The God of All Comfort

A Theological Study of the Causes and Cures of Affliction

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Preface

The notable theologian, J. I. Packer, in his seminal work on *Knowing God*, writes, “Comfort is that which encourages and nerves, not in the modern sense of that which tranquilizes and enervates. The quest for comfort in the modern sense is self-indulgent, sentimental and unreal, and the modern religion of ‘I-go-to-church-for-comfort’ is not Christianity.”¹ A much older writer has said, “Our conceits and apprehensions of comfort are but dreams till we attain some true feeling of God's love to us in Christ Jesus poured and shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us.”²

Too many people, including many Christians, want a “word” of comfort from the Lord. They want to feel better, to be relieved of the agonies and difficulties of intense affliction and unending pain. They believe God owes it to us, as a kind heavenly Father, to wrap us in his arms of love and care and take away life’s tragedies and afflictions.

Consequently, we do not read and cannot understand the record of Job in the Bible. We avoid the harshness of affliction experienced by many of our forefathers of the faith, opting for carefree lives and minimal troubles with which to deal. When hard and harsh times do come our way, we feel God does not love us anymore, or that something is wrong with our faith in him. As a pastor who has counseled numerous people caught in the throes of affliction and distress over the years, I have seen these desires made over and over again.

We need a theology of comfort, not merely a list of “how to's,” but a thought-out, God-given, time-tested biblically based understanding about comfort irrespective of the situations we face or can face. We can find such a theology by taking a close look at Paul’s letter to the Corinthians in 2
Corinthians 1 as well as in other biblically based writings. True comfort is God-centered, God-defined and God prescribed. It is known not first by how we feel or our situation, but by what God has said and revealed about it. People avoid this God-centered delineation of comfort because they think it too “religious” and not for the common man or woman experiencing severe affliction and troubles.

I would, on the other hand, contend that without such a theology of comfort, all we have is humanity’s vain attempts to soothe our aches and pains by medicating or psychoanalyzing them. Instead of really dealing with them God’s way, we delude ourselves into a false sense of coping with them.

I am not an expert psychiatrist or psychologist and do not decry their work with intensely afflicted people. However, without a God-centered approach and standard, they can give only temporary support to an age old problem. I wonder how they would counsel Job.

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Notes
2. Edward Elton, Epistle Dedicatory before The Triumph of a True Christian Described, Eldon’s exposition of Romans 8, as quoted by J. I. Packer, Knowing God, 255.
A Relatable History
The Value of Opening Remarks

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

(2 Corinthians 1:1–2  ESV)

More than any other New Testament church, the church at Corinth gives us an instance of a local church “in trouble.” God never glosses over the immense theological, practical and personal problems at Corinth.

The church began with problems (Acts 18). Tremendous persecution and religious bias added to Paul’s frustration with the church. God had to directly step in to encourage Paul to press forward (Acts 18:9, 10). The church had problems “growing up.” They were immature (1 Cor. 3:1-3), split into rivalries and factions (1 Cor. 1:10-12), that were revealed even at the celebration of Communion, or the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–22).

The church had misused the special gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12–14). The church had even once dared question the resurrection of Christ from the dead! (1 Cor. 15:12) Finally, the church had once sanctioned incest in its midst. (1 Cor. 5). But, rather than giving up on this problem church, the Apostle Paul starts this letter with words of comfort, not condemnation.

The man, Paul, has a relatable history as well. He here shows us his “ups and downs” in his own journey and life. Bible scholars point out that Paul made two visits and wrote perhaps three previous letters to the
Corinthians. One of the visits he himself describes as “painful” (2 Cor. 2:1), from which came a “sorrowful letter” (2 Cor. 2:4). Moreover, a certain sect of Jews had come to the church at Corinth, claiming Paul had no apostolic authority or personal integrity to even write to them!

Paul shows us here his inward suffering — “For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you with many tears” (2 Cor. 2:4) — as well as outward struggles (2 Cor. 7:5; 4:7; 5:10; 12:7-9). He was sickly, melancholy at times (2 Cor. 2:13), frustrated and distressed with their spiritual insensitivity (2 Cor. 6:11-13). God gives us first lessons from this very relatable history and man.

**God’s opinion of a church is often not ours**

He addresses the church as “the church of God at Corinth” (2 Cor. 1:1). He even calls them “saints,” or “holy ones” in Christ. The point is that in spite of all the problems and trials and weaknesses and sins of these people, this church was, after all, Christ’s Church! God rules even in churches with problems and sins, and he overrules the attacks of men and Satan to preserve and secure his work — “The divine act in choosing and calling them cannot be undone by human frailty or reversed by Satanic forces at work within the very ranks of the believers.”²

While God’s overarching care and control never excuse sin, and while repentance and renewed faith are still necessary, God sovereignly and surprisingly to us cares for his Church, and consequently, all true local churches, no matter the condition. God never gives up on his people, because they are his people. Notice the instructive passage in Ezekiel 20 — “And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I bring you into the land of Israel, the country that I swore to give to your fathers. And there you shall remember your ways and all your deeds with which you have defiled yourselves, and you shall loathe yourselves for all the evils that you have committed. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name’s sake, not according to your evil ways, nor according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel, declares the Lord GOD.” (Ezekiel 20:42–44)
Your personal problems do not have to impede powerful ministry!
Paul’s relatable history meant that he understood the common ills that often befall Christians who conscientiously seek to serve Christ from day to day. He understood opposition from nonChristians (both friends and strangers) (See Acts 18:6ff; Rom. 10:1-3). He bore with jealousy from “other” teachers (2 Cor. 1:12f; 10:10ff). He dealt with resentment and a stand-offish attitude from church people (2 Cor. 6:11-13). And, he was working from chronic illness and pain (2 Cor. 1:8-9a; 7:5; 12:7-9).

However, he refused to let these hindrances disrupt and discredit his ministry among the Corinthians. He begins his letter by not complaining or grumbling, but rather by rejoicing in the God of grace and peace, the God of all comfort, and the Father of mercies. He had crawled out from underneath his burdens to take a good look at them from God’s viewpoint.
He had viewed them in Christ, and he was thus free to serve them.

I had to learn this lesson the hard way in the early years of my ministry. I was co-pastoring a small, beginning church in Wilmington, DE. We were meeting in the back room of a bookstore. It was my turn to preach, and I was angry and upset with them for growing internal personal problems which plagued this group, as well as lack of external growth and outreach. I let them have it from the pulpit, not so much a preaching as a verbal thrashing of them. I misused and misapplied God’s Word for my own personal anger and frustration. I later confessed this to them and asked them for forgiveness, but the harm was done. A key family told me at the door after the service that they were never coming back, and that I had no right to say the things I said and how I said them. They were right, and I was wrong.

In another church later on, I had to give this advice to another fellow pastor, who was frustrated and ready to either give in or give it to his people. We have no right to air personal grievances in God’s Name and use God’s Word as a whipping tool. Such actions simply reveal our own immaturity and sinfulness, not godliness.

“Grace be to you and peace”
How does one overcome his personal bias and negative viewpoints with
problem people and churches? In the very first place, we must have a healthy and strong view of “grace” and “peace.” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:2, 12; 4:15; 8:19; 12:9; 13:14; Eph. 2:14; Col.3:15)

Grace is not simply “God’s unmerited favor” granting us salvation. Paul used this term over one hundred times in his letters as “that which causes joy!” The twin pillars of grace are the reality of the freeness of God’s gift — “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7) — and the thought of the power that God gives for daily living (2 Cor.12:9). Grace is something in which the Christian must therefore grow — “But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.” (2 Pet. 3:18) It is that quality of life that the Christian must evidence, because it is that quality that most defined Jesus’ life and work for us (2 Car. 8:9). G.W.H. Lampe has observed that “grace is the active presence of Christ himself mediated through the Holy Spirit to be the principle of our life in Him.”

When you think of “peace,” what often comes to mind? God’s definition of peace has an objective basis or root which brings forth subjective tranquility. The feeling of peace flows from and depends upon the fact of peace. A Christian can have a powerful ministry while going through tribulation and trials because of this kind of peace!

Peace is from God. This simply and directly means God alone—not our feelings, not our friends, or church, or pastor, or any created being or thing—can truly give us a true and lasting sense of freedom and joy (cf. Ps. 4:8; 29:11; Isa. 26:3; Jn. 14:27; Isa. 57:19-21).

Peace is a relationship status with God. The peace the Bible describes comes through a right relationship with God founded on the righteousness of Jesus Christ — “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” “And the effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.” (Rom. 5:1; Isa. 53:5; Isa. 32:17). False peace transmits surface tranquility while taking
sin much too lightly. False peace never has doubts, while healthy and God-centered peace deals with doubts through the active presence of the Spirit of Christ. Gospel peace takes sin seriously!

The feeling of peace comes after and through this right relationship. That wonderful promise in Philippians 4:7 — “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” — is the result of God’s perfect peace mediated through us by the Spirit of God. Such a feeling can come and go; it can be often disturbed, halted and blinded by circumstances and our own failures in daily sin. Yet, our relationship with God, our status of peace is as sure as God is, if we trust in Christ’s righteousness alone. Paul thus invites and even constrains the Corinthians to walk by faith, not sight, even in the midst of difficulties.

Grace and peace have to become much more than religious or theological “buzz words.” They convey power, authority and life through the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit in a Christian’s journey.

This is Paul’s preface, his beginning words to these immature, self-centered, cranky Christians at the church in Corinth. “Grace be to you and peace.”

Questions to consider
1. When does a local church “cease” becoming a true church of Jesus Christ?
2. Note and comment on Isaiah 55:8–11.
3. How has God’s grace impacted your life?
4. How have you thought about the “peace” of God?

Notes
1. I purposely use the words, the church at Corinth, to theologically define and describe a local church as an expression of the universal Church of Jesus Christ. There is one true Church, and every biblically valid local church is simply an instance of this one true Church. See John Owen, The Works of John Owen, Vol. 15, “Church Issues,” (London: Banner of Truth, 1968 reprint). A city rich in culture and attractiveness, “Paul founded the church circa AD 50, after his visit to Athens (Acts 18:1-7). It had its origins in the sermons Paul preached in the Jewish synagogue whose leader was among the early converts (Acts 18:8). Inevitably the church and synagogue clashed.
The Jews attempted to institute criminal proceedings against the Christians. This failed when Gallio ruled that Christianity sat under the umbrella of Judaism (Acts 18:12-17), giving Christians the same favoured status as Jews. This was a decision with far-reaching consequences, especially for Christians who were Roman citizens with obligations to the imperial cult.” (http://inductive.indubibia.org/1-corinthians)


Foundations of Real Comfort

A Theology of Comfort

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.”

(2 Corinthians 1:3, 4 ESV)

Too often in discussing “comfort,” we begin with how we feel, or how circumstances are either in our favor or not. We want God’s comfort, indeed, but we want to feel good too! What we do not want is comfort through or in the storms of life. We would much rather have comfort from them. The Apostle Paul views God’s comfort from a very different angle.

A pregnant word

The term Paul uses for “comfort” is parakaleo (παρακαλεω), a multifaceted term that can mean a number of things we do not sometimes associate with comfort. It is used 107 times in the New Testament and can mean to “admonish or exhort” — “the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” (Romans 12:8) It can mean to “beg or entreat someone” — “I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps?” (2 Corinthians 12:18) “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.” (Philippians 4:2)

It can mean to “instruct or teach” — “He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in
sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” (Titus 1:9; cf. 1 Timothy 6:2; 2 Thes. 2:17) And it could mean, as we suppose, to “console, encourage and comfort people” — “who comforts us in all our affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Corinthians 1:4) “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” (1 Thes. 4:18) At times the Apostle combines the ideas of exhorting, comforting and encouraging in Romans 12:8, 1 Corinthians 14:31, and 1 Thessalonians 3:2 — “the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” “For you can all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all be encouraged.” “And we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s coworker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith.”

We should not mask the richness of the term Paul uses in 2 Corinthians to talk about comfort. One person’s comfort might be another’s instruction or exhortation or discipline. The issue is not about how good we feel, but how good God is in dispensing comfort.

Get your focus right
Comfort to be adequately described must be pictured first from God’s mercy-seat, not from the straw-stand of human emotions. Man can never be the measure of anything in comfort, let alone the “measure of all things.” He is neither the criterion nor the source of the truth of God’s mercies. In this area of comfort, he cannot live by what he feels or thinks or how he wills. He must live, act and think by the revelation of God’s mercies and promises given to him, but always remaining outside his powers to rationalize or limit by emotional experiences. What I mean by this is that too often our emotional desire for “joy” or “peace” or “freedom from affliction” really obscures and takes us away from God’s promises, his tender mercies (Psalm 119:77).

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” (2 Cor. 1:3) The focus is not so much on the result, but rather the source and agent of comfort here — “God the
Father.” He is “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” which speaks of the assurance of sonship, that we are children of the King through the Son — “to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” (Galatians 4:5,6; Romans 8:15-17).

He is also the “Father of mercies (compassion).” This is an Old Testament reference to the covenant mercies of a covenant-keeping God — “The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.” “As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” “For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust.” “Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love.” (Ex. 34:5; Ps. 103:13f; Micah 7:18; and cf. Ps. 86:5,15; 119:41; Neh. 9:17; Isa. 53:10; 66:3)

He is the “God of all comfort.” God alone holds the definition, the explanation, the process and the outcome of all comfort in the palm of his hands, under his sovereign control. Comfort cannot be defined by how we feel; it must be defined by Who God is!

**Practice submissive praise!**

Again Paul reminds us through his own praise of God here what our focus should lead to — active, wholehearted praise of God the Father! This is a recurring theme throughout his letters in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 1:3; 5:19,20; Phil. 4:4-7 and 1:29).

The lesson seems to be that God has ordained “praise” to be a comfort-giver! Unless you reach this point of praise, whatever and however you feel, God’s overwhelming comfort is not yours. The real issue is submission,
joyful, unbridled submission to God’s glory, God’s love, God’s power, God’s plan for you during times of affliction, trial, pain and stress. What a horrible word to so many!¹ Submission. It’s like eating lemons or sour pickles. I love what one blogger has said about suffering and submission:

Submission, the despised ‘S’ word, is a training issue. What do I mean by that? Once your mind understands the value of submission, it informs the will to soften the neck and bow the knee. It all comes back to your view of God. We think that a compassionate and merciful God removes suffering. No, He converts suffering into something redemptive. Joni Earckson Tada sums this up best, ‘Suffering is when God uses what He hates in order to accomplish what He loves.’

Unbowed people covet, fight and quarrel. Why? They don’t believe God is at work in their lives and that He can be trusted with their welfare. Submission first begins with God, ‘Submit yourselves, then to God.’

James uses Job (5:11) as an example of submission to God during suffering. ‘You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.’ Because we know the end of Job’s story we see the value of submission to God during suffering. And it is submission to God in suffering—not just submission to suffering, which is what happens to a lot of people as they grow bitter.

We only see the natural realm where suffering seems futile, yet God uses the suffering in the natural realm to accomplish eternal wealth in the spiritual realm.² Affliction is a “school” whereby we learn what “transformation of the heart” is all about.³ Charles Gordon once said, “The basis of all peace of mind, and what must be obtained before we get that peace, is a cessation of the conflict of two wills—His and ours.”⁴ Afflictions are given to humble us — “We shall have many blows before we are brought down to the right mark, and it is because we are so continually getting up that God is so continually putting us down again.”⁵
Notice in Psalm 119 that the Psalmist’s response to affliction and suffering reveals no hint of “I don’t deserve this!” or, “If God is such a loving God, He would not treat me like this,” or “I don’t know why God is treating me like this. What have I done to Him?” Instead, there is the default of hearkening back to God’s revealed will in His written Word. “Preserve my life according to your word” (vv. 25, 107); “Strengthen me according to your word” (v. 28); “I do not forget your decrees” (v. 83); “I have not forgotten your law” (v. 153.)

Submission to God’s Word frames suffering and affliction. As a matter of fact, there is unspeakable joy and pleasure in the straight-forward instruction of God’s Word (v. 92).6 We cannot survive affliction without our “embrace of God’s truth in any form, stated, promised or commanded (“word”), our “binding force and permanence” (“statutes/decrees”) or our obedience to Scripture “as a whole” (“Torah”).7 These are the terms the Psalmist uses in referencing God’s Word in dealing with his afflictions. “Such is the weight of many earthly sorrows that nothing but Scripture, received in faith and applied by the Holy Ghost, can sustain the sinking heart.”8

If this is true, why then do Christians yawn or even sneer at the Psalmist’s proposal that the Bible is totally sufficient to deal with suffering or affliction? Several answers may be given. First, modern Christians by and large do not study the Scriptures. They either don’t know how to study them or are unmotivated to do so. A major cause includes seeker-targeted churches more interested in cultural relevance and attracting the unchurched or previously churched to something they would find exciting, entertaining, uplifting, or whatever “high” description is given. Solid Bible study is considered boring, irrelevant, heady, or just not attractive. In addition, the Bible study supposedly done in small groups in the context of these churches is intuitive, dependent upon the combined “ignorance” of group members sharing their feelings about what they read.

Second, modern Christians have been led astray by looking for “a word from the Lord” apart from the written Scriptures. This “word” can come from many sources—a TV preacher/prophet, an internet blog, or
just an inner “sense” or feeling that God is speaking. The Bible may be alright, but it is seen as a “lower form” of revelation or inspiration. To the Psalmist, getting a “word from the Lord” meant searching the Scriptures. The problem is a decreasing adherence and appreciation of the sufficiency and final authority of the Scriptures for all of faith and life, including suffering.

Third, instead of a love for God’s Word there is a grudging compliance rather than a healthy, life-giving acceptance and adoption of it to one’s personal life. We want God, but we want God without or apart from his stated, written Word. We pray “His will be done,” but have no idea what his will even looks like. Postmodern Christians even “pick-and-choose” as to what they want from the Bible. Such piecemeal encounters with God’s Word cannot give vital assurance and satisfying answers to our suffering.

The Psalmist’s clear appeal to God’s given Word as a sufficient, practical and completely satisfying answer to his suffering challenges the modern Christian. Estes and Tada give thirty-six (36) principles about God’s purpose in our sufferings drawn directly from the Bible.

That Word above all earthly powers,
No thanks to them, abideth;
The Spirit and gifts are ours
Through Him who with us sideth.

Let goods and kindred go,
This mortal life also;
The body they may kill;
God’s truth abideth still;
His kingdom is forever. Amen

Really understand biblical comfort
Comfort’s source resides in God’s Word and God’s promises, not our emotional state. The mighty and all-merciful heavenly Father defines and describes and delineates what comfort is for the Christian. It is not comfort although God afflicts; it is comfort in the midst of affliction and
trouble — “who comforts us in all our affliction...” (2 Cor. 1:4a)

God’s way of comfort means we forsake our ideas of “feeling secure” or living on a spiritual mountaintop. Plainly, we must receive comfort from God, not bring it to Him. Indeed, the Christian is so strengthened by the hand of God that he is able not merely to endure (like the ancient Stoics) but to actually rejoice in “weaknesses, injuries, in necessities, in persecution, in distresses for Christ’s sake” (2 Cor. 12:10).

Consequently, divine comfort cannot be viewed as “elation” or “winning over depression,” a state which often results from our sinful handling of our situations of affliction. God’s comfort comes as the result of working out a problem and living through a period of chastisement God’s way, namely, to attack the sinful tendencies of the human heart and follow the Bible’s way of righteousness to a life and experience of that righteousness. Moreover, the verb used here (parakaleo) is a present participle indicating a constant and never failing kind of comfort.

God’s comfort is something that constantly flows into our lives by Christ’s presence through the Spirit — “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” (Gal. 2:20; John 14:26,27)

We must maintain at all costs this strong, objective character of divine comfort over against the invasion of various kinds of mysticism prevalent today and subconsciously espoused in many Christian groups.

We must hasten to point out, however, that even if comfort is not really emotionalism, it does involve emotion—and plenty of it! Although comfort is objective at its source, it must also be real and personal. “God comforts me!” should be the testimony of every Christian. This was Paul’s (and his fellow laborers’) testimony according to verses 8–10. While comfort cannot be defined merely as a “feeling” of joy and peace, it is certainly and biblically more substantial and deeper than a matter of the
The testimony of the Word of God—the promises Paul makes reference to by implication here—are always joined to the witness of our own experience (cf. Psalm 119:137, etc). We cannot play intellectual gymnastics with this idea of comfort and reduce it to a seemingly “orthodox,” yet lifeless, concept. The comfort Paul refers to in verse four is manifestly inward. It calms our troubled thoughts and fills our hearts with joy and peace in believing (cf. Phil. 2:1).

