driver survives. Why do things like that happen?

Know this: whatever God does or allows to happen in your life as His child is motivated by His everlasting love for you. God says in His Word, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you” (Jeremiah 31:3). He loves you. So when crisis hits, when you are in trouble, bring it to Jesus.

- **When the Israelites turned against Moses, we read in Exodus 15:25 that “he cried out to the Lord.” When you are criticized unfairly, take it to God.**
- **When Hezekiah received a threatening letter, we read that he spread it out before the Lord (see 2 Kings 19:14). Have you ever received a letter threatening you?**
- **When John the Baptist was beheaded, his disciples went and told Jesus (see Matthew 14:12). When trouble comes, we need to go and tell Jesus.**

You can talk to God, and you can even ask Him why. Sometimes people will say, “Oh, don’t ever ask God why.” You know what I would say? Ask God why as much as you want, but don’t necessarily expect an answer. Ask away. Be honest with God. You think God doesn’t see your heart when you pray? So be honest. Say, “God, I

am not happy right now. I don't understand this. I am hurting. This doesn't make sense. Why did You do this?" It is OK to say those things. You say, "Oh Greg, no. That's blasphemy." It is not blasphemy. Jesus Himself said from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Was that blasphemy? No. He was calling on His Father. "My God, My God. Lord, I am calling on You." Look at the honesty of the psalmist as he deals with his problems and then calls out to God. That is what we need to do. Don't withdraw from God and your Christian friends. Go to the Lord and cry out to Him. You can ask why.

What about Job? We all know his story. And we remember that after he heard the horrible news of the death of his children, he worshipped God and said, "Naked came I into this world. Naked go I out. Blessed be the name of the Lord" (see Job 1:21). Yet as you read through the Book of Job, he asked God why many times. And he never really got an explanation. But let me ask you this: if the Lord were to actually tell you why certain things happened, would that erase your pain or heal your broken heart? Let's just say God said, "OK. OK. I am tired of you asking. Now I am going to tell you. Are you ready? Write it down. I did this for this reason." And He gives you the reason. What are you going to say? "Oh OK. Great. Praise God." No. You are probably going to say, "I don't agree with that. That makes no sense to me, Lord." That is probably what you would say and that is probably why He doesn't tell us why.

As Christians, we are to live on promises, not explanations. We shouldn't spend too much time asking why. Instead, "What?" should be the question that we ask Him. As in, "What am I supposed to do, Lord?"

Jesus was God, with all of His power and glory, but He was also a Man. He was a Man who felt our pain

and sorrows. Isaiah 53:3 says that He was “despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” He carried our weaknesses and our sorrows weighed Him down. He knows what it is to suffer. He voluntarily put Himself in the way of danger to bear our sorrows on the cross. Why would He do this? Hebrews 2:17 gives the answer. It says, “It was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us” (NLT). And since Jesus has gone through suffering and temptation, He is able to help us when we are being tested. Listen to this: if it breaks your heart, it breaks His as well. Scripture reminds us that God keeps our tears in a bottle. In fact, we are told in Psalm 56:8, “You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book” (NLT).

When I was in Israel in 2008, before our son died, we went to a Jewish antiquities store I had heard about. They had relics dating back 3,000 years. Amazing. It was like a museum except they would let you hold things. (Just don’t drop them. It would cost a fortune.) So I was looking around. There were a lot of fragments of pottery and a lot of very weathered things, understandably. But standing out in the midst of all of these antiquities was this beautiful translucent blue bottle. And I asked the man who owned the store. “Sir, what is this blue bottle?” He says, “Oh, that is a Roman tear bottle.” I said, “Really? I have never heard of a Roman tear bottle. What is that?” He says, “The Romans believed that when they lost a loved one, if they put their tears in a bottle they would be recorded in Heaven.” Well I was immediately reminded of what the psalmist said in Psalm 56:8, “You have collected all my tears in your bottle.” God has a bottle for my tears. Not the one in the antique shop in Israel, but one in Heaven, where God keeps record of every tear I have shed and every tear you have shed. God keeps our tears in a bottle so He may wipe them away someday.

Sometimes God is glorified through the removal of our troubles and affliction. Like when you have some problem and you have people pray and it goes away. Praise God for that. Or the doctor performs a surgery and you are cancer free. Or they take care of that heart issue. Or whatever it is. We thank God. We thank our doctor. Of course, we pay him as well. But we realize God is the One ultimately in control. So that is wonderful. But then there are times when the surgery doesn't go as hoped. There are times when the illness is not removed. The problem is not taken away. And then God can be glorified through the enduring of the affliction. And listen to this: it is through hardship we will develop hope.

You would think that the best way to find hope is to have a trouble-free life. Right? No. The best way to find hope is through the crises of life. Romans 5:3 says that we glory in tribulation, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance, which means endurance. And perseverance produces character and character produces hope. Hope is going to come through hardship. So when a Christian suffers and still turns to God and glorifies Him, it reassures the rest of us that there will never be a valley so deep that God will not get us through it.