As certain as the promises of a faithful God, so is his comfort. Yet here it is not so much the mind that believes as it is the believing mind that takes hold of the promises of God, and this gives an inward reality of peace in all and any sort of affliction.

It is the believing mind that lays hold upon the promise of God, is certain of that promise, contemplates that promise, so that the believing heart embraces the thing promised and esteems it so great and gracious, that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with it.13

By way of biblical analogy, Paul tells us that this comfort is a deep, inward experience of love, joy and peace that consumes the whole Christian. It is solid enough to withstand the real pressures of any and all affliction, and deep enough to pierce beyond the surface of rationalization and emotionalism. It is a comfort that lasts.

**Give it back — “That we may be able . . .”**

Paul’s description of comfort in verse four leaves no room for self-pity or inactivity. As it dispels errors concerning the theological aspects of comfort so it refuses to remain merely a topic for discussion among discouraged Christians. This comfort flows out of a Christian’s life in experiences of joy and love and “pervasive counseling” to others.

John Donne, the English poet, once wrote “No man is an island unto himself!” That is clearly true about God’s comfort. When God blesses you and me with his mercies, we must turn around and give them away. In the matter of comfort, it is truly “more blessed to give than to receive.” This is essential for the Corinthian church-body and any church body, simply
because it is a body, an organism devoted through Christ and his Spirit to mutual growth and edification and instruction (cf. Ephesians 3 and 4).

How in practical terms can you and I be channels of God’s comfort that we ourselves have received? The “God of all comfort” in Psalm 34 gives us some key principles. First, help one another in learning how to praise God. We have noted above how the practice of praise was meant to help the struggling Corinthians. Psalm 34:1–3 puts it this way —

“I will bless the LORD at all times;
his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the LORD;
let the humble hear and be glad.
Oh, magnify the LORD with me,
and let us exalt his name together!”

In the second place, help one another by so radiating Christ that others will want to be spiritually refreshed — “Those who look to him are radiant, and their faces shall never be ashamed. . . . Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Psalm 34:5, 8) This is called “pervasive counseling,” counseling that convinces those in need of how vain the world and its resources really are, and how good the grace and power of God can be. Too many have lost this sense of the “sweetness of grace” in which the forefathers of the faith gloried.

Third, help one another by demonstrating how God has wonderfully met our every physical need in times of distress — “Oh, fear the LORD, you his saints, for those who fear him have no lack! The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.” (Psalm 34:9, 10) Jesus promised in Luke 12:29–32 — “‘What I’m trying to do here is get you to relax, not be so preoccupied with getting so you can respond to God’s giving. People who don’t know God and the way he works fuss over these things, but you know both God and how he works. Steep yourself in God-reality, God-initiative, God-provisions. You’ll find all your everyday human concerns will be met. Don’t be afraid of missing out. You’re my dearest friends! The Father wants to give you the very
kingdom itself.” (The Message)

God will never let us down. Jesus promised us the Father’s presence and power to “give us the kingdom” of God. God will take care of us. He will take care of you as you trust in Him. And that includes the necessities of life—food, clothing, sustenance. In my growing up years, my father came down with severe diabetes and was out of work for a period of five years. My mother was at home caring for three kids. We barely survived on welfare checks that came once a month and free food stamps. But we survived. God cared for us and brought us food and other needs in amazing and surprising ways—like eggs, butter and milk from a farmer neighbor down the road on a constant basis, or free donuts and pastries by a delivery man who took note of our plight, and free school lunches for me paid by a teacher who saw my need. “Your Father knows that you need them.” That should reassure Christ followers today and always. Fear not!

Help one another by encouraging those in need with the mighty fact that our Great God does indeed hear, and will in fact answer, the groans and sighs of those in affliction — “When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.” (Psalm 34:17, 18)

Finally, help one another by stressing over and over again that no matter how great the affliction, God is greater still! This is real security — “Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. . . . The LORD redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.” (Psalm 34:19, 20, 22)

We see such encouragement in Titus and his ministry to and with the Corinthians — “In addition to our own encouragement, we were especially delighted to see how happy Titus was, because all of you helped put his mind at ease” (2 Cor. 7:13). Titus, sent to the Corinthians on the difficult mission of ascertaining the state of the church, did not have a joyous task. He was sent by Paul in the midst of “conflicts on the outside, fears within” (2 Cor. 7:5). As the Corinthian Christians comforted Titus (2 Cor. 7:7), and as he shared this comfort with Paul and the others, Paul
could say, “my joy was greater than ever.” Such comfort Paul refers to in 2 Corinthians can be seen, sensed and truly known by fellow believers.

I asked the Lord, that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of His salvation know,
And seek more earnestly His face.

I hoped that in some favoured hour
At once He’d answer my request,
And by His love’s constraining power
Subdue my sins, and give me rest.

Instead of this, He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart;
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.

Yea, more, with His own hand He seemed
Intent to aggravate my woe;
Crossed all the fair design I schemed,
Blasted my gourds, and laid me low.

‘Lord, why is this?’ I trembling cried,
Wilt thou pursue Thy worm to death
‘Tis in this way,’ the Lord replied
‘I answer prayer for grace and faith.

These inward trials I employ
From self and pride to set thee free;
And break thy schemes of earthly joy.’
That thou may’st seek thy all in me.”

In our day of often superficial Christianity and Christian theories of
comfort, let us as the people of God provoke from our unbelieving friends and neighbors the response that a Roman persecutor made of the early Christians: “They were a people ‘Deo contenti’ (content with God), whom they did always carry about with them in their bosom.”

Questions to consider
1. How have you been comforted by God in your life? Give some examples.
2. “I have no sense of God’s love.” “I just pray that this suffering is soon going to be over!” “I feel so discouraged! Pray for me that God would help me feel much better tomorrow.” In the light of this chapter, evaluate these statements.
3. What should I be doing and saying as I move through afflictions?

Notes
1. The comments in this section and “questions to consider, 2–5” are taken from the author’s Upfront and Indepth: Deeper Devotional Studies on Psalm 119 (Lulu Press, 2010), 72ff.
4. The Hebrew term ahab (אהבה) expresses the shared love between two close friends (1 Sam. 20:17; Prov. 17:17), or, even more intimately, between a husband and wife (1 Sam. 1:5). “The Deuteronomic concept of loving God is in Psalm 119 applied to the Torah” (Leslie C. Allen, Psalms 101-150, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 21 [Word Books, 1983], ft. nt. on v. 47b, p. 136).
5. Charles Spurgeon, “The Sweet Uses of Adversity,” on Job 10:2, The Free Grace Broadcaster, Issue 158, Fall 1996, p. 20. He says earlier that “afflictions are often the black foils in which God doth set the jewels of his children’s graces, to make them shine the better” (p. 17).
6. The meaning and intent of מִלְחיַת (See Isa. 5:7).
7. From Derek Kidner, Psalms 73–150 (InterVarsity Press, 1975), 417–419.


10. “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” (German: “Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott”) is one of the best known hymns by the reformer Martin Luther, a prolific hymnodist. Luther wrote the words and composed the melody sometime between 1527 and 1529. It has been translated into English at least seventy times and also into many other languages. The words are a paraphrase of Psalm 46.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Mighty_Fortress_Is_Our_God)


12. For the Greek student — ὁ παρακαλῶν ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ θλίψει ἡμῶν εἰς τὸ δύνασθαι ἡμᾶς παρακαλεῖν τοὺς ἐν πάσῃ θλίψει διὰ τῆς παρακλήσεως ἡς παρακαλούμεθα αὐτοὶ ὑπὸ τοῦ θεοῦ.


14. This remarkable hymn (1779) comes from the pen of that remarkable man, John Newton (1725-1807).
Lord, This Really Hurts!

The Severity of Affliction

“For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.”

(2 Corinthians 1:8–10 ESV)

God had only one son without sin, but he has no sons without suffering,” said the great Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon. Spurgeon also noted that “great hearts can only be made by great troubles.”¹ Martin Luther called affliction the “theology of Christians — theologium Christianorum.” The modern Christian often is found running from troubles, distresses, and painful circumstances. Yet, our forefathers of the faith noted affliction’s blessings, benefits and “sweetness.”²

How intense can affliction be in a believer’s life? Affliction can be life-threatening. The Apostle Paul talked about being “under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life” (2 Cor. 1:8f). Peter refers to the “painful trial” his readers were experiencing (1 Peter 4:12). Affliction hurts! There is no Stoicism here, no denial of pain and desperation here, no dilution of reality here.

The Psalmist in Psalm 119 catches the crushing, life-draining force and reality of affliction or suffering — “laid low in the dust” (v. 25),
“weary with sorrow” (v. 28), “I have suffered much” (v. 107), “Trouble and distress have come upon me” (v. 143).

The Psalmist plumbs the depths of affliction especially in his description of being a “wineskin in the smoke” (v. 83), or a “dried up wineskin” (CEV). In ancient times skins of animals were used as drinking containers. As the bags dried up they cracked and could no longer be used. Some believe that as they hung in nomadic tents they would absorb the smoke of the fire that was used for cooking and warmth. Eventually the skin would harden, turn black and become useless. So the Psalmist here paints a picture of being on the “brink of ruin”3 or “symbolically a potential container of refreshment who walks around as though in a fog, unclear, surrounded by unpleasantness which can darken one’s countenance and dry up the joy within.”4

Clearly, Job in the Old Testament record suffers greatly with not merely the silence of God for a time, but also the excruciating pain of intense affliction. Added to the loss of his livelihood (oxen, sheep and cattle), his servant employees, and his family (chapter one), physical pain is added to his suffering —“And the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your hand; only spare his life.” So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. And he took a piece of broken pottery with which to scrape himself while he sat in the ashes. Then his wife said to him, “Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God and die.” (Job 2:6–1) Finally, three so-called “counselors,” or “friends,” try to tell him that he has sinned against God, merely adding to his emotional and spiritual upheavals.

Whatever the precise nature of the symbolism of the Psalmist, or the rantings of Job, or the unrestrained darkness of Paul here, this believer is experiencing the agonizing reality of suffering or affliction. Such has been the case in every age of Christianity. The Apostle Paul understands what the Christian can go through in affliction. His thoughts are applicable to every dark and painful situation in which we can find ourselves. His words touch the reality of our hearts and lives. As we listen to God speak through him, we can find resolution and rest.
Why do bad things happen to good people?

Rabbi Harold Kushner in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, posits that God does not cause bad things to happen to good people.⁵ They are not a punishment from God. They are simply part of the processes of life. Over four million readers have bought Kushner’s philosophy and theology.

The problem is with the philosophy that people are essentially “good.” They don’t deserve cancer at age 34 or the death of a child or the myriad of things that could and do go wrong in life. After all, everyone is basically good. How can a loving God grant or allow such terrible affliction and suffering? Job and the Apostle Paul share a common context, and that is they live and operate in a world consumed with sin and degradation. We live in such a world, not merely stained or hampered by the Fall recorded in Genesis, but with the ravages of sin and depravity.

Take the example of Hana Brady. Hana was a thirteen year old Jewish girl from Czechoslovakia who died in a gas chamber at the Auschwitz concentration camp in World War II on October 23, 1944. Her parents were never seen again after they had been previously deported by the Nazis. Her brother, George, survived by working as a laborer at the camp.⁶

Horrific. Gruesome. Awful. Terrible. Yes, all of that. Abnormal, unrepeatable, unexpected — no, not really. While most shrink back from the Holocaust and its atrocities and horrors, many see this degradation of humanity as something which “normal” people would and could not do. Yet, I would argue that “normal” people committed such horrific acts. “Normal” people who lived right outside the camps denied that such horror ever existed.

We have a hard time dealing with intense suffering and affliction because of the pervasive myth of goodness in our society. Ever since Aristotle’s theory of natural goodness,⁷ philosophers and social scientists have widely adopted the viewpoint that at our core, we are morally good. We therefore deserve good things to happen to us. Some have said we are good only “to our own kind,” thus, creating a place for Nazism, for instance, so that Nazis could be bad to the Jews and other selected non-Aryans. Others have argued that moral goodness is merely what is “rational” to
the human race. Thus, “moral action is rational action.”\textsuperscript{8} When a human being acts according to his rational nature, he is doing what is good. More importantly, when we act according to our natures truly, we will do the good.

The point is, according to this belief, humankind is essentially morally good. Yes, we can act out of our given nature and thus commit bad acts, but they are against who we really are. This viewpoint, however, is wanting. It does not answer the deeper issues of societal indifference and human cruelty. It fails to adequately explain a corrupt world. And it fails to deal honestly with the horrors of intense affliction.

Additionally, “goodness” is inextricably linked to God’s goodness by Jesus himself — “No one is good except God alone” (Mark 10:18; cf. Matt. 19:17; Luke 18:19). Consequently, what is “good” must match or be in compliance with the nature and character of God himself. It’s not merely that we are not “good enough” in God’s sight, but rather we lack the fundamental qualitative character trait.\textsuperscript{9}

The judgment of Moses and the Old Testament writers and prophets is that at its core, humankind is intensively and extensively evil – “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Genesis 8:21; cf. Jeremiah 13:23). And this statement from God comes \textit{after} the universal flood judgment! It’s the very same declaration of the nature of mankind that God gave \textit{before} the flood (Genesis 6:5). Humankind has not changed even with the devastating flood. We see this today in peoples’ attitudes and lifestyles even after the terrorist attacks of 9/11/2001. Many flocked to churches and synagogues right after those attacks, only to drift away from churches and religion and God in a few weeks.


“They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity” (Romans 1:29; cf. Rom. 1:18ff).

“As it stands written, There is no one righteous, not even one”
(Rom. 3:10f from the Psalms).

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins. . . . All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath” (Ephesians 2:1-3).

At our very core, our nature is not goodness and light. Who we really are is not very complimentary or pretty.

Depravity has infected and affected every part of our nature, including our thoughts, desires, actions, emotions and wills. Creation itself has been adversely affected and suffers through the sinfulness of humankind — “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.” (Romans 8:20–22) Yes, even our human will has been tainted and scarred with evil. This is why the Reformers and other orthodox writers have talked about total depravity. Total depravity includes what is called total inability. The evil within is not selectively applied to our core natures. We don’t get to decide how “bad” we can be.

We choose not to act so wickedly or experience devastating affliction because of God! Whether we call it “common grace” or “restraining grace” or something else theologically, God acts in us and in society to suspend and counteract the evil within us, around us or done to us.

Common grace curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men.10 Consequently, God works in the providential care of creation (cf. Matthew 5:45; 7:9, 10; Gen. 8:21, 22; Colossians 1:17), the restraint of sinful behavior (cf. Gen. 20:6; 1 Samuel 25:26; Esther; 1 Timothy 2:1-3) and the ordering of society for his glory and man’s welfare.

But such total depravity can be “good news!” Not, the Good News,
but good news in the sense that God alone must deliver us from ourselves. We cannot do anything that He would call “good.” We do not have the predisposition or power to change ourselves or those around us. We must go to God for the ultimate solution to human depravity and intense suffering.

The problem with Gospel “Good News” in our church climate today is that many people don’t see the desperate need for it. Their sins or sinfulness are “mistakes,” or missteps or the failure to realize their potential. Their suffering is not warranted and, therefore, must be a “mistake.” There is little conviction that I am as bad as it gets, or that affliction can be as grievous as it is at times. Very few in the modern world want or need deliverance if we can choose not to misstep. There must be a reason why intense suffering has come upon me. Free will has come full circle to mean I can choose on my own to need or want God or not, even in affliction and suffering.

Moderns look at this and say they don’t need or want “hellfire and brimstone” sermons or messages to drive them to Jesus Christ and his salvation. While, indeed, some of these old fashioned messages were harmful and overdone, they spoke to a society and world that were desperate for deliverance and relief. That world, due to the lack of teaching and application of this truth of total depravity, is gone. Convictional Christianity has been replaced by comfortable Christianity. Restoration of this theological anchor will help restore the reality of the Good News of the gospel. It will also make intense suffering and affliction more understandable.

Unanswered questions
What exactly was the Apostle’s ailment? Much thought and time have been spent by many to try to answer this particular question. The result has been one of simply fruitless speculation of the human imagination. A surface reading of the portion, “for we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia” tempts one to search without resolution for an answer to the question raised. Not only is this a result of fruitless search; it actually detracts from the import of Paul’s
message to us in these verses.

Some have proposed that Paul is referring to mob violence described in Acts 19:23–41, but there is no indication Paul was in any real personal danger there. Others say this refers to the dangerous attacks of bodily sickness the Apostle had, whatever they were — “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.” (2 Cor. 12:7) Some say that these trials were the agonizing anxieties Paul had within himself over the health of the local church at Corinth. Then again, some conjecture that these were trials of different sorts, more especially plots against the Apostle’s life. In all of this, however, there is no certain answer to the questions raised.

Paul is not interested in telling us the intricate details, or what exactly was it that he suffered in Asia. He fails to satisfy our speculations and forces us to search out the real reason why he gave us these verses.

I like the unknown mysteries of the Bible. Rather than seeking to verify every facet of God’s revelation, we are left with open ended questions and queries. This is good, and actually demonstrates the veracity of the inspiration of Scripture. If we could analyze everything and codify every aspect of God’s Word we would only gratify our self-centered egos. In the realm of affliction and personal struggle and pain, no one can fully appreciate or satisfy their hankering after precise diagnoses. God does this because at the end of the day, He wants the glory and praise and adoration for his healing and sustenance through affliction. We see this played out in the quintessential book on suffering, the book of Job. In the next chapter we shall plunge into more of the question of the silence of God in suffering.

We should remind ourselves of the purpose of the letter to the Corinthians at this point. Paul writes to vindicate his apostolic authority and position as well as help struggling believers at Corinth — “For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do,
letters of recommendation to you, or from you?” (2 Cor. 2:17; 3:1) He therefore refuses to grant any ground for his accusers on which to stand. They might, after all, charge the Apostle for tricking the people of God by sympathy pleas for his personal hurts and pain. That would in the end dishonor the Lord and prove worthless in helping to comfort these believers.

There is a practical point not to be lost here. When we think of the men and women in the past and present history of the Church who have suffered for Christ, we do not really ask for nor do we need the gritty details of their suffering. That which causes us to rejoice with them in suffering is how great and gracious our God has been to sustain his people. We also think about the intensity of their suffering, or in how many instances their afflictions seemed unbearable. Through such intensity God gives us a glimpse of his strategy in affliction.

How intense can affliction be?

In these verses Paul faces the question of the reality, or better, the realness, of divine comfort, that it is not a “dream” or an abstract theological game. Then he deals with the results of that realness of comfort. In so doing, he gives us the theme of this section.

The Apostle Paul here explodes one of the most dangerous distortions of the Bible today — the “Word of Faith Gospel.” Kenneth Hagin would propose, “Say it; do it; receive it; tell it.” “Noted Word of Faith teachers, such as Kenneth E. Hagin and Charles Capps have argued that God created the universe simply by speaking it into existence (Genesis), and that humans have been endowed with the ability (power) to speak things into existence. Thus, making a “positive confession” (by reciting a promise of scripture, for example), and believing that which one says, generates power which enables those things to come into fruition. This teaching is interpreted from Mark 11:22-23”11 — “And Jesus answered them, “Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.”

Word of Faith preachers have likened faith to a “force.” Although
it endures, this teaching has been convincingly refuted by many Bible scholars. The essential problem is that it places on the Scriptures an interpretation not warranted by their meaning or context.

Paul’s argument from experience dispels any such fantasy. He says he was “burdened,” or “weighed down” exceedingly (“pressed out of measure” in the KJV). Think of an animal weighed down so much that it finally sinks under its burden, beyond its strength to carry. The term “excessively” (NASB) implies the aggravated and deeply intense nature of the burden. It is like trying to run with a person on your back, at least twice your weight, when your legs feel like rubber and you feel like falling, unable to stop running and unable to get the oppressive burden off your back. The term “beyond our strength” describes the affliction as beyond the normal power of endurance.

“Inasmuch,” says Paul, “that we despaired even of life.” So intense was the burden that Paul could see no possibility for survival. He was utterly at a loss concerning whether or not he could go on. The situation seemed impossible, so much so that he makes the astounding statement in verse 9, “indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves.” He was conscious that within himself, humanly speaking, the death-sentence had been passed. Making an inquiry into his present spiritual state, his heart, soul and mind joined in one resounding chorus — death!

Paul, however, was not suicidal, nor was he in the unbelieving state of despair leading to such an action. The language used along with the context of the Word of God reminds us that all that is said here must be seen under the umbrella of God’s sure and sovereign care and control of his own (cf. Psalm 30:5) joined with the harness of faith. Nevertheless, affliction described in this place is so severe that apart from divine intervention, there would be little to no hope.