A BLESSEDNESS IN MOURNING

You may be familiar with singer Steven Curtis Chapman, who is a friend of mine. You've probably heard his songs on the radio. I remember when I heard the horrible news about the death of his daughter Maria Sue, whom he adopted from China and cared so much for. It was devastating for him, as it would be for any parent.

Maria Sue had so deeply touched his heart because this little girl was born with a hole in her heart—so Steven and his wife, Mary Beth, adopted little Maria Sue. But tragically in 2008 the Lord called that little girl home. Then Steven

was the one with a hole in his heart—that sense of loss. In my interview with Steven shortly after that tragic day, he admitted,

I prayed for quite a while for her to be raised from the dead. I was just a desperate father saying, “God, You have done this before,” reminding Him of all the times He had done it before. Like He needed to be reminded. But even in that, and coming to that place of really knowing that we needed to let her stay in the arms of Jesus (where we believed and knew she was), as much as I wanted to bring her back, as I prayed I literally forced myself to say “Blessed be the name of the Lord. God, I trust You. I bless Your name.” It was literally a physical sense when I would do that, that I would be lifted away from this abyss of nothing if I let myself go there. I felt like just the despair would crush me. But worship, and just trusting God against everything that my brain was telling me, was survival.

Are you mourning the loss of someone? How are you surviving? Perhaps not that well, but you are making it? Sometimes, depending on what phase of mourning you’re in, it’s not even a day at a time, but moment by moment. In Psalm 42, David writes, “Day and night I have only tears for food, while my enemies continually taunt me, saying, ‘Where is this God of yours?’ My heart is breaking as I remember how it used to be” (verses 3-4 NLT). I know what the psalmist meant when he says, “I only had tears for food”—when your breakfast, lunch, and dinner are tears. You lose your appetite. You cry constantly. My wife said she had only seen me cry maybe two or three times in our life together. After the Lord took Christopher, I cried every day for hours. And deep crying. And so I understand what David is talking about.

There would also be times when I would go into a black hole of sorts. Here is what happens. You are just going about your life and something triggers a memory. And you remember the time you were together. Then your first instinct is to call them or talk to them and you realize they are gone. And you say, “They are gone. I will never see them on this earth again.” And then, “Why did this happen to me?” And all of these thoughts go through your mind.

So many things can trigger this sadness. They are sort of like little landmines that you step on and that hit you unexpectedly—they will remind you of something and immediately you are taken to a different place and it is very hard. So when you ask us how we are doing, just know that we are struggling. Any person who has lost a loved one that was close to them is struggling. But also know this: God is with us. If we had our way we would not be in this place, but we are here. So we want to learn what we can learn.

I think sometimes people will see you while you are not smiling—maybe even when you have been crying—and they think “Oh, they are not doing well.” Well, what are they expecting? There is a place for mourning. There is place for crying. There is a place for grieving when you have lost someone. As Ecclesiastes 3:4 says, there is “a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.” So here is what I do. I say, “Greg, you listen to me.” Yes, I start preaching to myself. Someone watching would think I am a lunatic. And maybe I am. But I am a hopeful lunatic. I will say, “Greg, you listen to me. The Bible says you will see your son again. He is in Heaven. The Bible says that Jesus is the resurrection and the life and whoever believes in Him will not die.” And I will remind myself of the promises of God. I will quote them out loud to myself. And you know what? It just sort of lifts me up from this pit I find myself in.

So the psalmist is saying, “All I do is cry day and night. Why has this happened to me?” He then corrects himself in

Psalm 42:11 with, “Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise Him again—my Savior and my God!” (NLT).

Know this: just like there is a place for mourning, there is a blessedness in mourning. We think the blessedness always comes from laughing and having fun. No, there is a blessedness in mourning as well. Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). And that word *blessed* can be translated “happy.” You can be happy when you are sad. I have experienced that blessedness—that joy that only the Lord can bring. There are things you learn in this valley of mourning that you will not learn anywhere else.

I think sometimes in the church we want to rush over it. Some might say, “Don’t mourn. Just praise God.” Well, you can praise God and you can mourn at the same time. When Stephen was martyred, we read in Acts 8:2, “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him” (NIV). But Stephen was in Heaven. In fact, Stephen himself said, “Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:56). Yes, he was in Heaven, but they were still on earth and he was no longer with them, so they were sad.

Sometimes people will say, “You shouldn’t be crying. You shouldn’t be mourning. They are in Heaven if they are a believer.” But even the great apostle Paul talked about the deep sorrow he would feel if a friend of his would die. In Philippians 2:25-27, he said:

I thought I should send Epaphroditus back to you. He is a true brother, co-worker, and a fellow soldier. And he was your messenger to help me in my need. I am sending him because he has been longing to see you, and he was very distressed that you heard

he was ill. And he certainly was ill; in fact, he almost died. But God had mercy on him—and also on me, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.
(NLT)

This is Paul, who had been to Heaven and had come back again. This is Paul, who had more faith than anyone you can imagine. And yet Paul himself is saying if Epaphroditus had died, he doesn't know if he could have borne it. And that is how it can be. You wonder, Can I bear this? Can I get through this? When you lose someone you think, Can I survive this?

Understand something: mourning is part of the healing process. You need time to heal. If you don't go through it properly, it can mess you up a little bit. I know people who have lost loved ones but have never dealt with it properly. They have never mourned as they should. They are either in a state of denial, where they will not acknowledge it happened, or they can't let go of the person—and it changes who they are. You need to let it out. And although you may want to fight tears, I am telling you tears have their place. When you cry, and I mean really cry—where you cry so badly it is like you feel pain in your chest and you drop to the ground—that kind of mourning can actually have a healing effect on you. So be patient with yourself when you are mourning.

I am not crying for my son as much as I am crying for myself, quite honestly. And for my wife. And for my other son. And for Christopher's wife. And for his daughters. I am crying for me because I miss him. I know he is in that place where there is fullness of joy and at God's right hand there are pleasures forevermore. But I miss him. And I want him here now. And if there were something I could do to get him here, I would do it. If God would come to me and say, "OK Greg. Right now. You die, he lives. Deal?" I would do it on the spot. But of course such things cannot happen.

So even though I'm not at the place I was over ten years ago, it's still very hard. And it is something you get through day by day. It's not a year-by-year thing. It's not a month-by-month thing. Sometimes it's a moment-by-moment thing. Don't rush it. You are going to get through it with God's help and with prayers. I'm not over it. I'll never be over it, but I'm getting through it. I'm getting through my Red Sea. I just walk through it trusting the Lord, knowing that when I get to the end of the Red Sea I am going to see my son again in Heaven.

WE ARE WEAK—HE IS STRONG

If we look at the troubles in the apostle Paul's life, we realize that sometimes there are situations that you can't attack. You just have to get through them. Maybe it's something you weren't expecting. Maybe it's a troubled marriage. You need to hang in there and not give up. Maybe it's a physical problem. Maybe you have a disability you were born with. Maybe you've had an accident and now there's an issue in your life that you never had before. Maybe it's just the effects of getting older and you're dealing with a lot of new aches and pains. You hear snap, crackle, and pop in the morning and you're not even eating Rice Krispies. Or maybe it is some affliction of some kind.

The apostle Paul had this problem. And he was a guy who prayed for people to be healed, and they were. He prayed and people were raised from the dead. But he had a "thorn in the flesh," as he called it. Now don't forget Paul was beaten. He was shipwrecked. He went through all kinds of hardships. Some scholars think his "thorn in the flesh" might have been his eyesight. We don't know. Whatever it was, it bugged him. It bothered him. It troubled him. And three times he asked the Lord to take it away.

And the Lord said to Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV). Or as another translation puts it,

“My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.” Once I heard that I was glad to let that happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and begin appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ’s strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size—abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become. (Verses 9-10 MSG)

I love that translation. That is very well said. And that’s it: Lord, I don’t understand it, but can you help me get through this Red Sea? Help me get through this issue? One day you will get through it in one way, shape, or form.

So why does God allow suffering? And why would He allow it to happen to us? People have actually come up to me and said, “Why would God allow this to happen to you of all people?” Implication being: You are a pastor. You tell people about Jesus. You are the guy that we go to when we are hurting. We don’t expect you to be hurting. You are the guy who is supposed to have the answers. Why has it happened to me? So God can be glorified in my life. I don’t understand it. I don’t know why He allows it. But I know He wants to be glorified. Let me give you just a few reasons why God would allow suffering in the life a Christian and even in the life of a leader.

- **Adversity levels us and keeps us humble.**

Prosperity has a tendency to make people proud and self-sufficient. We don’t think we need God when we

have our salary, our investments, and our career, or when we have our homes, our health, and our families, or even sometimes when we have our successful ministries. But when our home burns down, or the stock market crashes, our health fails us, or a loved one dies, we are brought to our knees and we realize we are weak and we need God. God gave Israel a warning as they were poised to enter the Promised Land. The wilderness wanderings had come to a close and up to this point God had given them everything. Every morning, they would walk outside of the tent door: manna. Same thing for lunch and dinner. They found imaginative ways to eat it, sort of like turkey on Thanksgiving. You have a plate of turkey for your Thanksgiving meal, then turkey sandwiches at night, and then turkey omelets for breakfast the next day, and so on. So every day it was manna, manna, manna. But there was always that provision. And then when God wanted them to move, they followed a cloud by day and a fire by night. If they were thirsty, God could bring water out of a rock. So the point is He took care of them. They were dependent on God. There were no backup plans. It was God or nothing. It wasn't a bad place to be in.