What was God doing?
Paul’s intensity of affliction passes into the matter of God’s strategy for the suffering. From this strategy we can see the quality of comfort God gives his suffering people. The question of “why such intense suffering” is a legitimate question. Rather than questioning God’s divine purposes or
sovereignty, the text invites us into the answer in verse 9 — “But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead.” Paul and all who trust Christ should not trust in themselves, but in God, the “raiser of the dead.”

Paul’s claim of apostleship is vindicated here. Such a vindication gives the letter a unified thrust, even in a passage dealing with something that seems far removed from a defense case. With respect to Paul himself, such affliction made it impossible for this servant of God to explain away by reason, or to push aside by will power, or to shrug off with indifference his affliction experience. It serves as a sobering reminder of what real and practical “weakness” was all about and what the freedom of grace really means. Paul’s fight was not yet over. His course was not yet finished. He still had many obstacles to overcome, but God here showed the man who preached grace what it meant to really live by that grace. Possibly Paul was reminded of the story of Abraham and Isaac, where “Abraham believed God who quickens the dead and calls things which are not as though they were.” (Romans 4:17f)

With respect to Paul’s accusers in Corinth, God made it impossible for Satan to thrust upon anyone the idea that Paul’s affliction could be explained away by naturalistic reasoning. There could be no human explanation to Paul’s release from such bondage. Even his accusers were forced to behold the wondrous, awe-inspiring act of God whose deliverance of Paul was in a very real sense a “resurrection from the dead!”

Deliverance from this terrible kind of affliction, according to the Bible, is like a resurrection from the dead. What are God’s purposes in such deliverances? First, God shows us the absolute weakness of our own resources so that we can clearly see and sense what grace is all about. Charles Hodge comments — “There is no such thing as implicit confidence or reliance on God, until we renounce all confidence in ourselves.” We cannot truly know the “God of all comfort” until we have learned in our afflictions how to rely on the power of God alone to deliver us. Hodge again says, “No man until he is tried knows how essential the omnipotence of God is as a ground of confidence to his people. They are often placed in circumstances where nothing short of an almighty helper
can give them peace.”

Most every Christian maintains that it is grace and grace alone that saves anyone. But how many of us can say, “I have had such an encounter with my own weaknesses and with God’s mighty grace that I really live daily by grace alone?” Many speak of “grace” until it becomes a cliché or a catch-word for doctrinal purity, while living and knowing very little of the reality of such grace. Not so for the Apostle Paul. He came to know the quality of divine comfort. He came to know that comfort from God is a matter of unspeakable, sovereign grace given by God alone, maintained through Christ alone and ministered through the Holy Spirit alone. He learned that comfort is not merely feeling “comfortable,” or an escape into a world of spiritual fantasy. He learned that biblical comfort, God’s comfort, is a life and death issue.

In the second place, God teaches us the amazing power and grace available to Christians now because of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Paul refers to this fact in the phrases, “in God who raises the dead” and “He on whom we have set our hope.” It was the Lord Jesus Christ who said to his disciples, “In the world you shall have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33)

What is striking is that Jesus gave these great words of comfort on the eve of his crucifixion, at the point when his own human affliction became even more unbearable than Paul’s. Knowing the power of the Father to raise him from the dead, Jesus would give present comfort to a fearful band of disciples gathered around him on that dark and forboding night. God tells you and me through Paul that this same Jesus who spoke peace and assurance then has the power and grace sufficient enough to be our hope now and forever — He has delivered; He will presently deliver, and He will still deliver in distant years and in circumstances we cannot even imagine.

When we think of “resurrection,” we often think of a point in time in past history where God raised Jesus from the dead, or we think of a point in time in future history where God will raise mankind in a final general resurrection. We unthinkingly limit Christ’s triumph over death to isolated points. Yet, the Scriptures are quite clear that Jesus Christ died
and rose again that believers might “overwhelmingly conquer through him who loved us” and therefore “will reign in life through Jesus Christ.” (Romans 8:37; 5:17)

Christ is now our “hope of glory.” (Colossians 1:27) We can labor and strive, even in the midst of great afflictions, “because we have our hope set on the living God.” (1 Timothy 4:9, 10) Christ’s resurrection carries with it the crucial idea of present, as well as future, victory for Christ’s people over all obstacles. This brings this rich comfort to our history, our circumstances, our lives today as well as tomorrow.

Moreover, the Bible does not view the suffering we go through as gloomy or foreboding. It rather tells us to regard present suffering as “light” compared to the “eternal weight of glory” waiting for every true believer (2 Cor. 4:17). We can receive the Word of God in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit — “And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” (1 Thessalonians 1:6)

We do not need to sit around in discouragement and grief, waiting for a future deliverance, when freedom from even great affliction is presently available to all who come to the Great Deliverer, Jesus Christ, today and trust wholeheartedly in him. Have you looked through disappointment and the grief of affliction to the amazing quality of comfort that is at hand for you now at the feet of a Living Savior?

Questions to consider
1. Has the Apostle’s experience been yours? How have you dealt with such affliction?
2. Read 1 Corinthians 10:13. Does this verse promise an escape route from the intensity of great affliction? It is certain that God is faithful and that “he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able,” but who determines the limits here?
3. How have you answered the question, Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?
4. If you are a pastor or counselor, considering these verses how should you help someone going through particularly intense affliction?
Develop a “worksheet” for such people to complete that will emphasize the thrust of Paul’s message in 2 Corinthians.

5. In chapter one we noted Paul’s introduction to Christian comfort in terms of “grace” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:2) What advance in Paul’s theology of grace has been made in verses 8 – 10?

Notes
6. Hana Brady was the subject of the 2002 nonfiction children’s book, Hana’s Suitcase, written by Karen Levin. A recent update to the book includes a Foreword by Desmond Tutu. It is available through Amazon.com.
8. This is neo-Aristotelian naturalism seen in Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness (Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 24. Thus, like a “good” tree has “good” roots, so human beings are “good” in the sense that goodness belongs to them in virtue of their natural kind. Moral goodness by Foot is seen as a specific form or subset of this natural goodness. If this seems vague, it is so to others who have written critiques of Foot’s work.
9. Thayer’s comment is particularly interesting in this regard: “It is to be regarded as a peculiarity in the usage of the Septuagint that בֹּלֶל good is predominantly (?) rendered by καλος.... The translator of Genesis uses ἀγαθός only in the neuter, good, goods, and this has been to a degree the model for the other translators. ... In the Greek O.T., where ὁ δικαιος is the technical designation of the pious, ὁ ἀγαθος or ὁ ἀγαθος does not occur in so general a sense. The αὐτος ἀγαθος is peculiar only to the Proverbs (Prov. 13:22,24; 15:3); cf. besides the solitary instance in 1 Kings 2:32. Thus, even in the usage of the O.T. we are reminded of Christ’s words, Mark 10:18, οὐδεὶς ἄγαθος εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ Θεός. In the O.T. the term ‘righteous’ makes reference rather to a covenant and to one’s relation to a positive standard; ἄγαθος would express the absolute idea of moral goodness” (Zezschwitz, Profangraec. u. Biblical Sprachgeist, Leipz. 1859, p. 60). Cf. Tittm., p. 19. On the comparison of ἄγαθος see B. 27 (24.). See Joseph Thayer, Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Hendriksen, 1996 reprint).
10. Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology (Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996 reprint of 1932 work), 434. The concept of “common grace” is a particularly Reformed or Calvinistic theological concept. The definition is given in the text. It is “common”
because its benefits are experienced by all humans, and it is “grace” because it is
sovereignly and undeservedly bestowed by God.
12. The word “sentence” indicates an official decision or verdict in response to an
inquiry or deputation.
13. Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand
15. Note the succession here in Paul’s use of the verb “deliver.” The AV reading, “who
delivered us . . . and does deliver . . . he will yet deliver,” although it provides a nice,
past–present–future sequence, chooses poor textual evidence on which to support the
second use of “to deliver” as a present tense. Most evidence points to a future tense.
The sequence would then read, “who delivered us . . . and will deliver . . . he will still
deliver.” The only difference might be that Paul used the first “will deliver” to refer to
the present and near future, while the second one pointed to a more remote future. In
any case, the thrust of the passage remains the same.
When God Seems Silent

Paul and Job

“Why did you bring me out from the womb? Would that I had died before any eye had seen me and were as though I had not been, carried from the womb to the grave. Are not my days few? Then cease, and leave me alone, that I may find a little cheer before I go—and I shall not return—to the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness.”

“For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death.”

(Job 10:18–22; 2 Corinthians 1:8, 9a ESV)

There are two questions that continually come up in discussing intense affliction especially among Christians — Is redemptive grace effective? That is, did Jesus really break the power and pervasiveness of the results and curse of sin evident in pain and sickness and suffering? Did Jesus Christ really “bruise the serpent’s head” even though the Devil “bruised his heel?” (cf. Genesis 3:15) In the war between good and evil, who finally wins?

The second major question often asked is, How is a suffering and redeemed person to respond to intense affliction? I am a reader of the Puritans. In that reading, I have found most of them accepting suffering and pain and intense affliction as “normative.” They have written extensively on affliction and its necessity and “sweetness” — “Christians sometimes have their sinking fits. And though the depths of calamity into which the
godly may fall may be as deep as hell, yet this is our great comfort—the mercy of God lies even deeper!”¹ “We complain that very sore trials lie upon us; let us remember God is our Physician, therefore He labors rather to heal us than humor us.”²

This is evident in Scripture: the strongest in grace have been the most tempted, afflicted, and distressed. Abraham excelled in faith, and God tried the strength of his faith to the uttermost. Moses excelled others in meekness and had to deal with a murmuring generation. Job carried the day with patience, and he was exercised with great afflictions. So God, in much wisdom and love, will suit your burdens to your backs. He will fit all your afflictions to your strength.³

Thomas Brooks, in *The Mute Christian Under the Smarting Rod with Sovereign Antidotes to Every Case* (1659)[SEE Appendix for Synopsis], mirrors the thinking of many of our Puritan forefathers —

But God, who is infinite in wisdom, and matchless in goodness, hath ordered troubles, yea, many troubles to come crowding in upon us on every side. As our mercies, so our crosses, seldom come single; they usually come treading one upon the heels of another; they are like April showers, no sooner is one over, but another one comes. And, yet Christians, it is mercy, it is rich mercy, that every affliction is not an execution, that every correction is not a damnation.⁴

Modern Christianity has moved far from such thinking and reasoning. In fact, we today would call this morose, debilitating and depressive, not suited to encouragement and comfort. We might even call this kind of reasoning severe and damaging and blame our Puritan forefathers for making God a tyrant rather than a loving Father. Yet, intense affliction and suffering, even among the most dedicated believers, endures and needs biblical answers that moderns cannot give.

It is interesting on many levels to consider Job’s suffering as analogous to Paul’s affliction journey. The parallels are striking.

In both cases, questions like those above can be asked. In both cases, we are dealing with real situations in time, space and history, which are
either absent of a detailed account of the exact nature of the affliction (Paul) or of a definitive date in the history of redemption (Job). In both cases, Satan’s strategy appears to be similar. He wants Job’s “accuser–friends” as well as Paul’s to force upon the men and their situations a totally naturalistic explanation of the wonder of deliverance God was about to perform. Consequently, in both cases, God’s strategy appears to be similar — to make it impossible for the accusers (and, in fact, the Accuser himself) to foist such an explanation upon the work of God. Deliverance must be all of grace.

In Paul’s case as well as Job’s, we can possibly see a challenge which originates in Satan himself to the sovereign effectiveness of God’s redemptive decree of Genesis 3:15 — “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” If this is so, then Paul’s account in 2 Corinthians 1 takes on a redemptive-theological thrust not seen in any present understanding of these verses.⁵

Faced with intense suffering or overwhelming odds, we could ignore the situation and try to pretend that “it’s just a dream — tomorrow will be better!” And, of course, it isn’t. We could minimize the situation, but trying to think the situation is small will not make it so. Or, we could do more of what we are doing now, hoping that things will improve. That is simply the definition of insanity! We could panic and give up, as unfortunately some do and become suicidal. Or, we could take the course Job and Paul did, admitting we don’t know what to do, but we do know the One Who does.

While we cannot thoroughly and exhaustively study the book of Job in this particular study, we can take note of several clues giving us answers to the major questions raised during intense affliction. What do we do when God seems silent?

**Voice your complaints**

God is no stranger to complaints. One third of the Psalms are complaints or laments. “In these laments the writer pours out to God his sorrow (Psalm 137), anger (Psalm 140), fear (Psalm 69), longing (Psalm 85), confusion (Psalm 102), desolation (Psalm 22), repentance (Psalm 51),
disappointment (Psalm 74), or depression (Psalm 88) either because of external evil or internal evil or darkness. God wants to hear our pain.

Job is full of painful, yet faith-full, complaints. The suffering of this ancient holy man is not random, not punitive, not purgative. Job’s trials act as a standing corrective to human complacency and pride. Job’s agonizing questions point us forward to the hope of the gospel in Jesus Christ and the effectiveness of our redemption in and through him. They come in waves as his so-called friends seek to instruct or counsel him.

“Why did I not die at birth, come out from the womb and expire?
Why is light given to him who is in misery, and life to the bitter in soul, who long for death, but it comes not, and dig for it more than for hidden treasures.”
(3:11, 20, 21)

“Oh that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances! For then it would be heavier than the sand of the sea; therefore my words have been rash. For the arrows of the Almighty are in me; my spirit drinks their poison; the terrors of God are arrayed against me.”
(6:2–4)

“Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are a breath.”
(7:11, 16)
“How then can I answer him, choosing my words with him?
Though I am in the right, I cannot answer him;
I must appeal for mercy to my accuser.”
(9:14, 15)

“I loathe my life;
I will give free utterance to my complaint;
I will speak in the bitterness of my soul.
I will say to God, Do not condemn me;
let me know why you contend against me.”
(10:1, 2)

“I am a laughingstock to my friends;
I, who called to God and he answered me,
a just and blameless man, am a laughingstock.”
(12:4)

“How many are my iniquities and my sins?
Make me know my transgression and my sin.
Why do you hide your face
and count me as your enemy?”
(13:23, 24)

“Man who is born of a woman
is few of days and full of trouble.”
(14:1)

Beware of well-intentioned but off-centered advice
The three so-called “friends” of Job are the psychiatrists and spiritual advisors of Job’s day. They are looked upon as “wise men” of the period. They try to comfort Job by giving him their answers to two main questions that bother Job — How can a person, like me, find justice and hope from a holy, righteous, Creator God, One who has made heaven and earth, One
who judges the sinner, One who is absolutely pure? And, how is suffering, yet redeemed man, to respond to Satan’s challenges and intense suffering?

Eliphaz’s answer (4:7–11) is based on experience. If it works, then it must be true. Job is suffering because he must be sinful. How do we know? Because Eliphaz has seen this kind of thing over and over, and knows it to be so. His pragmatic approach is what Job needs to heed.

Bildad is the champion of salvation by doing the right things (8:4–6). His theory is that if you are good, God blesses you. If you are evil, God judges you. It is evident that Job is flawed and evil. Acts of repentance are called for in this case.

Zophar preaches the common sense gospel of the day (11:13–19). If Job will only do the two or three steps that he must do, then everything will be okay. “A little talk with Jesus will make it right” is Zophar’s philosophy. Every doubt is sin; every difficulty is a sign of unbelief.

The discussion advances from stated theory to personal application and becomes rather abusive. Job calls them all “miserable comforters.” (Job 16:2) Eliphaz becomes impatient with Job and much more harsh with him in chapter 15. His tongue-lashing of Job not only gives no comfort. Job keeps telling him that he has done all he can do, that he cannot do any more and that he needs a “mediator” to step in the gap between him and God. This only makes Eliphaz more upset. We suffer because of sin. Everyone knows this. Get your act together, Job!

Bildad in chapter 18 is annoyed at Job’s lack of repentance. He believes Job is trying to willfully misunderstand his three friends, and so he tells Job that the wages of sin is death, and ends there.

Zophar in chapter 20 believes it is obvious that Job has sinned somewhere and indirectly accuses Job of land-grabbing and the oppression of the poor. He gives Job the “fire-and-brimstone” sermon about the woes of the wicked and the terrors of hell.

But the thrashing of Job is not over yet. A younger Elihu enters the scene in chapter 32. He is angry with the three so-called counselor friends of Job. He is angry with Job for challenging God. Knowing little about life and death, this brash and bold, presumptuous and arrogant, younger counselor seems to have the right answers.
Elihu’s God, however, is unreachable, out of touch with mankind, including Job (cf. 35:5–8; 37:22, 23). And the Mediator Job has called for in chapter 19 — “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!” (19:25–27) — is but a “super-angel,” not a God-man (33:23, 24). Job, says Elihu, you need to be broken by God. Stop arguing with God. Submit to his dealings with you.

Job, on the other hand, calls out by faith for a Redeemer (9:32, 33; 16:18–17:3; 19:23–29). Since he has no one in his family as a “goel-redeemer,” God himself will be his Redeemer. Job’s resurrection hope is to “see” his Redeemer, on whom he has set his hope and future. It is not that Job is sinless. Quite the contrary, Job himself agrees with the need for a Redeemer from sin and shame for his own case. His so-called friends are circumscribed by their own limited viewpoints of sin and life and death. Even well-intentioned friends and counselors can get it wrong about why a person moves through intense suffering and how to relieve it.

Trust in God’s sovereignty

After all has been said and done, or so we think, God finally speaks. What he says to Job is totally unexpected as an answer to his dilemma and suffering. In chapters 38 and 39, God makes a statement of his almighty power and wisdom, manifested in the natural order. No human can control earth or sea or sky or the wild animals that roam the earth. Mankind lacks the power and wisdom to do so.

God challenges Job — “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge? . . . Have you entered into the springs of the sea, or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness? Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth? Declare, if you know all this. Do you know the ordinances of the heavens? Can you establish their rule on the earth?” (38:2, 16–18, 33)

Essentially, God is saying, “Let God be God!” By nature, experience,
and secular training, we veer toward a “projectionist” view of God, if at all. That is, we think or want God to be a certain way, and, consequently, mentally and emotionally, and even spiritually, “project” our view when speaking of the character and nature of God. For instance, we try to define or delineate “goodness” apart from what God has revealed in his Word and speak of goodness as the opposite of “badness,” whatever that is. Or, we take a Platonic or Aristotelian view of goodness as “the highest end to which knowledge and action lead us.” Or, we associate goodness with human, sentimental happiness. We then “project” these views upon God. Diagrammatically, it looks something like this:

The secular-humanist considers humankind the starting point of truth and revelation. He or she vaguely sees or distorts God’s revelation of Himself. In this way of thinking, we live in a “closed system” of thought, action and being. We see what we want to see and are able to verify. We don’t allow God’s definition of either Himself or reality to be part of our lives. To whatever extent modern Christians have accepted this projected system of reality, to that extent the adoration of Job and Paul for God’s self-revelation and actions are either out of place or inhibitive to them.
The Christian-theist views God’s self-revelation, shown in the Scriptures, to be the starting-point of all reality and truth. This person lives in an “open system,” where God may freely interject, define and even suspend. We “think God’s thoughts after Him,” not for Him, not in place of Him, and not in addition to Him. Not only does this not make us less human, as Darwinist Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion*, would have us believe, but more fully human, more fully loving, more fully just, more fully complete. This is the framework of both Job and Paul the Apostle.

A number of writers treat mercy, patience and grace as “aspects of God’s goodness to individuals in specific situations:”

Thus, God’s mercy is his goodness toward those in distress, his grace is his goodness toward those who deserve only punishment, and his patience is his goodness toward those who continue to sin over a period of time.

God’s goodness is self-located and self-defined. That is, goodness originates from Himself and no other source. There is no higher standard than the character of God for goodness. This is why Jesus said in the Gospels, “No one is good, but God alone” (Luke 18:19; Mark 10:18). The Puritan Thomas Manton pointed out, in addition, that God is essentially good (He not only does good but is goodness itself); God is infinitely good (no limit to God’s goodness); and, God is immutably good (No diminishment or augmentation).

Though this may seem tautological to some, “God has given us some reflection of his own sense of goodness, so that when we evaluate things in the way God created us to evaluate them, we will also approve what God approves and delight in things in which he delights.”

“Wait a moment!” someone is bound to say. Aren’t these attacks wrong? Yes. Isn’t affliction painful and even debilitating? Yes. Are Job and Paul Stoics or masochists? No. Not in any way. The context of affliction and suffering is found in letting God be God. It resides in my adherence and submission to the goodness of God. If God is essentially good and does good, then I will rest in Him, in His perfect will, in His plan, in His timing, in His Word. Charles Bridges puts it this way:
Judging in unbelieving haste, of his providential and gracious dealings, feeble sense imagines a frown, when the eye of faith discerns a smile, upon his face; and therefore in proportion as faith is exercised in the review of the past, and the experience of the present, we shall be prepared with this ascription of praise. Submission and worship are Job’s final responses to God’s self-revelation —

Then Job answered the LORD and said:

“I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. ‘Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?’ Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. ‘Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.’ I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”

(42:1–6)

Instead of prideful, “Now I understand!,” it is submissive “Now I repent,” which is the response of afflicted Job. God’s sovereignty became not merely a theoretical point of theology, but a practical God-centeredness in the life and affliction of Job.

God’s argument is as follows: If I, God, can create in my wisdom such freakish creatures with seemingly no functional purposes, then in my wisdom and for my glory I can send you seemingly freakish experiences which are totally beyond your comprehension, but not beyond mine. Trust me! For regardless of what happens in this world I am in complete control ruling and overruling for your good and my glory.

Accepting God’s sovereignty means actively trusting God, realizing He is in control and can be trusted. At no point does God release his control of our lives. Job and Paul faced the choice of acknowledging or
rejecting the sovereignty of God in response to their suffering and loss. Paul put it this way —

So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7–10)

Keep talking and listening to God
We underestimate the power and need of prayer in intense affliction. We are to grow in our prayer relationship with God. Since we share the sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 4:13; Philippians 3:10), we also share in the resurrection power of Christ in comfort. Our experience of God’s comfort, even through affliction, parallels our daily sense of union with Christ.

If we are wandering in sin, out of fellowship with Christ, comfort will be hard to find. If we are living in intense communion with the living Lord, comfort will be as intense and satisfying. This is Paul’s point in how he uses the term “abounds” in 2 Corinthians 1:5 — “For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.” Jesus Christ is both the centerpoint and channel of our comfort.

God tells us in the case of the Corinthians that we are “co-workers” with Him in praying for one another. We have a human responsibility to especially pray with and through those going through intense affliction. God places a high premium on prayer.

Such prayer requires and exacts a cost, however. In 2 Corinthians 1:11 the word for “prayer” actually means “supplication.” It is a term used in the New Testament loaded with two special qualities — perseverance
and intensity.

We see such persevering prayer in the example of Anna in the temple awaiting the coming Lord of Glory — “There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:36–38) She saw redemption because she prayed perseveringly for redemption.

Intensity in prayer follows Christ’s example in Hebrews 5:7 — “During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.” The Puritan John Owen described it as “a vehemency that cannot be compressed or confined, but will ordinarily break out into a loud expression of itself . . . not merely the outward noise, but the inward engagement of heart and soul, with the greatness and depth of the occasion.”

Supplication is a wrestling with God (cf. Genesis 18:23ff), a shameless immodesty that takes no denial (Luke 11:8). The labor expended in such prayer can leave a person exhausted, but blessed in the arms of Jesus.

Worshipful rejoicing and wonderful church unity are two evident results of biblical intercession. This is a major way of demonstrating love for one another, especially during seasons of affliction and suffering.

In the prayer of an afflicted person in Psalm 102, after issuing his complaint before God, the Psalmist knows that God is still on the throne, still sovereign Lord of grace and glory. He desires God to act now for him (v. 13), yet hopes for future action (vv.15–17). God is still acting today for people like Job and the Psalmist and Paul as well, in that Christ Jesus is the light of the nations and Zion’s true citizens will flourish. God’s glory will be in our midst, and the poor and disadvantages will indeed be cared for. God will fulfill his purposes and promises — “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God
himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:3, 4)

Questions to consider
1. When has God been “silent” in your life experience? How have you dealt with such apparent silence?
2. Stop and consider what areas of your life do you need to let “God be God!” Spend time in prayer and meditation and discernment.
3. Study carefully Romans 8:28–39. Do you have an internal “assurance” that God is for you? Why or why not?
4. Buy the Puritan devotional, The Valley of Vision, and with your daily devotions spend time meditating on the prayers of our Puritan forefathers of the faith.

Notes
5. Note here Meredith Kline’s understanding of the message of Job — “No comprehensive answer is given to the problem of suffering since theodicy is not the book’s major theme; nevertheless, considerable light is afforded. In addition to the prologue’s contribution is that of Elihu, who traces the mystery to the principle of divine grace; sufferings are a sovereign gift, calling to repentance and life. Moreover, impressive assurance is given that God as a just and omnipotent covenant Lord will ultimately visit both the curses and blessings of the covenant on His subjects according to righteousness. Especially significant are the insights Job himself attains into the role God will play as his heavenly vindicator, redeeming his name from all calumnies and his life from the king of terrors. Job utters in raw faith what progressive revelation elaborates in the doctrines of the eschatological theophany, resurrection of the dead, and final redemptive judgment. This vision does not reveal the why of the particular sufferings of Job or any other believer, but it does present the servants of God with a framework for hope.” (https://meredithkline.com/klines-works/articles-and-essays/
6. Post of Jon Bloom, “God Wants You To Complain,” on Psalm 142:1, 2, from the 
Desiring God website at https://www.desiringgod.org/authors/jon-bloom.

7. The Old Testament term goel (גָּואל) could refer to a “vindicator,” but most 
likely the reference is to a “kinsman-redeemer.” Goel stood for “another” in the Old 
Testament, to defend his cause, to avenge wrongdoing by blood-shedding (1 Kings 
16:110, and to maintain his rights, name and honor (cf. Ruth; Deuteronomy 25:5). 
A kinsman-redeemer would “redeem” or “buy back” a man’s estate. However, Job had 
none. Thus, his plea to God, for God himself to be his Redeemer.

8. William H. Halverson, A Concise Introduction to Philosophy (Random House, 
1981), 234.

9. While historically attributed to Johannes Kepler, the phrase “think God’s thoughts 
after Him” acquired its truest meaning via the fully Reformational doctrines of God 
and of man. The Reformational ideal was best carried into the twentieth century by 
Cornelius Van Til, who made liberal use of this phrase. He explains, for example: “The 
system that Christians seek to obtain may be said to be analogical. By this is meant 
that God is the original and that man is the derivative. God has absolute self-contained 
system within himself. What comes to pass in history happens in accord with that 
system or plan by which he orders the universe. But man, as God’s creature, cannot 
have a replica of that system of God. He cannot have a reproduction of that system. 
He must, to be sure, think God’s thoughts after him; but this means that he must, in 
seeking to form his own system, constantly be subject to the authority of God’s system 
unto the extent that this is revealed to him.” (Cornelius Van Til, A Christian Theory of 

the God of the Old Testament is a “misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, 
genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously 
malevolent bully.” (p. 51)

11. Charles Bridges says that “all the names of God are comprehended in this one 
of good. He footnotes this statement with the observation that in Exodus 33:18, 19 
and 34:5–7, the “glory” of God is in His “goodness” manifested to Moses. Thus it is 
not a single attribute, or a display of any particular feature of the Divine character, but 
rather the combined exercise of all his perfections.” (Charles Bridges, Psalm 119: An 

12. Thomas Manton, The Complete Works of Thomas Manton, XVI (Solid Ground, 

13. Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine 
(Zondervan, 1994), 198.


Banner of Truth, 1850).
From The Pit To Praise

Overcoming Depression

“The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit. Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the LORD delivers him out of them all.

I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

Even 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.”

(Psalm 34:18, 19; 40:1, 2; 23:4 ESV)

Our responses to heavy and sustained affliction can spiral to what modern scientists and psychiatrists call depression. Depression is a complex, painful disorder involving our whole being. Medical science admittedly does not know the causes of depression, and there is little evidence that depression results from chemical imbalances in the brain.¹

Symptoms of depression include, in order, moodiness (called “sad affect” by doctors), painful thinking, a sense of hopelessness with feelings of not being loved. Physical symptoms often result, like loss of sleep, loss of appetite, tension headaches and so forth. Irritability or agitation come next with psychotic behaviors, perhaps delusional thinking, in the worst
of cases.

Two non-biblical ways to handle depression are passive support or minimization. Why are they harmful? They lend credence to sinful behavioral problems, true guilt, for instance. They hold to a wrong view of love. Biblical love is always active, sacrificial and responsible (cf. John 3:16; Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:25; Romans 15:20; James 2:15, 16). They deprive a person of true hope and, thus, true happiness (cf. Proverbs 10:28; 1 Peter 1:3, 8, 9). They fail to treat a person as responsible before God, and they deny both the power and promises of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:13).

From a biblical-theological point of view, Christian psychiatrists and therapists believe that most depression arises from faulty or sinful responses to stressful situations in our lives. This can be a spiraling process in which mishandled problems create more problems and so forth. It looks something like this —

The initial problem or stress (1) is responded to by us with a faulty or sinful response (2). Additional complications result (3), prompting an additional faulty response (4). An illustration would be anger against another person not dealt with properly. We get angry and choose not to express that anger. We then suppress that anger. Grudges form and depression can result. We seek out a doctor for antidepressants. They don’t work, and the depression deepens. A biblical solution to anger would be to share these angry feelings appropriately and immediately, pray over the feelings that are generated, and seek God’s guidance for future direction — “Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.” (Ephesians 4:26, 27)

Two Christian psychiatrists, Minirth and Meier, say that “the irresponsible action of holding grudges is what brings on the majority of
depressions.” A biblical example can be found in Cain in Genesis 4:3–8. The spiraling effect got worse in his life. He did not repent of killing his brother, Abel, but chose to live with severe depression (Genesis 4:13), which had terrible family results (Lamech).

**God’s keys to handling depression (Psalm 40)**

Psalm 40 paints a painful reality of depression. Notice the language used by the Psalmist — “Slimy pit” and “miry clay” describe major distresses or great afflictions (Psalm 88:6, 7) or imminent peril, a feeling of darkness and death itself (Psalm 30:3). This is an overwhelming sense of dread and hopelessness.

Depression beclouds our senses and numbs our vitality — “my heart fails within me = has forsaken me” (Psalm 40:12). Sinful patterns of behavior often result — “my sins have overtaken me.” God, however, does not let us wallow in our depressive states. He gives us eleven (11) “keys” to finding happiness and hope through this Psalm.

**Key #1 — Expectant waiting (Psalm 40:1)**

Psalm 40:1 says “I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.” (ESV) “I waited and waited and waited for GOD. At last he looked; finally he listened.” (The Message). In the original Hebrew
language, the verse says, “expecting I expected.”

This is a straining of the mind in God’s direction, expecting relief. One writer pictures this as both a “vehement desire, yet entire resignation of the mind” to God’s will. Rather than Stoicism or insensitivity to the situation or affliction, this is submission of your entire self to the wisdom, sovereignty and power of God in the situation — “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes.” (Psalm 119:71; cf. Lamentations 3:19–24)

“Patience” does not mean passive waiting, however. Our spiritual forefathers spoke of three kinds of “patience” in the Bible. There is a “bearing” patience, a constancy in adversity, or perseverance through difficulty — “so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” “For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.” (Hebrews 6:12; 10:36)

There is a “waiting” patience, a waiting for God’s right time to act — “But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.” “Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.” (Romans 8:25; James 5:7)

There is a “working” patience, a following Christ through the hard times, expecting God’s just and final ends — “I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false.” (Revelation 2:2)

We need to remember that we can never “out wait” God, or exhaust the treasury of his mercy through the hard times. J. I. Packer puts it this way in Knowing God —

Nor, I think, would many of us ever naturally say that in the light of the knowledge of God which we have come to enjoy, past disappointments and present heartbreaks, as the world counts heartbreaks don’t matter. For the plain fact is that to many of us they do matter. We live with them as ‘our crosses’ (so we call them) . . . But these private mock heroics have no place at all
in the minds of those who really know God. They never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained.³

The Apostle Paul says — “But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ . . . I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him . . . I want to know Christ.” (Philippians 3:7–10)

**Key #2: Rely on God for stability and durability in such times (Psalm 40:2)**

“He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.” (Psalm 40:2) God establishes our footsteps — “Your throne is established from of old; you are from everlasting.” (Psalm 93:2)

As our “rock,” he provides shade in the wilderness of our lives — “Each will be like a hiding place from the wind, a shelter from the storm, like streams of water in a dry place, like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.” “The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. . . . The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation.” (Isaiah 32:2; Psalm 18:2, 46; cf. Psalm 61:2)

As our “rock,” God also provides stability against the winds of life — “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.” (Matthew 7:24, 25)

And, so, we sing to and about God our Rock —

A mighty Fortress is our God,
A Bulwark never failing;
Our Helper He amid the flood
Of mortal ills prevailing:
For still our ancient foe
Doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great,  
And, armed with cruel hate,  
On earth is not his equal.

Did we in our own strength confide,  
Our striving would be losing;  
Were not the right Man on our side,  
The Man of God's own choosing:  
Dost ask who that may be?  
Christ Jesus, it is He;  
Lord Sabaoth His Name,  
From age to age the same,  
And He must win the battle.

And though this world, with devils filled,  
Should threaten to undo us,  
We will not fear, for God hath willed  
His truth to triumph through us:  
The Prince of Darkness grim,  
We tremble not for him;  
His rage we can endure,  
For lo! his doom is sure,  
One little word shall fell him.

That word above all earthly powers,  
No thanks to them, abideth;  
The Spirit and the gifts are ours  
Through Him who with us sideth:  
Let goods and kindred go,  
This mortal life also;  
The body they may kill:  
God's truth abideth still,  
His Kingdom is forever.  
(Martin Luther, 1483–1546)
Key #3: Celebrate when God gives renewed joy! (Psalm 40:3, 16)
“He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. . . . But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, “Great is the LORD!” (Psalm 40: 3, 16)

A “new” song indicates a song of refreshing and revitalization — “Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” “Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth!” (Psalm 98:1–3; 96:1; cf. Psalm 149:1)

It is instructive and interesting that on the eve of his crucifixion, his severest trial, Jesus chose singing — “And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” (Mark 14:26) Rather than just a sidenote or what religious people do, Jesus teaches his disciples that in the darkest of hours, we should choose singing. Is that what you do?

Key #4: Counsel others with your God-given gratitude (Psalm 40:3, 9, 10)
“He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. . . . I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD. I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.” (Psalm 40:3, 9, 10)

Our deliverance is to be shared with others (READ the chapter, “Foundations of Real Comfort,” pp. 20ff) — “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s
sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.” (2 Corinthians 1:3–5)

**Key #5: Avoid nonChristian, anti-God counsel (Psalm 40:4)**

“Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust, *who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie!*” (Psalm 40:4) Note the deliberate rejection of those who trust in what is false. The terms used here indicate a “respecting” someone by taking a specific direction specified by that person, like a nonChristian counselor or therapist.

Such counsel from the Psalmist should not surprise us. After all, the blessed or “truly happy” person is one who “walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.” Or, as The Message puts it, “you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon, you don’t slink along Dead-End Road, you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College.” (Psalm 1:1)

Pastor and apologist Tim Keller, writing about the solid counsel of the Puritans, affirms this course of action —

Clearly, the Puritans rested their counseling approach on Scripture. In many ways the Puritans are an excellent laboratory for studying biblical counseling, because they are not influenced by any secular models of psychology. Many of those today claiming to be strictly biblical in their counseling approach still evidence the heavy influence of Maslow or Rogers or Skinner or Ellis. But the Puritans had the field of “the cure of souls” virtually to themselves; they had no secular competition in the area of counseling. Thus we need to consider very seriously their counseling models.⁴

**Key #6: Lose yourself in the wonder of God’s thoughts toward you (Psalm 40:4, 5)**

“You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.” (Psalm 40:5) We can do this by pondering and meditating on such passages as Psalm 139.
God knows everything perfectly, including me. The omniscience of God is astounding. The term for God — “LORD” = (vv. 1, 4, 21), is the “I AM,” evoking reverence and awesomeness, the Name revealed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 6. There is no mention of “Elohim” in the Psalm, and no “El Shaddai” here (cf. Psalm 91, the Name for might or power). This is the Name of redemption and covenant.

“The Lord” is also the Name of tenderness and intimacy, but with due reverence. The prayer of the Psalm is God-centric throughout. This Lord has “searched me,” dug into me, made a minute and thorough investigation and examination of me. “For the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.” (1 Samuel 2: 3). Notice that “He knows.” No pronoun is needed here. “This is the truth which he will enunciate concerning God, for it is not his purpose to speak to God as some abstract being who has no relationship with man, but rather to show that God knows him as an individual.”

God knows our daily activities and thoughts in their entirety (vv. 2, 3, 4) He knows “when I sit and when I rise,” indicative of all activity, including times of rest. He knows “our thoughts,” the purpose or aim of our lives. This is a thorough knowledge — “It is not a mere knowledge about David, but an intimate, thorough knowing and understanding all that there is to know about him.” He “discerns” (“winnow” in the Hebrew). God has winnowed his path and his lying down, so that that path and lying down have been thoroughly examined and searched out by God. He knows us “completely,” an exhaustive knowledge of words and thoughts behind them.

God knows me all the time! His omnipresence is astounding (vv. 4-16). We are “hemmed in” (v. 5) — We cannot escape God’s presence (v. 4). “Where can I go from your presence?” (v. 7) means we cannot hide from God. “There your hand will guide me” (v. 10) — God’s everywhere presence is to guide us, not condemn us — “That power or hand of God leads David as a shepherd leads his sheep or a father his child. The place is distant and David knows it not, yet God’s power is leading him.”

He “created my inmost being”(v. 13). God knows us from conception through death; God knows our emotions, our drives, our passions, our
desires (“our kidneys” in Hebrew).

We are “written in your book” (v.16). “God has a book, and in this book he writes the names of his people. In the New Testament this book is referred to as the Lamb’s book of life, and only those who will enter the heavenly city whose names are written therein. In the Psalm, however, the conception or at least the emphasis is a bit different. The thought here is that the entirety of the Psalmist’s being, even including the days of his life, are inscribed in the book that belongs to God.”

“Before one of them came to be” — “What actually is the Psalmist saying? If we understand his language aright, he is saying that the days of his life were actually formed before even one of them had come into existence. All his life, the details of each day, had been written down in the book of God, before any of these days had actually occurred.”

To know God, really know God, is to hate all enemies of God (vv. 19-22). This is not personal vindictiveness or a vendetta of David’s, just a natural revulsion of those who hate and despise the true God. “David has been filled with awe. How great and infinite is the Name of God! Yet wicked men treat this Name with disdain. It is this that David cannot abide. Such men are his enemies, for they are God’s enemies also.”

We need to let ourselves be lost in awe, wonder and praise when we think of God — “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it.” (v. 6) We cannot ever bring God down to our level. God is both Author and Sustainer of life, thus indicating its preciousness even from conception. Again, this should evoke wonder and praise! Moreover, we should not shy away from the pre-ordained knowledge of God, even if it makes us feel uncomfortable (vv. 16-18). Finally, such intimate and all-encompassing knowledge of God leads us to want more, not less of God’s deepest searching of us (vv. 23, 24).

Key #7: Dedicate yourself, not merely your things to God (Psalm 40:6–8)

“In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me:
I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:6–8) The background to these verses would be Saul’s unwarranted and unwanted substitution of things to the God-required wholesale destruction of his enemies (1 Samuel 15:20–25).

God opens or “awakens” our ears to give voluntary obedience to the Lord. The “I have come . . .” (v. 7) is used of Jesus and his voluntary, absolute obedience to his heavenly Father in Hebrews 10:5–10. These verses speak of dedication and commitment to the Lord of glory. What God wants, and what we want are often very different (cf. Psalm 51:16, 17; Romans 12:1, 2). The real power of this key to overcoming depression and severe afflictions is not, Have I thought about this?, but rather, What have I done about this?

Key #8: God’s Word must become our delight, not merely our duty (Psalm 40:7, 8)

“Then I said, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” (Psalm 40:7, 8) These verses are directly quoted in Hebrews 10:5–10. Jesus is both the power and the pattern of how we apply God’s Word to our lives. The Word of God is “prescribed” (“written” in v. 7 implies strength) for us, not just made available for our use.

The “desire or delight” in verse 8 signifies an attitude of close friendship or even intimate relationship with God (cf. Psalm 112:1; 119:35). Such delight comes from a prompting of the heart and is rooted in the very essence of our being (“heart” = bowels in the Hebrew).

We get from “duty” to “delight” by having an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We read the Word of God over and over until it becomes part of the fabric of our lives. And we want to get beyond the sense of duty to the joy and freedom of delight.