But now they are at the brink of the land of Canaan. The land flowing with milk and honey. The land that has fruit so big it takes two guys to haul out a cluster of grapes. Just imagine that. Flowing rivers, green trees, and blue skies. And the Israelites, who have been wandering in this harsh wilderness, could hardly wait. "Oh yeah."

But God gives them a warning. He says, "As you are entering this Promised Land, be careful that you do not forget Me. When you have eaten and are full, beware lest you forget the Lord" (see Deuteronomy 8). And sometimes we forget the Lord. Even in ministry. Everything is going so well, we don't pray as much. How about Acts 12, when James was arrested? Maybe the

church thought, “Oh, he will be all right. He is James. God will protect him. He is one of Jesus’ close friends.” But James was beheaded. Herod killed James.

Then Peter gets arrested. Peter is pretty much the leader of the church. What does the church do? We read that they prayed. “Constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” (Acts 12:5). They prayed like they had never prayed before. You know the rest of the story: God sent His angel and delivered Peter.

But sometimes we don’t pray until we have to. And I will tell you, I have never prayed so much as just after my son went to Heaven, because I needed to pray to get to sleep at night. I needed to pray to get up in the morning. With the kind of thoughts that hit you and the troubles that you face at a time like that, you say, “Lord, help me,” because you need His strength every moment of the day.

Getting back to Paul, he had a vision of Heaven. Now, do you think that could go to your head if you had been to Heaven? Can you imagine? “Oh, by the way, I was in Heaven the other day. It’s pretty nice. It was like the royal garden of a king. I can’t even describe it.” You could be arrogant and prideful about something like that. But Paul says, “There was sent to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me.” That word thorn would be better translated “stake.”

A thorn—that’s little. A stake—that is another thing. What was this stake? “A messenger of Satan to buffet me.” We don’t know what that means, but it would appear it was some kind of physical condition. As I mentioned before, some believe he had failing eyesight. We don’t know what it was. But whatever it was, three times he asked the Lord to take away his thorn in the flesh. And what did God say

in response? “My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness.”

“So now,” Paul writes, “I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may work through me. That’s why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NLT). Did I read that right? Paul says that it’s all for Christ’s good so he is content with his “weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles. For when I am weak then I am strong.” The words of a madman? No. These are the words of a godly man. The words of a man who has understood that God can work through pain. God can work mightily through disability. Sometimes God can work more effectively through a person with a disability than He can work through a person who doesn’t have one. A disability can turn into an ability.

You see, if your health is always great and you have never suffered, people are going to have a hard time relating to you. But if you have suffered, people will say, “Wow, they have gone through stuff that is as bad as I have gone through. In fact, they have gone through things that are worse than what I am going through and they are still glorifying God. Maybe this Christianity stuff is true. Maybe I ought to listen to them.”

- **Adversity teaches us eternal truths we would not otherwise learn.**

I am sure you have your troubles today. We all do. Maybe you have a prodigal son or daughter. This is a common occurrence in the homes of pastors and leaders. I can’t tell you how many times I have sat down and talked with people who are in leadership who are struggling with their kids. And you know it is a challenge to raise our kids in

the way of the Lord because I think the enemy attacks our homes. I think the enemy sets his sights on the home of a Christian leader. And he knows one of the ways he can get to them is through their children. Don't ever stop praying for your kids. And make sure that you are a godly example in the home. Don't be two people. It is so important.

In his book *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis writes, "Pain removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul." We are going to learn things in these valleys that we can share with others. There are some things you learn only in valleys and never on mountaintops. I know we dread the valleys. I know we don't want to go through them. And I know when we are in them we want to get through them as quickly as possible. But let me say this to you: God can use these times. They can enrich and deepen you and make you more effective for Him. After all, He wants to be glorified through your life. And isn't that what you want as well?

- **God allows adversity so we will have a new compassion for others who are in pain.**

This world is a place of pain and hurt. Everyone has it. We live in a world full of hurting people. It has been said, "Success builds walls and failures build bridges." Let me explain that. If you only talk about all of your successes to others, that can put up a barrier. One person can say to another person, "Hey, how are you doing?"

"I am doing well."

"Yeah? So how is your business going?"

"It is going pretty well."

“How many clients do you have?”

“Oh, we have a couple hundred.”

“Yeah? Well we have 2,000.”

OK, you know what? A wall just went up. The guy is thinking, “I don’t want to talk to you.” Success builds walls.

But failure builds bridges. Think about this conversation:

“How you doing?”

“I am doing all right.”

“Well, I am kind of having a hard time right now.”

“Really? What’s wrong?”

“Well, I am just having some struggles, you know, with my family and need prayer.”

“Really, man? Can I pray for you?”

“I would really appreciate that.”