Key #9: Frankly admit your sins and feelings to God (Psalm 40:12, 13)

“For evils have encompassed me beyond number; my iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head;
my heart fails me. Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me!” (Psalm 40:12, 13)

Instead of denying or ventilating before God, David unveils himself before the Lord. He confesses the misery of his sins. He accepts responsibility for his sins (“my” sins). He admits those sins in open confession (cf. Psalm 38:18). He seeks the Lord right away, not waiting for a “better” time.

**Key #10: Actively reject spiritual enemies (Psalm 40:13–15)**

“Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me! O LORD, make haste to help me! Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who delight in my hurt! Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, “Aha, Aha!” (Psalm 40:13–15)

A key principle of Scripture often overlooked is that God’s salvation means judgment upon others (cf. Micah 7:7–10). Such a key provides resilience of character, even during severe affliction or depression. It is the ability to “bounce back” after depression has run its course. This is not a personal vendetta or vengeance against real or imagined enemies, but rather the reality of God’s just sentence or reward (cf. Romans 12:17–21).

**Key #11: Choose happiness as a lifestyle (Psalm 40:16, 17)**

“But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, “Great is the LORD!” As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God!” (Psalm 40:16, 17)

True happiness takes into account our reality. It is not elation, which usually is temporary and fleeting. True happiness can be seen and felt, even in the midst of discomfort and depression (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:3, 4). True happiness is self-forgetful. True happiness encourages others. True happiness is rooted in the eternal watch care of God. “To compare what I am with what God is is a steadying thing, but to pray for God’s glory is a liberation, the way of victory, and as John 12:27f shows, the way of Christ himself.”11
Rick Warren gives us helpful insights here. Valleys are inevitable. They are a normal part of life (cf. John 16:33). Valleys are unpredictable. They are often sudden and unexpected (cf. Jeremiah 4:20). Valleys are impartial. No one is insulated from pain and sorrow. No one gets to walk through life free of problems, and problems do not mean you are a “bad” person. They simply mean you are human (cf. Matthew 5:45). Valleys are temporary. Every situation has its “season” —

“For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to odance;
a time to cast away stones,
and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to cast away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.”
(Ecclesiastes 3:1–8)

Valleys are purposeful. God has a reason for taking us through them. We love the moutaintops, but we build faith in the valleys of life (cf. 1 Peter 1:6, 7).

Questions to consider
1. Have you ever been in depression, or are you presently in a depressive state?
2. What have you personally found in the medical or psychiatric field
that has helped or made your depression worse?

3. Of the eleven keys found in Psalm 40, with which one(s) have you struggled?

4. Which of the eleven keys have helped you conquer depression or severe afflictions?

Notes
1. While I disagree with the evolutionary perspective of the following medical paper, it shows the growing prevalence of depressive behavior and highlights the continuing medical discussion and treatment problems — “Depression is a devastating disorder, afflicting up to 10% of the adult population in the United States and representing one of the leading causes of disability worldwide. Although effective treatments are available, approximately one third of all patients with depression fail to respond to conventional antidepressant therapies, further contributing to the global burden of the disease. Accordingly, there is a pressing need for new conceptual frameworks for understanding the development of depression to develop better treatments. In this Review, we outline emerging data that point to the immune system — and, in particular, the inflammatory response — as a potentially important contributor to the pathophysiology of depression.” (Andrew H. Miller and Charles L. Raison, “The role of inflammation in depression: from evolutionary imperative to modern treatment target,” Nat Rev Immunol. 2016 Jan; 16(1): 22–34. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5542678/)

6. Young, 22.
7. Young, 56, 57.
8. Young, 80.
9. Young, 81.
10. Young, 98.
The Mute Christian
Under The Smarting Rod

Thomas Brooks

A Synopsis
The Mute Christian Under
The Smarting Rod
A Synopsis of Thomas Brooks

“A Christian with an olive leaf in his mouth, when under the greatest afflictions, trials, troubles, and darkest providences; with answers to questions and objections, calculated to promote submission and silence under all the changes that may be experienced in this world.”

(Thomas Brooks Subtitle)

Thomas Brooks in 1659 penned a massive work on affliction called The Mute Christian Under the Smarting Rod With Sovereign Antidotes To Every Case. In this volume, this Puritan writer provides a typical Puritan exposition of Psalm 39:9 — “I am mute; I do not open my mouth, for it is you who have done it.”

In this exposition, Brooks writes “to all distressed and afflicted Christians throughout the world.” He introduces the book this way:

But God, who is infinite in wisdom, and matchless in goodness, hath ordered troubles, yea, many troubles to come crowding in upon us on every side. As our mercies, so our crosses, seldom come single; they usually come treading one upon the heels of another; they are like April showers, no sooner is one over, but another comes. And, yet, Christians, it is mercy. It is rich mercy, that every affliction is not an execution, that every correction is not a damnation.¹

In his Preface, Brooks advises us on how to read his treatise. For most profit to our souls, we are to “read and look up” for a blessing, noting that nothing comes to us except by the blessing of God. Second, we are to
“read and meditate” — “Meditation is the food of your souls; it is the very stomach and natural heat whereby spiritual truths are digested. A man shall as soon live without his heart, as he shall be able to get good by what he reads, without meditation. Prayer (saith Augustine) without meditation is dry and formal; and reading without meditation is useless and unprofitable.”

Third, we are to “read and try what thou readest,” testing everything according to the Scriptures as the Bereans did in Acts 17. Fourth, we are to “read and practice what we read” — “Profession without practice will but make a man twice told a child of darkness. To speak well, is to sound like a cymbal; but to do well, is to act like an angel.” Fifth, we are to “read and apply to our own souls,” and sixth, we are “read and pray.” If we do these six practical things, we will find the information and Scriptural discussion a rich blessing.

Brooks maintains that the point of Psalm 39:9 is as follows — “That it is the great duty and concernment of gracious souls to be mute and silent under the greatest afflictions, the saddest providences, and sharpest trials that they meet with in this world.” He describes this “silence” as a “gracious, holy silence” and contrasts it with six unhealthy and false “silences” — a “Stoical silence which is sinful unsensibleness, a sinful sullenness;” a “politic silence,” which we would call political correctness; a “foolish silence,” holding one’s peace; a “sullen silence” of people occupied with a “dumb devil” like that of Ahab in 1 Kings 21:4, refusing to be comforted; a “forced silence,” “As the cudgel forces the dog to be quiet and still and the rod forces the child to be silent and mute, so the apprehensions of what God hath done and what God may do, force many a soul to be silent.” A sixth silence, which is the wrong kind of silence, is a “despairing silence,” a “terror to the soul,” where God is seen only as an angry Judge. All of these kinds of “silences” Brooks says are not the Psalmist’s intention or meaning.

On the other hand, a prudent, holy silence before God is an acknowledgement that God is the author of all the afflictions that come upon us. “It includes and takes in some holy, gracious apprehensions of the majesty, sovereignty, dignity, authority, and presence of that God, under
whose afflicting hand we are, Hab. 2:20.”

While this is foreign theology to many moderns, the point Brooks makes is that we will grumble and complain and murmur under afflictions “till we come to see his majesty and authority, Isa. 26:11, 12, till we come to see him as the King of kings, and Lord of lords, Rev. 1:5. It is such a sight of God as this, that makes the heart to stoop under his almighty hand.”

A gracious and prudent silence has a “holy quietness and calmness of mind and spirit under the afflicting hand of God.” In the fourth place, such a holy silence believes in a “humble, justifying, clearing, and acquitting of God of all blame, rigour, and injustice, in all the afflictions he brings upon us.”

“God’s judgments are always just; he never afflicts but in faithfulness. His will is the rule of justice; and therefore a gracious soul dares not cavil nor question his proceedings.”

A holy silence understands several “soul-stilling” conclusions. First, afflictions work for their good. They purge out our dross, kill sinful weeds, and prune our hearts, making them more fertile and fruitful. They increase my spiritual experiences, and draw out my heart to seek the Lord more and more. They are really God’s “love tokens.” Second, they keep us “humble and low” before the King of kings and Lord of lords. Third, they do not last but are merely “little crosses that we bear.” Fourth, we need adversity in our lives along with the sweetness of blessing. It is that “composition of both [which] is the best way in the world to keep our souls in a healthy constitution.”

God takes no joy in the necessity of afflicting his children for their own good.

A holy and prudent silence includes a surrendering, a resigning ourselves to God (Psalm 27:8; James 4:7) Finally, such a holy and prudent silence involves a patient waiting upon the Lord until deliverance comes (Psalm 40:1–3; 62:5; Lamentations 3:26).

Brooks does not, however, rule out normal and natural responses during affliction and patience in affliction. He notes eight things that, while we are patient in affliction, we can and should express. The first is “a sense and feeling of our afflictions” (Psalm 39; Isaiah 26:9–11), and God afflicts us until we do feel his heavy hand on us. Second, we are indeed to pray for deliverance (James 5:13; Psalm 50:15).
Third, we should be “kindly affected” through afflictions because of sins — “In all our sorrows, we should read our sins; and when God’s hand is upon our backs, our hands should be upon our sins.” Fourth, we can and should teach others while we are being afflicted since they “many times work strongly, powerfully, strangely, savagely upon the souls and consciences of others.” A number of the New Testament letters were written by Paul when he was in prison or afflicted. Fifth, we can weep and mourn under the weight of afflictions — “Please, O LORD, remember how I have walked before you in faithfulness and with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight. And Hezekiah wept bitterly.” (Isaiah 38:3) “When God strikes, he looks that we should tremble; when his hand is lifted high, he looks that our hearts should stoop low; when he hath the rod in his hand, he looks that we should have tears in our eyes.” (cf. Psalm 55:2; 38:6; Job 30:26–32)

Brooks says that a gracious and prudent silence does not exclude “sighing, groanings or roaring under affliction” (cf. Exodus 2:23; Job 3:24; Psalm 38:9; 22:1; 32:3). “Sometimes the sorrows of the saints are so great that all tears are dried up, and they can get no ease by weeping, and therefore for a little ease they fall to sighing and groaning.”

Seventh, we can use just and lawful means to be delivered out of our afflictions — “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” (Matthew 10:23; cf. Acts 9:23–25). Finally, our “silence” through afflictions does not mean we never complain against the “authors, contrivers, abettors or instruments” of our affliction. (cf. 2 Tim. 4:14; Acts 19:32; 2 Cor. 11:24)

Then, in true Puritan fashion, Brooks asks “Why must Christians be mute and silent under the greatest afflictions, the saddest providences, and sharpest trials that they meet in this world?” And in true Puritan fashion, he gives several answers. First, that they may hear the “voice of the rod.” “Afflictions are the rod of God’s anger, the rod of his displeasure, and his rod of revenge; he gives a commission to this rod to awaken his people, to reform his people, or else to revenge the quarrel of his covenant upon them..”
The second reason is that Christians may distinguish themselves from the men of this world, “who usually fret and fling, mutter or murmur, curse and swagger when they are under the afflicting hand of God.”

A third reason is to conform to the example and model of Christ who was “dumb and silent” under his major trials (cf. Isa. 53:7; 1 Peter 2:21–23).

A fourth reason is that “it is ten thousand times a greater judgment and affliction, to be given up, to a fretful spirit, a froward spirit, a muttering or murmuring spirit under an affliction, than it is to be afflicted. This is both the Devil’s sin, and the devil’s punishment.”

A fifth reason is that such a prudent silence makes us more fit or able to receive the mercies of God (cf. Heb. 12:11; James 3:18). A sixth reason is that it is just “bootless and fruitless” to strive to contest or contend with God — “No man hath ever got any thing by muttering or murmuring under the hand of God, except it hath been more frowns, blows, and wounds. Such as will not lie quiet and still, when mercy hath tied them with silken cords, justice will put them in iron chains: if golden fetters will not hold you, iron shall.” (cf. Jer. 7:19; 1 Cor. 10:22)

A seventh reason is to cross and frustrate the design and expectation of Satan himself — “In all the afflictions he brought upon Job, his design was not so much to make Job a beggar, as it was to make him a blasphemer; it was not so much to make Job outwardly miserable, as it was to make Job inwardly miserable . . . so that he might have some matter of accusation against God.”

A final reason for silence under affliction is to follow the many examples in Scripture of such silence, “as Aaron, Exodus 10:3, Eli, 1 Sam.3:18, David, 2 Sam. 16:13, Job, 1:21, 22, Eliakim, Shebna, and Joab, Isa. 36:11, 12. So those saints in Acts 21:12-15, and that cloud of witnesses, pointed at in Heb. 11:1.”

Because of the aptness and proneness to sin of even good people to maneuver themselves out of afflictions, Brooks suggests six considerations to prevent such actions. First, there is infinitely more evil in the least sin than in the greatest affliction (cf. James 3:5–11; Prov. 8:36; 1 John 3:4; Rev. 21:8). “The least spark may consume the greatest house, and the least leak sink the greatest ship.” Second, you cannot sin yourself out of troubles. Abraham, Jonah and Job tried it and failed. Moreover, trying to
sin yourself out of troubles simply gets you into more trouble — “Thus did Spira, Jerome of Prague, Bilney, and others. Some there have been, who, by labouring to sin themselves out of their present sufferings, have sinned themselves under such horrors, and terrors of conscience, that they could neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, but have been ready to lay violent hands upon themselves.” Just look at the examples and instances of those who sought evil ways to get rid of their troubles, like Ahab’s stealing of a vineyard, only to have his own blood shed there.

Brooks then appeals to his readers laboring under severe afflictions and trials to be mute and silent, according to the Psalmist, for a number of reasons. Consider, he says, the greatness, sovereignty, majesty and dignity of God and let that move you to silence. Consider that all your afflictions and troubles shall work together for your good (Rom. 8:28). Consider that holy silence is a “keeper of other virtues,” lending a hand to faith, hope, love, humility, self-denial and so forth.

Consider that you have deserved far greater and heavier afflictions that what you are suffering at present. Consider that a quiet spirit is of great esteem with God (1 Peter 3:4), capacitating communion with God and rendering a person more servicable for God. Such a meek and quiet spirit is not a natural or moral or artifical quietness, but rather a gracious quietness given by the Holy Spirit. Consider also that a lack of a quiet spirit under affliction is fighting against your own prayer of “Thy will be done.” Consider also that a holy quietness under the heaviest afflictions will make other troubles and afflictions much more tolerable.

A holy silence under affliction will shield you from great temptations (James 1:2). Such silence will give a person a “quiet and peaceable possession of his own soul.” (Luke 21:19) After all, keeping such silence before God is not just a suggestion, but a command from the Lord (cf. Zechariah 2:13; Is. 41:1; Hab. 2:20; Amos 5:13 and so forth). Consider also that mercy and deliverance is just at hand when you are silent under the rod of God — “Mercy is always nearest, when a man can in quietness possess his own soul; salvation is at hand, when a Christian comes to lay his hand upon his mouth.”

Finally, consider, says Brooks, the heinous and dangerous nature of
murmuring. Murmuring reveals a root of bitterness of sin. Murmuring is especially condemned by God (Jude 15, 16). Murmuring is a “mother sin,” a sin that breeds other sins (Numbers 16:41; 17:10 and others). Murmuring provokes God (Numbers 14:27–29; Rev. 16:9–11). Murmuring is the Devil’s “image, sin and punishment” — “Cyprian, Aquinas, and others, conceive, that the cause of Satan’s banishment from heaven, Gennesis 3, was his grieving and murmuring at the dignity of man, whom he beheld made after God’s own image insomuch that he would relinquish his own glory, to divest so noble a creature of perfection, and rather be in hell himself, than see Adam placed in paradise.”

Murmuring sours and destroys mercy. It “unfits” a person for duty to God (cf. 1 Cor. 7:33–35). Murmuring strips a man of his understanding, nobility and glory. It perverts his reason, stupifies his conscience, sours the heart, disorders the will and “distempers the affections.” Murmuring wastes time, and Christians who murmur have the least cause for such murmuring, given that Christ himself is their treasure. Finally, murmuring makes a person miserable to himself and others.

**Dealing with objections to holy silence**

Brooks cites ten common objections to the thesis of silence before God for heavy afflictions and suffering. These are not so much theological objections as they are practical and personal problems that people cite when moving through heavy affliction. They are as relevant today, as they were in the seventeenth century world.

**Objection 1 — How do I know my afflictions are the result of God’s love?** Brooks’ answer is that if you find yourself drawn closer to God, to fear the Lord more, to please the Lord more, to cleave to the Lord more, to wait on the Lord more and to walk with the Lord more, then they come from the love of God to you (cf. Psalm 18:1–8; 116; 119:67, 71; Isa. 38). If you are concerned how to glorify God more in your affliction, then it must be from God. If you enjoy the special presence of God during affliction, then it is from the loving hand of God — “The presence of God with the spirits of his people is a breast of comfort that can never be drawn dry: It is an everlasting spring that will never fail.”
If your afflictions make you more “conformable to Christ,” then they come from God’s love — “Many are in poverty, shame, contempt, reproach; etc, like to Christ who yet by these are not made more like Christ in his meekness, humbleness, heavenliness, holiness, righteousness, faithfulness, fruitfulness, goodness, contentedness, patience, subjection, submission. Oh, but if in these things you are made more like to Christ, without all peradventure, your afflictions are in love.”

If your soul is brought more under the inward teachings of God, doubtless they are in love (cf. Job 34:31, 32; Psalm 94:12). If correction is attended by instruction and “lashing with lessoning,” then you are a happy person. Loathing sin more, walking with God more, disdaining the world more are all signs the affliction is in love.

If 1 Corinthians 10:13 is true of your afflictions — “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” — then they are from the love of God. If you are willing to go through your “dross is consumed” and the “cure is wrought,” then they are from love. Finally, if you live through your afflictions a life of faith, then they are in love. We should note and hang onto the promises of God (cf. Isa. 43:2, 3; 41:10; 57:15; 1 Timothy 1:15; John 10:27–29; Isa. 26:3; Matthew 11:28; 1 John 3:14).

Objection 2 — God has taken away that which is most precious to me, like the death of a spouse or loved one. How can I be silent then? Brooks notes that if the storms of your life are not real storms, then they are not real afflictions. Your mercies were always the result of God’s gift and blessing to you, not yours anyway. It could be that the mercies with which you have lived you have not “improved them,” that is, made you love God and Christ more, strengthened your communion with Christ, and made your walk with God more “close and circumspect.”

“Children and fools are taken with many things, but improve nothing: such children and fools are most men; they are much taken with their mercies, but they make no improvement of their mercies; and therefore
no wonder if God strip them of their mercies. The candle of mercy is set up, not to play by, but to work by. . . . There is no way to secure your mercies, but by improving them; there is nothing that provokes God to strip you of your mercies, like the non-improvement of them.”29 “Though God had smitten thee in this or that near and dear enjoyment, it is thy wisdom to hold thy peace; for that God that hath taken away one, might have taken away all.”30

Even with the loss of “near and dear mercies,” you still have and enjoy more favors from God. Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrew 13:8). Union and communion with Christ stil abide with you. The sun of righteousness is still shining on you. You are still under the anointing of the Spirit and the influences from heaven. God can also make up this loss in something else that will be better for you. He took Absalom from David but gave him a Solomon. He took from him a Michael but gave him an Abigail.

Perhaps what you considered a great mercy could have turned out to be a greatest cross and provoked the greatest misery and calamity that you would ever meet in this world. David’s first child to Bathsheba would have turned out to be a source of sin and shame and an embarrassment to him. Also, you can never know how bad your heart could have been had those mercies you lost continued in your life.

Finally, become more committed and enamored with spiritual losses than temporal losses. Even with your temporal losses, have you lost your fellowship with God, the joys of the Spirit, and your peace of conscience? These are more important losses to consider.

**Objection 3 — My heavy afflictions have lasted so long! If they could have been shortened, then I could have remained silent before God.** Brooks notes that given our sinfulness, our days of adversity are not that long at all. Our losses and crosses are not as long as other saints have experienced (cf. Psalm 77 and 78; Genesis 15:12, 13; Exodus 12:40–42; Jeremiah 25:11, 12). The longer your affliction, the sweeter heaven will be. Compared to that eternity of glory, they are but light and short (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16–18).
The longer your afflictions, the more spiritual experiences you have gained (2 Corinthians 1:5) — “The afflicted Christian’s heart is fullest of spiritual treasure; though he may be poor in the world yet he is rich in faith, and holy experiences; and what are all the riches of this world to spiritual experiences?”

Long afflictions are but preparation for long-lived mercies. Think of Joseph’s years in prison and what finally happened to him and God’s people. David’s seven years of banishment as king were but preparation for forty fruitful years of reigning over Israel. The longer a saint is afflicted on earth, the more glorious they shine in heaven (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16–18; Matthew 5:10–12). Their “graces are exercised and increased” (cf. Heb. 12:10; Romans 5:3–5). Their religious duties are multiplied. The more like Christ they are transformed. Impatience only lengthens days of sorrow, and God’s timing is always the best timing. God will not make them last beyond what is necessary to accomplish his will in your life.

Objection 4 — My afflictions just keep getting worse and worse. How can I keep silent as they increase? First, your afflictions are not as many as your sins, God’s favors, and the joys at Christ’s right hand. They are not as many as God could have given you. Then, your afflictions are not as many as God’s mercies to you, and they are not as many as have happened to other Christians. They are certainly not as many as happened to Jesus. Your murmuring and complaining will simply add to their number, and though they are many, they are not so many as the joys, the pleasures and the delights at Christ’s right hand, being matchless and endless.

Objection 5 — My afflictions are very, very great. How can I ever be silent about them? Brooks advises to never complain that one’s afflictions are so great until you can say your sins are not great. “The remembrance of great sins should cool and calm a man’s spirit under his greatest troubles.” The greater your affliction, the nearer your deliverance (cf. Deuteronomy 32:36). Compared to the glory to be revealed, they are not that great (cf. Romans 8:18).

Compared to the torments of the damned, they are not that great.
What are thy afflictions, thy torments, to the torments of the damned, whose torments are numberless, easeless, remediless, and endless; whose pains are without intermission, or mitigation, who have weeping served in for the first course, and gnashing of teeth for the second, and the gnawing worm for the third, and intolerable pain for the fourth, (yet the pain of the body is but the body of pain, the very soul of sorrow and pain is the soul’s sorrow and pain), and an everlasting alienation and separation from God for the fifth?”

Your murmuring and complaining will simply make them greater.

**Objection 6 — My afflictions are greater than any others. There is no affliction like my affliction. How can I then hold my silence?** Brooks says in response that a person’s sins may be greater than another’s. Perhaps you have some “distemper” which makes your afflictions seem greater than they are. It could also be that your heart is harder, your pride and heart are harder than others, more carnal, more impure, more passionate than others. Moreover, there are thousands more in this world whose afflictions are greater than yours.

Consider that the mercies of God toward you are greater also than others. If your “winter nights” are longer than others, then your “summer days” have been longer as well. Finally, by great afflictions the Lord may “greaten thy graces and thy name” in this world. Think of Job and think of Paul.

**Objection 7 — My affliction comes with great temptation. How can I hold my peace when Satan is assaulting me?** Brooks notes that no person is less loved by God because he is more tempted by Satan. Witness Job, Joshua, Peter, Paul, and even Christ himself. Temptation resisted and bewailed will never hurt or harm you; they will never prevail. Also, temptations are evidences that you are dear to God and that it shall go well with you — “If the heart of God were not towards me, the hand of Satan would not be so strong against me.”

While Satan is tempting you, Jesus is interceding for you (Luke 22:31,
32; Hebrews 7:25) — “When Satan puts in his pleas, and commences suit upon suit against us, Christ still undertakes our cause, he answers all his pleas, and non-suits Satan at every turn, and in despite of hell, he keeps us up in divine favor.”35 Finally, the temptations of saints all work for their good. They multiply and increase spiritual experiences. They prevent “great abominations” (cf. 2 Cor. 12:7). They promote the exercise of grace. They make you more “serviceable and useful to others” (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3, 4). It is an honor to be tempted and to come through the temptation. Temptations increase prayer, and by temptations the Lord will conform us more closely to Christ (cf. Heb. 12:1, 2; 2 Cor. 3:18). Finally, temptations make “sin more hateful, the world less delightful, and relations less hurtful.”36

Objection 8 — God has deserted me! God is far from me! God has turned his back on me! How can I remain silent? The choicest of saints, says Brooks, have felt abandoned by God at some point in their lives and spiritual journeys (cf. Psalm 30:6, 7; 77; 78; Job 23:8, 9; Isa. 8:17; Micah 7:7–9). Such a forsaking is merely partial, not total (2 Cor. 12:9; Psalm 37:23, 24). God’s love is a constant, abiding quality even when we feel forsaken (cf. Jeremiah 31:3; John 13:1; Isa. 49:14–16). God’s secret presence remains even in the darkest of times (cf. Psalm 23; 139). The fact that we seek the Lord, pant after God, struggle to lay hold of God proves the secret presence of God with us.

Even though God may seem gone for a moment, He will return again. Though sorrow comes with the night, joy comes in the morning (cf. Psalm 94:19; Isa. 54:7–10). Finally, God’s seeming desertion of his people works for their good. By withdrawing, God fits them for greater refreshments, greater manifestations and consolations. By his withdrawing, he prevents his people from their withdrawing from him. God forsakes us that we may not forsake him. He “hides” himself from us so that we seek him. By such withdrawal, God enhances and commends the worth, excellency and sweetness of his promises (cf. Micah 7:18, 19; Isa. 54:7, 8; Heb. 13:5, 6).

We will also be able to commiserate with others going through similar things (Heb. 13:2). We will set a “higher price” on God’s favor when we
have it. This is the Lord training us to a precious and happy life of faith (2 Cor. 5:7). We will be made more conformable to Christ, who also suffered spiritual desolations (cf. Matthew 27:46). Finally, by these “transient and temporary forsakings, Psalm 71:20, 21, the Lord will exceedingly sweeten the clear, full, constant, and uninterrupted enjoyments of himself in heaven to all his people.”

Objection 9 — My good name is falsely accused and under reproach! How can I keep silent in such a time? While a good name is to be wanted even above a great name (Eccl. 7:1), and once lost it is hard to recover it again, it has been the lot of the most precious of God’s saints to be slandered, reproached, villified and falsely accused (cf. Matthew 5:10–12; 1 Peter 3:14; Psalm 69:1; Genesis 39; Psalm 52; 2 Samuel 16:11, 12; Job 7 and 8). It is no worse for you than it was for them. Jesus himself was sadly reproached, called a deceiver, possessing a devil, scorned and under contempt.

To be well spoken of from those who are out of favor with God is a reproach rather than an honor (cf. Luke 6:26) — “I would not, saith Luther, have the glory and fame of Erasmus, my greatest fear is the praises of men.” There will come a day when there will be a “resurrection of names” when their innocency will shine forth as the light (cf. Psalm 37:6). God has been a swift and terrible witness against false accusers (cf. Isa. 41:11) — Caiaphas was shortly removed from office; John Cooper falsely accused by Grimwood under Queen Mary, the said Grimwood died horribly; Narcissus, a godly bishop of Jerusalem, was falsely accused and his accusers died with fire and disease. Even God himself is falsely accused all the time (Ezekiel 18:25), charging him with respector of persons, a hard taskmaster (cf. Matthew 25:24).

Objection 10 — God delays his mercy to me, for which I have sought many times. How can I remain silent under such delays and disappointments? Brooks reminds us that God’s times are not our times, that God sometimes delays his answers (cf. Hab. 1:2; Job 19:7; Psalm 69:3; 40:17; 2 Cor. 1:8, 9). God’s delays are not God’s denials. He will most certainly come. God’s
delays do not mean God has forgotten you (cf. Isa. 49:14–16; Jer. 31:20; Psalm 77:9, 10; Isa. 54:7–10).

God’s time is always the best time, and the Lord will in this life “make his children amends for all the delays and put-offs” such as in the case of Abraham with the son Isaac and Hannah with the son Samuel.

Finally, the Lord never delays except for “great and weighty reasons,” and therefore we should hold our peace. These reasons include the trial of his people in distinguishing them from others (cf. Matthew 15:21–29), that they may have greater experience of God’s love and mercy and grace, to sharpen the spiritual appetites of his children and that his people may make a “fuller discovery of themselves to themselves.” He says that few Christians see themselves and understand themselves — “By delays, God discovers much of a man’s sinful self to his religious self, much of his worser part to his better part, of his ignoble part to his noble part.”

God also delays to enhance and raise the price of mercy and deliverance. We place the greatest price on that which we attain through greatest difficulty. God also delays to “retaliate” against our own putting off the “motions of the Spirit, the directions of his word, the offers of his grace, the entreaties of his Son.” The Lord delays, finally, to make heaven more sweet to them at the end of the day.

Closing remarks and helps and directions
All afflictions that come on the saints of God are the fruits of divine love (cf. Rev. 3:19; Heb. 12:6; Job 5:17). They are God’s “gems and jewels, more precious than all the silver and gold in the world.” Consider that all the trials, difficulties, calamities, crosses and losses are all the “hell” you shall ever have. Get an assurance that Christ is yours, that pardon of sin is yours, that divine favor is yours. This assurance will quiet and silence the soul under the sorest and sharpest trials.

Dwell on the blessings and benefits of former trials and afflictions, how God through them has discovered your sins, prevented and mortified sin, shown you the insufficiency of the world, how he has melted and broken your heart for fuller enjoyment of himself. Know that your “chiepest treasure” is safe, your God is safe, your Christ is safe, your portion is safe,
your crown is safe, your inheritance is safe, your royal palace is safe — therefore hold your peace.

Mortify your lusts. “It is unmortified lust which is the sting of every trouble, and which makes every sweet bitter, and every bitter more bitter; sin unmortified adds weight to every burden, it puts gall to our wormwood, it adds chain to chain; it makes the bed uneasy, the chamber a prison, relations troublesome, and every thing vexious to the soul.”

Know that all the trials that do come upon you come by and through the covenant of grace God has made with you (cf. Jer. 32). God has committed himself to keep you from the evils and snares of the world, to purge away your sins, to increase your graces, to crucify your hearts to the world, to prepare and preserve you for his heavenly kingdom.

Consider that all your afflictions actually only touch the baser parts of the Christian, his outward man (2 Cor. 4:16). Keep faith in “continual exercise.” Such exercise will bring satisfaction in the “naked enjoyments of God,” will dry up the springs of pride, self love, impatience, murmuring, unbelief, and the carnal delights of this world. It will present to you greater, sweeter and better things in Christ. It will lessen the esteem and worth of outward things. Keep humble before the Lord.

Hold fast several “soul-silencing maxims” — God brings us into a wilderness so that he may speak more graiously to them. He always wills what is best for us. He will always be there with and for us in all our afflictions. God has the best of intentions for us over against his intentions for unbelievers. The best way to have your own will is to “lie down in the will of God, and quietly to resign up thyself to the good will and pleasure of God.” God will make times of affliction special times of manifestations of divine love and favor. Finally, dwell much on the brevity of life —

Thou hast but day to live, and perhaps thou mayest be now in the twelfth hour of that day. Therefore hold out faith and patience, thy troubles and thy life will shortly end together; therefore hold thy peace, thy grave is going to be made, thy sun is near setting, death begins to call thee off the stage of this world, death stands at thy back, thou must shortly sail forth upon the ocean of eternity; though thou hast a great deal of work to do, a God to honour, a
Christ to close with, a soul to save, a race to run, a crown to win, a hell to escape, a pardon to beg a heaven to make sure...43

Reflections on Brooks
Thomas Brooks, much like other Puritan writers, is hard to read for the modern Christian. He certainly and clearly portrays afflictions and how to deal with them from a theological and practical point of view foreign to many Christians today. In fact, his advice may seem harsh, unbending, loveless, unkind and generally offensive to some. The “gentleness” with which we often associate writers on comfort seems to be missing, if not altogether avoided and discarded. We need to therefore offer some overall background perspectives that may make Brooks more palatable to the modern Christian in affliction.

First, Brooks operates from a high view of the sovereignty and authority of God. Whatever the cause of afflictions in our lives, God is not only not to be blamed, but actually to be praised for them. God is our sovereign Lord, and therefore has the right over our lives, both now and for all eternity. His conception of God is not that of an angry, unjust and tyrannical judge, but rather of a gracious God who is first and foremost holy and to be honored no matter what. Whatever God does is right and righteous and ultimately for our good. If this is not your concept of God, then you will have much trouble reading and imbibing the advice of Thomas Brooks and other Puritans on affliction.

This God has established a covenant of grace with his people. Long before ancient Near East studies were done by different biblical scholars,44 this covenant was God-defined, God-given and God-determined. It followed much of the covenant-suzerainty treaty models in the ancient Near Eastern world, with the sovereign making his declarations and the subjects dutifully obeying those regulations for their own good and health.

What about the “love” of God? Not much is said in The Mute Christian about God’s love, though quite a deal is said about God’s “gracious mercies.” To the Puritans, God’s love was subsumed under the absolute sovereign grace of God. His love was not superficial, sentimental subjectivism. His
love was strong, sovereign, just and in keeping with his character as holy and righteous. Does God love us through afflictions? Yes, but not with the sentimental slush that often passes for the love of God today.

Brooks view of humankind is that of total depravity. This was the orthodox viewpoint developed by the sixteenth century Reformers. Humankind is not just flawed, but fatally flawed, inside and out. Sin is not merely a mistake, not merely a lack of human potential, not merely a slight to God, but without God’s grace, it is who and what we are. We are subjects of the Fall of mankind in the Garden. We are infused intensively and extensively with rebellion against the Almighty God. The modern concept of humankind, even much of the Christian conception, is that people are essentially good, with some bad patches perhaps. Brooks and the Puritans see no such essential goodness in humankind. We deserve God’s wrath, and to experience God’s mercy is truly undeserved favor.

Our best life comes after death in the arms of Jesus our Savior and Lord. This is emphasized over and over again in The Mute Christian. As one writer puts it:

The Puritans suffered long, but they suffered well. Death was a constant companion for the Puritans of the 17th and 18th centuries. In England, they faced deadly persecution at the hands of the Church of England, the church they sought to purify. In the New World, they faced an especially harsh physical climate. J. I. Packer writes — Ease and luxury, such as our affluence brings us today, do not make for maturity; hardship and struggle, however, do, and the Puritans’ battles against the spiritual and climatic wilderness in which God set them produced a virility of character, undaunted and unsinkable, rising above discouragement and fears, for which the true precedents and models are men like Moses, and Nehemiah, and Peter after Pentecost, and the apostle Paul.45

How can a person write over two hundred pages on one short verse of Scripture? They were spiritually mature in biblical studies in ways we are not. They “exemplified maturity; we don’t. We are spiritual dwarfs. A much-travelled leader, a native American (be it said), has declared that
he finds North American Protestantism, man-centered, manipulative, success-oriented, self-indulgent and sentimental, as it blatantly is, to be 3,000 miles wide and half and inch deep. The Puritans, by contrast, as a body were giants. They were great souls serving a great God. Their biblical counseling was deep, effective, biblically astute, and thorough.

John Piper agrees — “My own experience is that no one comes close to the skill they have in taking the razor-like scalpel of Scripture, and lancing the boils of my corruption, cutting out the cancers of my God-belittling habits of mind, and amputating the limbs of my disobedience. They are simply in a class by themselves.” And Tim Keller notes:

Clearly, the Puritans rested their counseling approach on Scripture. In many ways the Puritans are an excellent laboratory for studying biblical counseling, because they are not influenced by any secular models of psychology. Many of those today claiming to be strictly biblical in their counseling approach still evidence the heavy influence of Maslow or Rogers or Skinner or Ellis. But the Puritans had the field of “the cure of souls” virtually to themselves; they had no secular competition in the area of counseling. Thus we need to consider very seriously their counseling models.

Reading Thomas Brooks with this contextual understanding will help it make much more sense to the modern Christian going through affliction.

I close with a Puritan prayer —

O Thou Giving God,
My heart is drawn out in thankfulness to thee,
for thy amazing grace and condescension to me
    in influences and assistances of thy Spirit,
for special help in prayer,
for the sweetness of Christian service,
for the thoughts of arriving in heaven,
for always sending me needful supplies,
for raising me to new life when I am like one dead.
I want not the favour of man to lean upon
for thy favour is infinitely better.
Thou art eternal wisdom in dispensations towards me;
and it matters not when, nor where, nor how I serve thee,
nor what trials I am exercised with,
if I might be prepared for thy work and will.

No poor creature stands in need of divine grace more than I do,
And yet none abuses it more than I have done, and still do.
How heartless and dull I am!
Humble me in the dust for not loving thee more.

Every time I exercise any grace renewedly
   I am renewedly indebted to thee,
   the God of all grace, for special assistance.

I cannot boast when I think of how dependent
I am upon thee for the being and every act of grace;
I never do anything else but depart from thee,
   and if ever I get to heaven it will be because
   thou willest it, and for no reason beside.

I love, as a feeble, afflicted, despised creature,
   to cast myself on thy infinite grace and goodness,
hoping for no happiness but from thee;
Give me special grace to fit me for special services,
   and keep me calm and resigned at all times,
humble, solemn, mortified,
and conformed to thy will.
Notes
2. Preface, xvi.
8. Brooks, 34
11. Brooks, 42.
15. Brooks, 57.
17. Brooks, 63.
18. Brooks, 68.
20. Brooks, 75.
27. Brooks, 129.
29. Brooks, 139, 140.
30. Brooks, 141.
34. Brooks, 182.
35. Brooks, 183.
37. Brooks, 207.
40. Brooks, 231.
41. Brooks, 240.
42. Brooks, 248.
43. Brooks, 249.
46. Ibid.
47. Robinson, quoting John Piper.
Defeating BHAGs
1 Samuel 17:19-51

“Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.“ And David said, “The LORD who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.” And Saul said to David, “Go, and the LORD be with you!” (1Samuel 17:36-37) Defeating BHAGs. In leadership parlance, BHAGs are “Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals,” but I am using this mnemonic to indicate “Big, Hairy, Audacious Giants” in our lives. We all have them. They seem to tower over us, and one look at them often, like the Israelites, causes great fear and we run scared. It could be the BHAG of finances, or the BHAG of relationships, or the BHAG of work or school. Whatever it is, like David, we can defeat the BHAGs of our life.

We defeat them in the Name of the Lord. The Name of the Lord is power, and love, and clarity. The Name of the Lord is a Strong Tower — “The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe.” (Prov. 18:10) We have a Divine Protector, a Champion unlike any other, our Security in times of stress and trouble. These are not just words or religious trinkets, but the real thing. God fights for us in the battles against evil and sin and afflictions.

We need to declare his Name against the BHAGs. This is what David did to Goliath. As Goliath mocked and made fun of him, David declared the Name and power of the Lord, the only true God, against him and his forces. We need to do this against Satan and his forces in our lives.
This is not a shouting match, but rather a calm and collected recitation of Scripture promises and declarations against the enemies of God. Have you declared God’s Name against your BHAGs today? I recall counseling a young man who had trouble with lustful thoughts and told him to tell Satan to get lost, to go away in the Name and power of the Lord. And that is what happened every time an evil thought came into his mind. We do not do this enough in our battles. Take a clue from David and Goliath here, and just say, firmly and strongly, NO, in the Name of the Lord!

We need to use what God has given us and what has always worked for us against the BHAGs. David chose five smooth stones and a sling. What are they against a giant? They are what David used to kill lions and bears and other predators who would come after his sheep. Use what God has given you and blessed you with to defeat your BHAGs. It could seem like nothing against them, but in the strength of the Lord it always works. God has given you assets and you just need to marshal them against your BHAGs today.

Lord, grant me the fearsome strength of Christ the Lord against the BHAGs that plague and disturb me today. Help me use what you have given me and equipped me with to defeat them in your Name this day. For the honor and glory of God alone.
“I have been challenged to really think about the faith I have. Along with this, thinking about what trust I have in God. I have faith in God and in salvation through Jesus Christ, but do I really have faith in His provision, in His love, in His plans, that he has the best in mind for me? I think I do, when I think about it, but I find that I don't always live this way. I let worry, fear, and anxious thoughts to seep through. I have found that I need to lay these things at Jesus’ feet and make a conscious effort to live with complete faith in my words and actions.” (From the recent newsletter of a young missionary friend) Deeper faith. This young missionary’s words challenge me today in my faith walk with Jesus Christ. She is so on point, isn’t she? We profess total faith in Christ, but when it comes down to living that faith out, we are so often beset with fears, doubts, worry and anxious thoughts. Just like the frightened disciples on the Sea of Galilee during the storm. How do we grow deeper in our faith?

Go from thinking to living it out. My young friend notes that when we think about God’s provision, love and plans for us, we think we have enough faith. But when it comes to living it out, that is when we let our frailties and doubts and anxious thoughts trump our belief. The disciples thought they trusted the Master of heaven and earth, but were scared to death in the storm. And to demonstrate their lack of faith, when Jesus calmed the storm, they were more frightened! “And the men marveled, saying, “What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?” (Matthew 8:27) They thought they were strong, had seen a number of miraculous healings, but when it came down to their personal safety, they
found their faith “little.” Has your faith gone from your thinking to your actions?