See, now people can relate to you because you have built a bridge. When you are Mr. Know-It-All and you’ve got everything figured out and you never share any vulnerability, people will say, “I don’t relate to you.” But God can use adversity so that we will have compassion for others who are hurting.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

There is a story in the Bible of two disciples who were walking on the Emmaus road downhearted and discouraged because in their minds God had let them down. But it was not Jesus who had failed; they had failed to see what Jesus had come to do. Once He gave them a new understanding of His mission, it forever changed their lives. So what did Jesus say to restore hope to the troubled hearts of these disciples, causing them to say after spending time with Him, “Did not our hearts burn within us while He walked with us on the way?”

Let’s think about the story. It begins by telling us there were two of them. We don’t know exactly who they were, except one was identified as Cleopas. It is believed by some commentators that the other may have been the wife of Cleopas. It might have been two men. We don’t know for sure. It is two people walking on the road. They were not well-known disciples. One is named and the other person we don’t know of. The one who is named is not a noted disciple to speak of.

Jesus joins them. He can see that they are discouraged. They are not waiting in Galilee as Jesus had told them to. What I find interesting about this post-resurrection appearance is that we don’t see Jesus appearing to Caiaphas or Caesar. If I were Jesus and they crucified me, the first guy I would appear to would have been Pilate. “Yo, Pilate. Remember me? Can’t keep a good man down, can you?” Or I would have appeared to Caiaphas the High Priest, who for the most part orchestrated the crucifixion. Or I would have appeared to Caesar of Rome and said, “I am more powerful than you.”

It might make more sense to us if He first appeared to some of the leading disciples, like Peter and John. He

did appear to them in time. But it is interesting how He appears to these two disciples and we don't even know who they are. They are not mentioned again in the Bible. But He joins them on their journey. What does it remind us of? It simply brings us back to the fact that Jesus always had time for ordinary people. He was always reaching out to the down-and-outers and relatively obscure people, like the woman at the well or Zacchaeus.

So Jesus walks up to these two who were having an animated conversation. That is implied in the original language. They are talking and carrying on. They are sad. Jesus walks up and basically says, "Why are you so sad? What is the problem?"

They say, "What do you mean, what is the problem? Haven't you heard of the things which have happened?"

Jesus says, "What things? Tell me about it."

The Lord, I think, is having a little bit of fun with these two.

They don't even realize that they are telling Jesus about Jesus. He patiently listens as they tell Him about these things. "He was crucified. It has been three days since He died." Couldn't they pick up on the fact that they were saying "three days"? Had they remembered nothing? Jesus had repeated this phrase over and over again before His death. "After three days I will rise again" (Matthew 27:63 NIV). But their hope was gone. They were discouraged. In their minds, Jesus had failed. They still spoke affectionately of Him. In one sense they believed in Him, but their hope was gone (see Luke 24:13-32).

How often do we go through situations not realizing the Lord is walking with us through our times of hardship?

He walks with us through our fiery furnaces as He did with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. He walks with us through our valleys as He did with King David, who said in Psalm 23, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” He walks with us down our roads of hopelessness as He was doing with these two.

It reminds us of God’s Word in Isaiah 43:2, where He says, “When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you. When you go through rivers of difficulty, you will not drown! When you walk through the fire of oppression, you will not be burned up—the flames will not consume you” (TLB). The psalmist says in Psalm 119:114, “You are my refuge and my shield; your word is my source of hope” (NLT). It has been said that you can live 40 days without food, about three days without water, eight minutes without air, and one second without hope. You have to have hope.

Now, to have hope does not mean that you have a permanent smile plastered on your face. Nor does it mean that you have had some kind of a spiritual lobotomy where you don’t feel what other people feel. It doesn’t mean that you are not going to feel pain. You can have hope and pain coexisting together. These discouraged disciples on the Emmaus road had lost their hope. The same Lord that spoke to them wants to speak to you. I believe the same risen Lord is with you right now.

We all need hope, don’t we? Hope is like an anchor that keeps us in place during the tumultuous storms of life. In fact, Hebrews 6:19 says, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” (NIV). So what did Jesus do to restore their hope? He took those two back to the Scriptures.

When Jesus joined them on the road to Emmaus, it ultimately became their road to hope. Luke 24:27 says, “Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (NLT). When they almost reached the end of their journey they urged Jesus to stay with them for the night. As they sat down to eat, Jesus broke the bread and blessed it and the disciples’ eyes were suddenly opened. They recognized Jesus. Then He disappeared. He reignited their passion, causing them to say, “Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32). Jesus restored their hope using Scripture. “And the Scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God’s promises to be fulfilled” (Romans 15:4 NLT).

You may be struggling today because you were dealt a bad hand in life, so to speak. You were raised in a home that fell apart, an abusive home, or an alcoholic home, or someone very close to you died when you were younger. Some tragedy has befallen you, even recently, and it makes no sense to you and you may be angry at God. I hear people say, “I’m mad at God,” and the general tendency is to blame God for all of the evil and all the suffering in the world—effectively passing all the responsibility on to Him.