Lay your fears and frailties at the feet of Jesus. Admit your lack of faith. Admit your weakness of faith. Confess to God your “little” faith. Ask for forgiveness and more faith, everyday, every moment of everyday. The true disciple of Christ lives in total dependence on Christ. Our normal reaction to fear and worry and anxiety is to cast these things at the feet of our Lord and Savior. We give them up, increasingly, day by day, and moment by moment, to grow deeper in our faith.

Finally, as my young friend notes, make a conscious effort to live in faith. Righteous people are those who “walk by faith” (READ Romans 1:16, 17 AND Habakkuk 3). This requires not passivity but effort on our part to exercise daily faith in Christ. I like this biblical combination of faith and works, which the Letter of James references. “If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” (James 1:26, 27) Just a side note–deeper faith results in more practical holiness before God and the world.

Lord, forgive me for my “little faith.” Help me grow stronger and deeper in my faith walk with You this day. Help me really trust Your care and love and power this day, no matter the storms I face or the trials that come my way.

Help me truly walk by faith, not by sight. For Jesus’ sake.
Comforting Others
2 Corinthians 1:3–11

“God can take our adversity—a heart attack, cancer, an automobile accident, violent crime, bankruptcy, a marriage crisis, the loss of a loved one—and transform that pain into encouragement for the people around us. We come out of those experiences stronger and better able to comfort others. Although adversity may never be a blessing, God in His grace can bring blessing out of our adversity. The key is releasing the hurt and pain to the Lord so He can bring the needed healing to our lives. Why not give your circumstance to the Lord today and let Him use it in the lives of others. This will be the first step toward healing.” (Os Hillman, TGIF, Vol 2, Mar 9, 2017 reading) Giving comfort to others. Like many others, I have experienced tragedy, loss, grief, heartache and affliction of various sorts. I have seen God use these varied experiences for his glory and honor and the good of others. How does God equip us to give comfort to others?

You cannot give what you have not experienced. Now I realize this is an overgeneralization. I do understand that you can teach or preach or counsel others with information gleaned from study. But it is never the same as coming from an experience of something. If you want to be used by God to comfort others, He will undoubtedly lead you though some rough experiences. And the harder the ministry venue, the more difficult the experiences in which you will travel. This is universally the case. I know of many Christ followers who serve God in difficult service arenas who have gone through much in order to give much.
You cannot give what you have not released to the Lord. Without such release, you have not been set free from the pain and agony of the tragedy or experience. There are sadly many walking among us today who live with their pain and affliction because they have never released them to God. They somehow believe they can muddle through life, making the best they can make of each day, and trying to eek out a life in the midst of pain. Perhaps they have rejected God through their adversities. Perhaps they don’t know the healing power, the “Balm of Gilead,” that comes from the Lord of all comfort. The important point for any believer today going through painful trial or adversity is to lay all of that before the Lord, to sacrifice it on the altar of life, and to receive the healing and blessing of God from it.

Know that God sets you free from difficulties and rough times for a purpose. That purpose is to give comfort and encouragement and help to others going through similar trials and pain. If we believe in a sovereign and good God, a God who knows the end from the beginning, a God of all comfort, then we know what we have walked through is to be used for others. John Donne once said that “no man is an island to himself,” and he is right. All of us and each of us are made up of a thousand experiences of others whom God has placed in our path in life. The thirty three “one another’s” of Scripture in the New Testament are not there for nothing. For what purpose has God set you free today?

Lord, thank You for releasing me from painful trials and adversity on my life experiences. Show me how to comfort and help others around me going through similar experiences. Teach me Your way and will so I can teach and help others this day and beyond.
“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2Corinthians 1:3-4) Divine comfort. Perhaps one of the most moving passages in the New Testament is here in 2 Corinthians. Paul and his ministry companions open their hearts and their lives to the Corinthians once again. He reflects on the “painful letter” that was sent to this church (probably lost to us) — ‘And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.’ (2Cor. 2:3-4) In the midst of his personal affliction and trials and difficulties he as the pastor-apostle wants them to know his love for them. How should we comfort others?

We know the true Source of all comfort—God Himself. He is the “Father of mercies and God of all comfort.” God’s comfort has been shown throughout the history of redemption. He hears the cries of his people in bondage and affliction in Egypt and brings them out to a Promised Land. Time and time again, even though they forsake him, betray him, ignore him and walk away from him, he relents of his just anger toward them and shows mercy and gives comfort. He moves the weeping prophet, Jeremiah, to write some of the most profound words of comfort we have — “The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an
end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” (Lam3.22-23) If you are a Christian you can trust God as the eternal Source of all comfort.

We don’t hide behind a front of strength. Some of the most painful words about the Apostle’s hardships are written in these verses — “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.” (2Cor1.8) “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.” (2Cor4.8-10) Some would say that leaders should never reveal their personal pains and weaknesses to those under them. Paul goes directly against this advice and bares his heart and emotional and physical weaknesses and pains to the Corinthians. If you lead others, have you hidden your personal pain or shared it with them?

Giving comfort does not mean we gloss over necessary and needed truth. Paul wrote the “painful letter” to these Corinthian believers so that they might not continue in sinful ways and through their repentance experience the freedom and joy of the grace of God. Paul does not apologize, notably, for this painful letter but rather focuses on its outcome among them. Biblical comfort is truthful comfort. Biblical comfort faces the reality of sin and fallen humanity. Biblical comfort is strong enough to plow through such reality. When you seek to comfort others, do you hide the truth from them or share it “out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears?”

*Teach me, Lord, how to be a channel of comfort to others today. Help me not hide the truth from them but give that truth even through my own needs and affliction today. Make me an instrument of your peace and love today.*
God’s Faithfulness
Psalm 145:13–14

“The Lord is faithful to all His promises and loving toward all He has made. The Lord upholds all those who fall and lifts up all who are bowed down.” (Psalm 145:13b-14)

The faithfulness of God. The Old Testament word for “faithfulness” is “Amen!” When we say, “Amen,” at the end of our prayers, we are saying, “God, I am counting on You for the requests I have made. I am trusting You for them, in Your way and in Your timing.” This characteristic or attribute of God means more to us than perhaps what we realize. It is God’s faithfulness that grants us each morning, that keeps us while we sleep, that guards our loved ones, that ushers in new opportunities for service and usefulness for Him. Because God is faithful we can count on His promises and His plans for us. A couple of notes this morning about God and His faithfulness.

God is faithful to Himself. This may seem obvious, but it is crucially important for us to understand the source and ending point of faithfulness. God’s truth and character is what He upholds and what is finally important. Some struggle with this because it seems so “selfish.” But this is nothing of the sort. God is good and He is faithful to His goodness. He will not ever make a mistake or contravene His own will. We can ultimately and fully depend on Him for justice, goodness and truth. We can know His love and depend on His mercy because He is faithful to Himself.

God is faithful to His promises. Not the way we interpret them, or
even want to see them fulfilled, but to His will His way. Our mistake is placing human interpretation on the promises of His Word. The promise of “comfort,” for instance, is comfort in and through all of our trials and difficulties – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Cor 1:3,4) God’s “keeping power” is what we must depend upon in difficulties, not necessarily how we feel or what we want in deliverance.

Today, dear Lord, thank You for Your faithfulness. I praise You for being the God who keeps His promises and glorifies Himself in this world. Keep me faithful to You today, as You are faithful to me. For Jesus’ sake.
Fallout From Affliction

1 Peter 1:6–7

“… one and the same violence of affliction proveth, purifieth, and clarifieth the good, and condemneth, wasteth, and casteth out the bad. And thus in one and the same distress do the wicked offend God by detestation and blasphemy, and the good do glorify Him by praise and prayer.” (City of God, by Augustine of Hippo (354-430), quoted by T.M. Moore, Pastor to Pastor, Aug 6, 2014, and 1 Pet 1:6,7)

Fallout from afflictions. There have always been those who have claimed that Christian believers are immune from the devastating effects of trials and afflictions. They maintain that if faith is strong enough, we can ward off or at least decrease the effects of trials and afflictions. And, if believers go through them, they have not exercised strong enough faith and trust in Christ. This is simply not biblical Christianity. A couple of observations from Augustine and the historic Christian faith here.

First, all of us go through trials and tests and afflictions. No one is exempt. From the earliest believers in the wilderness journey in the Old Testament to the modern “wilderness journey” of Christians today, everyone has been subject to the same afflictions. The difference is that Christians are to march through them with hope and faith, praising God for His sovereign goodness and grace. They have a hope that is eternal and never grows dim. There is no guaranteed shield around Christians. They act like instruments of discipline.

The effects of trials and afflictions are what differs between believers and non-believers. Augustine is correct—afflictions for Christians “prove,
purify, and clarify” the good. For the unbeliever, they “condemn, waste, and cast them out.” They act as judgments from God. This is not the message we like to hear in these days. It is not a “nice” message, but it is biblically accurate. Thus, the need for repentance and faith on the behalf of all of those outside of Christ. Jesus is the only answer, the only hope, the only way to endure these trials and afflictions in hope and love. For Christians, this should drive us to witness more fervently and practice our faith more actively.

Lord, help me today, trust You through all the trials and afflictions that come my way. Let me not lose hope and faith, but rather cast myself on Your goodness and protecting care. Cause those who don’t know You to flee to You in these days, and make my witness fruitful to them. For Jesus sake.
The Greatness of Faithfulness
Lamentations 3

“But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. ‘The LORD is my portion,’ says my soul, ‘therefore I will hope in him.’” (Lamentations 3:21-24) Great is Your faithfulness! This statement of Jeremiah was not made when times were great and things were going well. In fact, right before these famous verses, Jeremiah moans—“my soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, ‘My endurance has perished; so has my hope from the LORD.’ Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall!” (Vv. 17-19) Lack of peace, desperate for happiness and in the midst of affliction and personal and corporate wandering, he can say, “Great is your faithfulness!” What we can learn from the juxtaposition of these feelings is important in our faith journey.

True and lasting joy and peace do not come from our circumstances. There may, in fact, be desperate circumstances and difficult days. They may leave us with a sense of forlornness and weariness. Yet, even then, we can affirm the great faithfulness of our God. Many Christians wait until things get better, or are starting to turn around, to affirm God’s faithfulness. Not so with Jeremiah. His circumstances did not define his life or his hope. Don’t let your circumstances, even desperate though they may be, define your life and your hope.

The Lord alone is our portion. We say it, think we believe it, and yet don’t live it out. The Lord alone is my portion! Say it over and over again until you have got it. The Lord alone is my portion! With God nothing
is impossible. That’s what Christmas is all about, isn’t it? Remember Mary’s song—“And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.” (Luke 1:50-52) Irrespective of Herod’s insane slaughter of two year olds and under, irrespective of the proud Pharisees and conquering Romans, irrespective of a nation which has lost its way spiritually, Emmanuel, God with us, came and granted us salvation.

I am preparing a study of the seven churches of Revelation for a winter quarter of teaching at the church which we are attending. The backdrop to the glorious vision of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ to John in Revelation chapter one is what has happened cited in Daniel 7. There four “beasts” or kingdoms are raised up on earth to defeat and define God’s people. Yet, the kingdom of God, of the Ancient of Days, of the Son of Man, oversees and rules them all. Even in the midst of our worst of times, Emmanuel is here. Remember that today.

“Emmanuel, Emmanuel, God with us. And if God is with us, Who can stand against us?!?” Says the song. And from the most popular and long standing hymn,

“Great is Thy faithfulness,” O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassion, they fail not
As Thou hast been Thou forever wilt be.
“Great is Thy faithfulness!” “Great is Thy faithfulness!”
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided—
“Great is Thy faithfulness,” Lord, unto me!”
“And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”

(2 Corinthians 9:8) God is able! I have a close friend who is looking for a job. He has been diligently looking for a while now, is eminently qualified, but a bit older in the job market. There have been a number of possibilities and interviews, but he is still looking. He is in my daily prayers. Another devotional writer today reminded me of God’s faithfulness and readiness to meet our every job need. He was assigned a seemingly impossible sales task, expected to fail, yet God came through for him, and he became an executive in that company. What do we do when faced with seemingly impossible odds in the job market?

Remember that God is able! We say it, pray it, tell it to others, but do we personally believe that, indeed, God is able in my situation, my case, to come through and bless me? The Christian life is a matter of faith, not blind faith, not cheap faith, not roll-of-the-dice faith. It is faith in a God who has promised to be always there for us, always watching over us, always able to provide for us. We simply need to trust in His ability and power and love in seemingly impossible odds set against us. Is that your faith today?

God is able in all things! Did you catch that word “all” in the quoted verse? “So that having all sufficiency in all things at all times.” Nothing is left to chance or luck or coincidence with God. Not a microcosm is out of God’s sight or care. Remember what Jesus said – “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly
Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?” (Matthew 6:26) Jesus goes on in that passage to say that we should not become anxious or give in to worry and fretting. God has your back. The Creator God is in control of every situation, every mind, every need and will provide in His timing and His way for His people. Always. Everywhere. In all things.

Lord, today I do pray for my long time friend looking for a job. I pray that his faith will not fail. I pray that You would soon provide him with a good job. I pray that You will care for him and his family in this season. Be his hope and stay. And for all of your people facing seemingly impossible things today, remind them that You are able!
“Before the year of famine came, two sons were born to Joseph. Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera priest of On, bore them to him. Joseph called the name of the firstborn Manasseh. ‘For,’ he said, ‘God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father’s house.’ The name of the second he called Ephraim, ‘For God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.’ The seven years of plenty that occurred in the land of Egypt came to an end, and the seven years of famine began to come, as Joseph had said. There was famine in all lands, but in all the land of Egypt there was bread.” (Genesis 41:50-54)

A God-sized solution. There are those who say that Christians cannot successfully operate in a secular society or workplace because of the godlessness around them. The story of Joseph in Egypt stands in stark contrast to this way of thinking. Not only did God give Pharaoh a dream message of what was going to happen to the known world at that time, but He also used Joseph to save Egypt and much of the world under famine in those days. What do we see in this God-sized solution to the great famine?

All people matter to God. It is this conviction and knowledge that allowed Bill Hybels and others to found and build one of the largest and most successful of ministries in North America. And it is this conviction that has birthed some of the largest mega-churches in our time. I do not say this to congratulate mega-churches or place any criticism on smaller church works. The point is that God cared for the godless Egyptians as well as his chosen people of that day. And He used Joseph in the court of Pharaoh as his instrument of blessing and providence to provide for
the people during the seven years of famine. God saved Egypt and the surrounding nations during the seven years of famine. God cares about your unsaved and godless neighbors and work mates.

God uses Christ-followers to provide for world sized needs. Joseph’s gift of interpreting dreams lifted him to second in command in the powerful nation of Egypt. Pharaoh and his people did not accept Joseph’s God or Joseph’s religion. But they gladly accepted Joseph’s God-sized solution to the coming years of famine and need in the known world at the time. Pharaoh honored God by honoring his servant Joseph. When we think that the secular world always hates and despises God-centered viewpoints and solutions to major problems, we fail to recognize God at work. Yes, we will need to couch world sized solutions in secular language and paradigms, but God still gets the honor and glory through them. Christians need to learn to speak for God in a world set against God and his Word. He can use you to make a major difference in this world and its needs.

*Lord, thank You for caring for this world and its great needs. Help me understand this truth and apply it to my unsaved and secular neighbors, friends and fellow workers. May they see You through me. For Christ’s sake.*
God Standing Off
Psalm 10:1

"Why standest thou afar off, O Lord? (Psalm 10:1) God is 'a very present help in trouble.' But He permits trouble to pursue us, as though He were indifferent to its overwhelming pressure, that we may be brought to the end of ourselves, and led to discover the treasure of darkness, the unmeasurable gains of tribulation . . . Your Father is as near when you journey through the dark tunnel as when under the open heaven!“ (Streams in the Desert, by L.B. Cowman, Daily Devotional, Jan 23, 2014)

Trouble, affliction, trial, pain and suffering, dark days. All of these human troubles come upon us, and they tend to wear us down, exhaust us, and make us limp in the service of our Lord and Savior. But these are the times when we need to trust more, pray more, seek God more, and continue to serve and persevere. I do a Bible study at a senior center close to our church once a month. These dear people are Christians who have journeyed with God for many years. Some are at the end of their journey here on earth. While they are not up on the latest news and struggles in the evangelical world, they have been an inspiration to me in so many ways. Here are some of the lessons that sync with the devotional comment for this day.

Perseverance and patience are vastly underrated by too many. These people have traveled with God for many years, a number of them in their 80s. They have seen good times, hard times, bad times, and have experienced all the pains and sorrows and joys and pleasures of life. Through it all, they have kept on keeping on with God. In fact, He has become their travel buddy, their constant and dear friend on the journey. Many of their friends have passed away; He remains. They have been disappointed by
others who may have started the journey of faith well, but have fallen away. Jesus has never left nor failed them. So they will never leave Him—it is a settled matter in their hearts and minds.

They understand “prodigals.” I have heard stories from them of grandchildren and great-grandchildren who began with God, but are presently living as if there is no God. They hurt for them, and weep for them, but they don’t give up on them. Like the Prodigal Son in the Bible, they trust that many of these wayward ones will indeed come back to the faith and own once again allegiance to The Lord Jesus Christ.

They pray well. You learn so much in prayer by listening and praying with folks like this. They have learned the secret of praying in faith in dark times as well as good. They understand that prayer is precious and is the most powerful thing they can do for our world. They study the prayers of the Bible. They love the Psalms and the varied prayers in them.

So, today, dear Lord, teach me through these dear people faith, perseverance, patience and dependence on You. Teach me how to entrust prodigals I know to You. Help me keep the faith through any darkness and wait upon You. In Jesus Name, Amen.
Going Through Difficult Times  
Romans 5:1–8  
A Study

Adversity is bracketed by hope in the context. Our problem is one of perspective, first of all. We see adversity as an interruption, a bad dream, a cruel joke to life. Few of us see trials and troubles as God’s messengers, God’s ways to bless and develop us and God’s love upon us. We are what we see, to a great extent.

Our problem is one of living below rather than within the promises of God. What we believe is what we act upon! So . . .

What about Psalm 23 — “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want!”

What about Isaiah 41:13 — “For I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.”

What about Romans 8:35-37? “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.” J.I. Packer has said we as Christians need to “possess our possessions!”

God’s truth about adversity
Adversity is grounded in faith, founded upon fact, not feelings:

“justified” = God declares us righteous through Jesus Christ  
“peace with God” = the status of a right relationship with God  
“access by faith” = God’s constant availability through Christ
“hope of the glory of God” = final victory; life forever with God.
We desperately need to replace human subjectivity with God’s objectivity!
More truths . . .
“Bad things happen to good people!” and “When it rains, it pours!”
We will have adversity — and plenty of it!
“In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33)
“We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God”
(Acts 14:22)
Jesus Himself had to suffer (Heb. 2:10; 5:8)

“No pain, no gain!”
“not only so, but on the contrary we also” (v. 3) = exultant rejoicing!
“perseverance” is the ability to handle pressure; steadfastness; endurance.
It is “the characteristic of a person who is unswerved from his deliberate purpose and his loyalty to faith and piety in Christ, even by the greatest of sufferings.”
Romans 12:12 — “be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer”
James 1:12 — “Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.”
Hebrews 12:7, 8 — “Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline) then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.”

“character” = “What is left after the fire”
Adversity cultivates proven character; gives us concrete evidence, visible proof we are sons and daughters of God in Christ Jesus. The term is used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew) for a “furnace for smelting.” It answers the question, “How do you really know you are a child of God? — By adversity, Paul says! To show that the Christian faith no dream or hallucination or just a mountain-top experience. “God’s rod is a pencil to draw Christ’s image more lively upon
“hope” = more of God alone.
Pressures and trials of daily life make God much more real and powerful to us. We start to learn what hope is all about—that it is about final and full trust in God’s ability and power and presence to keep us in life and in death, in sickness and in health, in good times as well as difficult times, in lack of funds as well as in prosperity. God alone becomes our one thing we aim for, seek for, long for, thirst for, and die for!

This kind of hope then “banishes shame” — drives it away; makes us bold for God in this world; gives us confidence in Him for all times and all circumstances. As our hope grows, God “pours out His Spirit of love and power” upon us. Image here of the abundant diffusion of the Spirit in the center of a person’s existence. God becomes real and really powerful to us as we move through adversity to perseverance to character development to experiencing real hope. Called “immediate assurance” by older writers.