But God is the source of our hope. We have to look to Him. Here is what God says to us in one of my favorite verses, Jeremiah 29:11: “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” That is what God is saying to us. Listen, even though you have hope, that doesn’t mean you are not going to feel pain.

Contextually that statement in Jeremiah 29:11 was given to the Israelites when they were in Babylonian captivity.

Because of their penchant for idolatry, the Lord banished them to the land of idolatry, Babylon, for 70 long years. They were no longer worshipping. They said they hung their harps on the willow tree. In other words, they put their guitar away, unplugged the amps, and there were no praise services happening because they felt God had forgotten about them and had abandoned them. With that backdrop, the Lord says, “Hey everyone, listen. I know the thoughts that I think toward you. They are thoughts of peace, not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” God was saying, “Israel, listen to Me. Your days are not over. I have a future for you.” And God is saying the same to us.

I love how the Lord says, “I know the thoughts that I think toward you.” It would have been enough if God would have said, “I know the single thought I had toward you for a fleeting moment.” Wouldn’t you be happy to know that God Almighty, the Creator of the universe, had a single thought about you? I would. But that is not what the Lord says, He says, “I know the thoughts.” Plural. More than one. “That I think.” Not past tense but present. “Toward you.” They are, “thoughts of peace and not evil to give you a future.” So the thoughts of God, plural, are good thoughts. The Bible says in Psalm 40:5, “Many, O Lord my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted. . . . They are more than can be numbered.”

God’s thoughts are good, “to give you a future and a hope.” And what does He mean when He says “a future”? It could better be translated “an expected end.” In other words, there will be an outcome. There will be completion in your life. God will tie up the loose ends because, as Christians, we are works in progress.

You might say, “Now wait, Greg. What about when everything in life doesn’t make sense? What about when

we get sick and we pray to be healed and we are not? What about when someone dies? Where is the good now, Greg? Where is the expected end?" I will tell you where it is. It is called Heaven. Things are not all going to be rosy on earth. You are going to have good moments here. You are going to have times when things come together and make sense. And then there are going to be times when they don't make any sense at all. But ultimately the future for every believer is being in the presence of God in Heaven. That is the thing we hope for. And God is the One we place our trust in. Psalm 38:15 says, "For in You, O Lord, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God." And in Psalm 130:5, the psalmist says, "I am counting on the Lord; yes, I am counting on him. I have put my hope in his word" (NLT).

Sometimes it is hard to have this hope as we look at our own situation or even at the world right now. There are so many things that could discourage us. We have our economic problems. We have random shootings everywhere. We have rogue nations developing nuclear weapons and threatening to use them on the United States. It can cause you to be helpless and hopeless. Jesus even said in Luke 21:26 that in the last days "the courage of many people will falter because of the fearful fate they see coming upon the earth" (TLB). As you look at these things happening around us, what should you do? Jesus said when you see these things begin to happen, do what? Look up. For your redemption is drawing near. Don't just look at the problems in our world. Look up because these things mean that Christ is coming back again. And it also reminds us that death is not the end. Physical death is not the end of existence. It is just a change in the state of existence. The tomb is not the entrance to death but the entrance to life. Heaven is the earthly life of the believer glorified and perfected. When a believer dies, they go into God's presence. That is the ultimate hope.

Do you have that hope? What are you hoping in? Everybody hopes in something. Some maybe hope in themselves. Some are like Maria in *The Sound of Music*: “I have confidence in confidence alone.” What? Are you nuts? You have confidence in confidence? No. That is not going to sustain you.

“Well, I have hope in technology.” Really?

“Oh, I am putting my hope in politicians.” I really feel sorry for you.

Listen, this is a tried and tested truth: Put your hope in God. He will never let you down. It is true because the Bible says it is true, but let me just say that I personally know it is true because I have put it to the test. And God has been there for me. And He will be there for you. No matter what you face in life, He will walk with you through it. Again, the psalmist said, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for You are with me.” You are either hopeful or hopeless. The Bible says in Proverbs 10:28, “The hopes of the godly result in happiness, but the expectations of the wicked come to nothing” (NLT). You cannot lose when you put your hope in God.

COMFORTING THOSE WHO ARE HURTING

I would like to take these last few pages to speak to those that want to bring comfort to people who are hurting.

When Job’s so-called comforters first came to him and they saw him in the miserable state he was in for a number of days, they said nothing. That was perfect. That was exactly what they should have done. It was actually when they started talking that the torment began for poor old

Job. But I think if the Lord gives you the right word, as the Scripture says, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25:11). Those of us who have gone through a tragedy have felt those words fitly spoken lift us up for the moment. It doesn’t solve the problem. The pain is still there. But for the moment those right words help.

Unfortunately, many times people will come with their words of comfort that aren’t so comforting. They will say things like, “Hey, it’s all good, man.” No, it isn’t. They say, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” What idiot came up with that? I love this one: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Wow. Now that is inspiring. How about, “What doesn’t kill you only makes you stronger”? Lame.

I have a better one. It is from the Bible. “All things work together for good to those that love God and are the called according to His purpose.” Now that is comfort. Do you know what that means? That means even when tragedy strikes, God can bring good despite the bad. It doesn’t mean that bad becomes good. Bad is bad. Crisis is crisis. Tragedy is tragedy. But good can come despite the bad.

Someone came up to me not long ago and said, “Well Greg, are you back to normal yet?” I thought, “You know what? He cares, but he just doesn’t know what to say.” I said, “No. I am not.” And you know what? I will never be back to normal (whatever that is), because normal was having Christopher here. He was in my life for 33 years. He is gone now. There is an empty chair at the table now. No, I am not back to normal. But over time, you come to a new kind of normal. God has given me strength and will continue to give me strength and be there for me.

When you are seeking to comfort a suffering person, avoid the easy answers and clichés. Sometimes what you say to them can be offensive. We try to be helpful, but we can actually be hurtful when we don't think things through. You will say things like, "I know how you feel" when you really don't. Or, "There is a reason for everything" when they clearly can't see one. How about this? "Cheer up. There is always someone worse off." Yeah, but there are a whole lot of other people who are better off. Someone once wrote to me, and a couple of people have said, "God picks his best flowers first." Or there is always, "Don't worry. Be happy." A friend of mine, Pastor Jeff Lasseigne, was telling me that he was at a memorial service for a couple whose child died. Someone actually came up to them and said, "We know how you feel about the loss of your child because our dog just died." Unbelievable!

Now, I don't want to make you paranoid, where you feel like you can't say anything. Because the only thing worse than saying the wrong thing may be pretending like it didn't happen. And people will do this. They know it has happened, and it is sort of like the elephant in the room and no one wants to mention it. Why? "Well, they might cry." Yeah, they might. But did you know that when you don't remember someone's loss—any loss, be it mother, father, brother, sister, grandparent, child—to not say anything may hurt because they think everyone is forgetting about that person.

It's OK for a grieving person to cry, so don't avoid the subject because you are afraid it will make them cry. What do I say? Bring up a happy memory if you knew the person. Despite the tears it may bring, that mention of their loved one could be a great moment for them. Because it helps them to realize that the person is remembered and will continue to be remembered. So sometimes it's important to say something.

When you are a pastor, people think you don't really need comfort because you just know all the Scripture verses or the right things to say to encourage yourself. No. I struggle like any other Christian would struggle with the pain of loss. So what helps me? One thing that has helped me a great deal is thinking about Heaven.

Now, I have always believed in Heaven since I became a Christian. And I have always preached on Heaven. In fact, it is actually one of my favorite topics. I refer to it quite often. But I have never thought so much about Heaven as I have since Christopher went there. Even though my mom is there, my father who adopted me is there, and I have a number of friends that are there, I never really thought a lot about Heaven. I would think: It is going to be great. I will be there one day. Yes. But now I think, "Well, wait. What is Heaven really like?" Because I want to know what my son is doing, you see. Christopher and I communicated all the time. I would call him up. "What's going on? What are you working on today? Let's get some lunch." I would text him: "What are you doing?" I liked to hear from him, get his feedback. Now I will get up some mornings and I will say, "Well, what is he doing? What is Christopher doing right now in Heaven?"

So I have become a student of Heaven. It helps me. It lifts me when I think of Heaven. And we are told in Colossians 3, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things" (verses 1-2 NIV). And that phrase *set your mind* could be translated "be engaged in a diligent active single-minded investigation" of Heaven. And I have been doing that. I have been investigating Heaven. I want to know more about Heaven. I have been preaching more about Heaven because it is more real to me because I have an investment there now.

I am thinking about what Christopher is doing in Heaven and I am thinking about the fact that before too long I am going to be in Heaven. So I want to be a heavenly minded person. You have heard it said, “They are so heavenly minded they are no earthly good.” That is the dumbest thing I have ever heard. I think the truth is there are too many people who are so earthly minded they are no heavenly good. All they think about is earth. They need to think more about Heaven.

In his book *Heaven: A Place, A City, A Home*, E. M. Bounds wrote,

Heaven ought to draw and engage us. Heaven ought to so fill our hearts and hands, our manner and our conversation, our character and our features, that all would see that we are foreigners, strangers to this world. . . . The very atmosphere of the world should be chilling to us and noxious, its suns eclipsed and its companionship dull and insipid. Heaven is our native land and home to us, and death to us is not the dying hour, but the birth hour.

Isn't that good? I love that. Warren Wiersbe said, “For the Christian heaven isn't simply a destination; it's a motivation.” Heaven should motivate us.

One thing that I have been asked countless times is, “How are you doing?” Let me just say, that is not an easy question for a grieving person to answer. If you want the real honest answer, it is generally we are not doing all that well. We have moments of joy and moments of deep sadness. We may laugh, but there is such sorrow. And it hits us all the time. You can be sitting with a bunch of friends and maybe laughing and having a good time, and—

boom—a memory will hit you. It is just like a landmine. You step on it and it blows up and you come crashing down.

Maybe better than asking the question, “How are you doing?” You might just say, “I am sorry for your loss.” Or, “I am praying for you.” Or even this, “I have no idea what you are experiencing right now, but I care.” Or, “Is there anything I can do?” Or just say, “I love you.”

Someone might say, “Well, he is in Heaven. So rejoice.” Please shut up. It is not that what you said isn’t true. I agree. He is in Heaven and we rejoice. He is in a better place than we are in. But don’t say flippantly to a grieving person, “Well, just rejoice.” Have you ever had anyone die? Someone close to you? Have you ever had a child die? If you did, you would never say it in a casual manner. You would say it with tenderness. You would say, “Man, I miss him. But you know what? We will see him again.” You would just say it differently, you see.

So give people space to weep. Don’t say to someone, “Don’t cry. Rejoice.” Say, “I am sorry.” And what does the Bible say? “Weep with those that weep.” Weep with them. Even Jesus wept at Lazarus’ tomb. Why did He weep? He was sorrowful. Why? Because of death. Jesus knew that Lazarus would live again. Jesus knew he would be walking in only moments. But He wept over the devastation of death. And He weeps with us when we are hurting. Maybe He was weeping because He thought, “Poor Lazarus. He is going to have to come back here again. Then he is going to have to die again.” I mean, it was not such a great deal for Lazarus. But Jesus wept. And we can weep as well. We are told in Ecclesiastes 3 that there is a time to cry, and a time to laugh. There is a time to grieve and a time to dance. There is a time to mend. There is a time to be quiet and a time to speak up.

I think we get into trouble when we start trying to explain why. “You know, maybe the Lord did it for this reason, or that reason.” Don’t even start with that. I have talked to some of the greatest theological minds and they have given me the best answers there are. And you want to know what those answers amount to? “I don’t know.” And no one is ever going to know. And no one is ever going to adequately explain the reason why this side of Heaven.

There will come a day when we will know why. But until that day, asking why to a large degree is an exercise in futility. Job understandably asked that question after the devastation came into his life of the loss of his health and his home and his possessions and, worst of all, his children. He asked why. And have you ever noticed that God never gave him a direct answer? In fact, God just showed him more of His own glory because it was beyond Job’s comprehension anyway.

So, one of the best things you can do for someone who is hurting is to be there for them. Just love them. That doesn’t mean there is not a place to share the Scriptures or pray with them, but don’t come in with a fast answer. Just help a person by being there for them. And ask God to help you go through it with them.

A PRAYER OF HOPE

Maybe you are facing a crisis right now. Maybe you have just heard the worst news imaginable. Maybe you are going through troubles in your marriage. Troubles at work. Troubles with your family. Physical troubles. Health troubles. Financial troubles. The list goes on. You are in deep anguish, or going through pain, worry, and anxiety right now and you wonder, “What should I do?” Here is what you do: you call out to God.

I can point to many good things that have come out of all of the pain of losing Christopher. One thing is the transformation of my youngest son, Jonathan, where he made the most radical commitment to Christ of his entire life and now serves the Lord like never before. I could point to people who profess to have faith now in Christ that didn't have it before, after they heard the news about Christopher. And we are thankful for these things. But ultimately we know that one day when we get to Heaven, it will all make sense. Until that day comes, we have to stand on what God says in His Word.

I would like to offer up a prayer of hope for you today and for the days ahead:

Lord, we don't want to be hurt. We don't want pain. But we want to glorify You. We want to be used by You. And so we say this to You today, Lord: "Use us." And if that includes pain, then we will just say, "Thy will be done" knowing You will give us the strength to go through it. When there is no pain, help us to enjoy those days and to remember that You will be with us just as much in the valleys as You are on the mountaintops. We will never be alone. The endgame here, the ultimate issue, is to glorify You. Not to be happy, but to be holy. Not to be temporarily comfortable, but to be eternally molded into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are Your servants. We are Your soldiers. We are Your children. So we look to You in complete dependence, in utter weakness, acknowledging that apart from You we can do nothing, but at the same time saying we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Oh Lord, help us to think about Heaven. Help us to focus on what is coming, because before we know it this life will be completed. This ministry will be done. And we will

stand before You. And all we want to hear are the words "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter now into the joy of your Lord." Be pleased with us, Lord. Help us to know how we can honor You in all that we say and do. We commit our lives to You now. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.