“All things work together for good . . .” and “There’s a silver lining under every cloud.” But qualified by the rest of the verse = “... for those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28)

Application
1. Instead of “Where is God?!” ask, “What does God want to teach me through this?”
2. Instead of “grinning and bearing it,” find ways to actually rejoice in the love of God through it.
3. Find someone to share your pain . . . and God’s comfort from it.
“Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (James 1:2-4)

Going Through It
James 5:2–4

“Affliction is God’s forge to soften the iron heart. It is impossible to form iron while it is cold, but make it red hot, and you can stamp upon it any impression you please. God softens hearts with the showers of adversity and makes us more attentive unto Him and less influenced by the noise of the world.” (Thomas Case, “A Treatise of Afflictions” posted by Michael, a pastor in Ohio and friend from Seminary graduate work). Going through it. My good friend, Michael, is a senior pastor at a church whose lay leadership has shown no confidence in his directing the church. They are actually lowering his salary for this next year. He has been actively seeking ministry elsewhere. His wife and family have medical issues. He is “going through it,” we would say. How does one get through difficult life situations?

First, realize God is doing a sovereign work in your life and your journey. The Ruler of all is heating the fires of affliction and adversity for our good. He is the Refiner, softening our hearts and forging the iron of our souls. Even if the Enemy, Satan himself, is at work in the situation, it is only by God’s permission and sovereign will (cf. Job 1). God is shaping us, molding us, working in us to make us what He wants us to be and do. This is not happenstance or by chance or just coincidence.
Then, understand that “steadfastness” and maturity come only through such fires. Christians and Christian leaders especially need “seasoning.” They need to develop “hard shells,” so to speak, so that they can minister more effectively in a dark and anti-God world. Immature leaders trust everyone; mature leaders know that everyone cannot be trusted and selectively trust. We are to let steadfastness, notice, have its “full effect” according to James. That can only come through time and tests. I love fully ripe and juicy peaches. But I have also bitten into seemingly ripe peaches only to find them not ready.

Finally, we need to get to a seasoned place where we choose joy in the testing and trials. We can mope around, complain, grieve, blame others, and be a real pain to our families in these times. At some level we need to rise above such immature reactions and choose the joy of the Lord as our strength in them. Mature, seasoned, tested Christians and leaders assess the situations, trust God through them and make alternate plans to get through them—with a peace and joy only God the Holy Spirit can give.

*Lord, today if I am going through Your tests and trials in my life, grant me patience, maturity, steadfastness and may that have its full effect in my life and attitude. Grant me Your joy as my strength. And, bless Michael and his family through these difficult times and meet their every need. All for Your honor and glory and the advancement of Your kingdom.*
Great Peace
Psalm 119:165

“Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble.” (V. 165) This is the same believer who felt alienation from the world (v. 19), who was “laid low in the dust” (v. 25), who felt “weary with sorrow” (v. 28) and who endured the pangs of affliction and loneliness and contempt. Can a Christian endure what the Psalmist did as evidenced in Psalm 119 and yet be in a state of “great peace?” Indeed, he or she can!

What is this “great peace?” It is the “shalom” that the Old Testament speaks of, that wholeness and fullness of life and purpose, that was ultimately fulfilled in our Lord and Savior, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:2-7). Great peace is the unsullied harmony between God and humanity, the sense that all is well, internally and externally. Such peace is given to and promised to all who know Jesus Christ, whose lives have been transformed by the Prince of Peace (READ Micah 5:4, 5; Luke 2:14; John 14:27; Romans 5:1-10; Ephesians 2:14-18).

Commentators have struggled to define this “great peace” in satisfactory words. Leslie Allen (The Word Commentary) translates it as “ample security,” Calvin as “God’s fatherly favor shining in our hearts,” Leupold (Lutheran Commentator) as the “rich measure of well-being where nothing lacks.” “Great peace” is an all-consuming richness of life, anointing us with the sense and presence of God with us, the God who holds the universe in his hands. It is an assurance that no matter how painful the grief, how bitter the affliction, how costly the persecution, how lonely the alienation, we can live above it all.
Great peace comes to those who “love” (with all the passion and sense of that word) God’s Word, His Torah, his directive universal law for humankind. Such Word gives “straight paths” for our feet (Proverbs 4:25-27). First then, the Christ follower who wants to live in “great peace” must unquestionably, deeply, passionately love God’s Word. It must be the directive for life here and forever. It must be written in our hearts, where it cannot be erased by affliction or difficulty or time. It must inform our jobs, our families, and our pleasures. It must be the beginning and end of every attitude, every thought, every action. Is this your love for God’s Word today?

Great peace comes from clearing up any “spiritual cloudiness” that obstructs our view of God and life. Coldness to the things of God, apathy in our worship and service, and dullness in our understanding of God’s Word must be dealt with. We need to know more of the “constraining love of Christ” that Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians. Then we need to stir up the habit of diligent faith, as Charles Bridges so wisely points out. Finally, we need to accept and realize that “nothing comes upon you except by God’s sovereign appointment or permission.”

Lord, today grant me such “great peace.” Help me so know and love You and your Word that nothing can disturb or thwart such peace. Take away the love of this world and replace it with love for You and Your world. Let me sing with Edward Bickersteth—“Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin? The blood of Jesus whispers peace within. Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed? To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.” Amen.
Affliction Endears the Promises
We never prize the precious words of promise till we are placed in conditions in which their suitability and sweetness are manifested. We all of us value those golden words: “When thou walkest through the fire thou shalt not be burned, neither shall the flame kindle upon thee.” But few if any of us have read them with the delight of the martyr, Bilney, to whom this passage was a stay while he was in prison, awaiting his execution at the stake. His Bible, still preserved in the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, has the passage marked with a pen in the margin. Perhaps, if all were known, every promise in the Bible has borne a special message to some one saint; and so the whole volume might be scored in the margin with mementos of Christian experience, every one appropriate to the very letter. — SPURGEON.

My Sorrow’s Sign
O murmurous Spirit of the Pine!
Thou seem’st to droop and nestle nigh.
Hast thou, then, read my sorrow’s sign?
What grief of thine dost thou resign
To echo here my soul’s low cry,
O murmurous Spirit of the Pine?

What need for me to build a shrine
To stay the people passing by,
If thou hast read my sorrow’s sign?
Thou hast no marble mark to thine;
Like mine, thy grief is always shy,
O murmurous Spirit of the Pine!

No shaft shall rise to measure mine,
Nor need the cold world marvel why,
Since thou hast read my sorrow’s sign.
For mine, the stars shall rise and shine
Until the constellations die;
For thou hast read my sorrow’s sign,
O murmurous Spirit of the Pine!
( Joel Chandler Harris.)

If you would not have affliction visit you twice,
listen at once to what it teaches.
(James Burgh)

The Power of the Holy Spirit  
A Study

When I say the word “power,” all kinds of thoughts might come to your mind. Perhaps you think of the influence of the Spirit of God in a person’s life and thought. Or, perhaps you think of people waving their hands, stomping their feet, speaking in strange and unintelligible voices, making worship rousing and noisy. Or, perhaps you think of healing services where people attend to be touched by an evangelist or someone for physical healing of some sort.

I want to go back to the basics of “power of the Spirit,” however, from the Bible. And mainly, I want to help us all answer an essential question many have been asking. It goes something like this — I pray, I hope for, I long for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, but nothing seems to happen. Why? Is the power of the Spirit just for excitable, outgoing, charismatic people? Is there something wrong with me that I don’t seem to have this power—whatever it may be? Is there something I should be doing or stop from doing to possess such power?

Dwight Moody has rightly said: “There is no use in running before you are sent; there is no use in attempting to do God’s work without God’s power. A man working without this unction, a man working without this anointing, a man working without the Holy Spirit upon him, is losing time after all.” When Jesus left this earth, He told his disciples that He would not leave them alone. In fact, he said to them that He would send a Comforter, a Counselor, a Helper to their faith journey. That would be the Holy Spirit. This is what Jesus says that the Spirit will do when He comes: “When he comes, he’ll expose the error of the godless world’s view of
sin, righteousness, and judgment: He’ll show them that their refusal to believe in me is their basic sin.” (The Message, John 16:8,9)

The Holy Spirit has exposing power. In older language, He has convicting power. It is the Holy Spirit who invisibly yet deeply and certainly convicts us of sinful thoughts, actions, deeds and desires. He exposes them to our hearts and minds. He exposes the root cause of sin, and that is disbelief in Jesus Christ as the only way, the only truth, the only life with God the Father. A person, any person, at any age or stage of life and experience comes to trust in Christ as his or her Savior and Lord through the exposing, convicting power of the Holy Spirit. He shines a God-sized mirror in our hearts, in our inner beings, and shows the dark corners to us. He shows and convicts us of our sins.

And why? Not to cower us. Not to shame us, but to change us, to convert us, to bring us back to God, back home spiritually to where we belong. The Bible tells us that all we like sheep have gone astray. All of us have wandered from God and His ways. The Spirit’s power draws us, convicts us, brings us back to Him. No one ever becomes a true believer without this exposing and convicting power of the Holy Spirit. So how should you respond to such power? Three words—Accept – Admit – Repent! If you want the power of the Holy Spirit in your life, this is the first base, this is the very first step. To accept God’s judgment of your life. To admit your sins before Him. And to repent—to change your mind and heart, to go from your own direction to God’s direction, with sorrow and true humility.

It’s not just mentally agreeing with the Bible here. Not just a nodding acceptance that Jesus died on the cross in your place for your sins, which is all true. True change comes through the power of the Holy Spirit. And we know we have experienced that power when we really and truly take responsibility for our sins, confess them to God and trust in Him alone for deliverance and freedom.

The second powerful work the Holy Spirit does is to transform us into
what Christ wants us to be. It is *transforming power* — “I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” (Ephesians 3:16, 17a) “And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17b-19)

In this passage the Apostle Paul reveals our weakness in spiritual life and power. We may be good in Bible accuracy, church programming, have the right things to say and do in sharing our faith with others, but power—real, Spirit-given, Spirit-led power lacks. Paul prays not merely for these people then and there, but also here and now.

The transforming power of God the Holy Spirit infuses us with strong faith in Christ. It is not a magical touch of supernatural ecstasy as much as it is conforming us to the character of Christ. Without Christ, there is no work of the Spirit; without the Spirit the truth and grace that is in Christ has no dynamic, no punch, no effectiveness. More power means more faith. This is a radical transformation from the inside out—“in your inner being” see that! Why is it that people say they are Christians, claim to be Christ-followers, but seem to live lives like those of their non-Christian neighbors and friends? It is a lack of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit! Why hasn’t the Church made the impact we would all hope it would have made in this world? Lack of the transforming power of the Spirit of Christ.

If this power is what you may lack, what should you do? Pray for it! Not just a table-grace type of brief prayer either. But insistent, expectant prayer. That’s what Paul does for us and instructs us to do for ourselves and others in this prayer.

A third type of power is witnessing or sharing Christ with others type
of power. “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” (1 Thessalonians 1:5) People need the Lord—yes. People need instruction from God’s Word, the Bible—yes. People need counseled and helped along the way—yes. But people around us need Spirit-filled, empowered Christians to share with them the Good News.

The Holy Spirit provides witnessing power to those who engage in watchful waiting. Waiting the right time. Waiting for the right words to say. Waiting for the God-moment when the Holy Spirit is exposing a person’s sins to him or her. Watchful waiting—active, prayer led, prayer inspired waiting for God to nudge you and say—Now’s the time. Share now. Witness now. Watch and see me work now.

A final note about the power of the Holy Spirit. He gives us overcoming power. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13). Paul is here contrasting the Greek notion of hope founded in uncertainty of the future and fear of present circumstances with the Hebrew notion of truthful hope, hope founded in the character and power of the God of the universe. God’s tested and tried character produces real hope. Romans 5 says it this way: “We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance character, and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Where is the power to live day by day? To endure the hardships, the difficulties, the challenges of life? To face disappointment and fear? To deal with sickness and death and disease and all the world’s ills? It is found in the hope produced by the power of the Holy Spirit given to us.

How does a Christian, a sincere, watchful, dedicated believer in Jesus or even a person who is just seeking God get from here to there? First, admit
“I can’t!” God’s power through the Holy Spirit comes to those who at the end of the day confess humbly and truthfully—I just cannot get there. In our younger years, Nancy and I had purchased a house, a duplex in Wilmington, DE that gave us myriads of problems, and when we went on to other church works in other states in obedience to God, it just would not sell. Year after year. I think five years in all. I was bi-vocational at the time, teaching in a public school. One day, just about at the end of my rope and patience and need, in tears I gave the house over to God and said, Whatever You want to do with it. It’s okay. The house sold the next day!

No power? Our problem may be that we think we can have what God wants us to have by just “cooperating” with him. We have bought into the lie that Christianity is about those who work hard, obey the rules, and need just a little help from God along the way. Second, plug in. You cannot get the power of the Holy Spirit by simply wishing it were yours! Like this corded drill I have, the only way it works is to plug it into the power source.

Plug in—ask God really and deeply for such power. He’s the source. Third, clear away the roadblocks. Here Scripture guides us well. Nothing may be happening due to one of three realities—resisting (Acts 7:51ff), quenching (1 Thessalonians 5:19), or grieving (Ephesians 4:30) the Holy Spirit.

Finally, take faith-risks. For many, the only way they will ever experience the profound and amazing power of the Holy Spirit is to step out in faith where God is nudging them, leading them, taking them. How about you? Are you keeping back, knowing what you need to do, but hesitant?
Psalm 23
A Bible Study

1. Introduction. Psalm 23 has been one of the most precious Psalms of David that the Christian and the Church have ever memorized and sung. While modern commentators have tried to find an appropriate ________________ [Note that the fill-in-the-blank answers are below] for this Psalm, it retains its power and comfort for both the individual and the body of Christ.

Thus, Derek Kidner’s words ring true: “Depth and strength underlie the simplicity of this psalm. Its peace is not escape; its contentment is not complacency: There is a readiness to face deep darkness and imminent attack, and the climax reveals a love which homes toward no material goal but to the Lord Himself.” (Derek Kidner, Psalms 1–72, InterVarsity, 1993)

2. Verse 1 – My Shepherd
   a. “The Lord” placed at the beginning has an ______________ sense – God and ______________ else!
   c. “not be in want” = not live in a ______________ of desperation or despair.

3. Verse 2 – My Adequacy
   a. “green pastures” = ________________ his flock
   b. “quiet waters” = places of ________________ and quiet
4. Verse 3 – My Restorer
   a. Two possible pictures here. The first is a picture of bringing back a ______________ sheep (Isa. 49:5; Ps. 60:1 and Ps. 19:7), giving spiritual renewal.
   b. The second sense is __________________ since “my soul” often refers to my physical or psychological state (cf. Isa. 58:12).
   c. “paths of righteousness” indicates __________ and ______________ paths, keeping us morally straight.

5. Verse 4 – My Overcomer
   a. “valley of the shadow of death” = taking the ___________ out of darkness, even death itself.
   b. “you are with me” = The Shepherd comes ________________ us, escorting us through enemies by his __________ (club worn at the belt) and ____________ (hooked and long stick to round up the flock), giving ______________ and ______________ for the flock.

6. Verse 5 – My Friend
   a. “prepare a table” = setting out a feast or preparing a defense, giving ______________ under pressure (cf. Rom. 8:31-39) and providing infinite ______________ in the worst of situations.
   b. “my cup overflows” = God gives us the ______________ over the worst of enemies and spiritual foes. (Picture of a victory celebration where the enemies are present as captives; the defeated rivals are there as reluctant guests.)

7. Verse 6 – My Eternal Hope
   a. To be God’s guest is more than an acquaintance, it is to __________ with Him.
   b. Life is a __________________ which is a journey ______________.
   c. “goodness and mercy” = God’s nature as Good and His covenant love gives us steady ______________ and lifelong ______________.
something we can always count on “for length of days,” an expression for eternity.

d. “will follow” = These qualities of God will “follow” us, meaning that God is not only with us but fighting __________ us.

“Wherever he may guide me
No want shall turn me back;
My Shepherd is beside me,
And nothing can I lack.
His wisdom ever waketh,
His sight is never dim;
He knows the way he taketh,
And I will walk with him”
(Anna Waring)

ANSWERS: 1. Setting. 2a. emphatic; no one; b. personal; pledged; c. state. 3a. feeding; b. rest. 4a. straying; b. refreshment; c. right; straight. 5a. sting; b. alongside; rod; staff; defense; control. 6a. assurance; resources; b. victory. 7a. live; b. pilgrimage; home; c. kindness; support; d. for.
Reclaiming God’s Plans
Jeremiah 29:1–14
A Study

Introduction
“It’s not the outside obstacles that are the most critical ones. The greatest barriers to growth are barriers to the process of thinking and visualizing.” (Carl George) You can only go “where you have imagined to go!”

Building God’s Church and your life here and beyond hangs upon your conception of God — who He is, how He works, and your dependence upon His plans for you.

God is always more interested in us than we are in Him!
God has plans for us!
“For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD.” (Jer. 29:11a)
God’s plans are God’s thoughts or intentions.

1. They are God’s plans, known by Him!
   - “I” emphatic here
   - Isaiah 55:8,9; Psalm 77:19

2. They are detailed and exhaustive.

3. They are continual.
   “For I know the plans I am planning for you…” (Hebrew)

4. They are settled.
   God’s Plans are good!
Plans to “prosper you and not to harm you.” Actually the Old Testament word is *shalom*. This term means more than absence of trouble. It refers to completeness, soundness and wholeness.

“God moves in a mysterious way
   His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
   And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
   Of never failing skill,
He treasurers up His bright designs
   And works His sovereign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
   The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
   In blessings on your head.

His purposes will ripen fast,
   Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
   But sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err
   And scan his work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter
   And He will make it plain.”
(William Cowper, 1772)

**God’s Plans are optimistic!**

“... plans to give you a hope and a future.”
Hope is the opposite of despair and languishing.
In eternity everything will come into focus (1 Peter 4:12, 13)
God’s Plans can be experienced
if we have a “God-centered obsession” in our lives!
Verses 12–14a.
When we seek God “with all our hearts” there will be a “God-focused obsession” in our lives that propel us to love God and know His plans as He reveals them to us.
- Note Psalm 42
- Note Psalm 63

Application
1. Does God and his plans “drive” your life today?
2. Does God “possess” you and your plans?
3. Fall in love with God through Christ today!
Sad and Dark Days
Numbers 14, 15 and Psalm 90

“For all our days pass away under your wrath; we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away. Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you? So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.” (Psalm 90:9-12) Going through sad and dark days. The Lord’s answer to Moses teaches us much about the heart of biblical theology.

First, there is forgiveness, because of which God will continue with Israel as his people and work out his promise with the younger generation (24). Secondly, there is judgment. Forgiveness is never arbitrary nor at the expense of God’s glory. His oath (21-25) shows that his own glory is his chief concern. Therefore, those who have despised him would never see the land. The next day, they had to return on their route, back towards the Red Sea. This was an immediate reversal of the progress made.” (New Bible Commentary)

Facing the disintegrative power of sin. Sin is never only a mistake. All sin is an offense against a holy and loving God, a covenant keeping God who has promised love and mercy to those who obey Him — “The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.” (Numbers 14:18) Psalm 90 is the song of Moses commenting on the forty year judgment of God to the original nation of Israel. All of this reminds us that the love and mercy and forgiveness of God does not overlook or
discount sin. The issue is God’s honor and glory, not our convenience or comfort. Sin has consequences. All sin, even sins of ignorance and presumption must be seen in this light. This is what Israel, and so many today, fail to see.

Prayer for God’s mercy is still the answer of the godly. Moses went to intercessory prayer for the people of Israel. Psalm 90 gives us six prayers with four major lessons. Know and “recognize our limited time on earth so as to use it with wisdom (Psalm 90:12), cry for compassion from a reconciled God (13); counter the withering of life (the morning of 5-6) with a new morning filled with his love which does not change all our days (14); look to him to make life as full of gladness as otherwise it would have been of affliction (15).” (NBC)

God alone is our wisdom, our forgiveness, our stability and our renewal. The carefully planned sacrifices of Israel, pointing to the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ for all sin, demonstrated these truths. Are you praying for the sins of the people around you? The sins of the people of your church family? The sins of your family? This should be our answer to a world which has rebelled against God and his grace.

So, today, dear Lord, in the words of Moses: “Return, O LORD! How long? Have pity on your servants! Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!” (Psalm 90, 13, 17)
Seeking God Daily
Psalm 63
Thanksgiving Day

“O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Seeking God daily. Today is Thanksgiving. We give thanks for family, friends, food, health, provision and so many things. We usually remember to thank God at table grace. But is this a daily habit or a chore for us? I have heard and counseled many people who “try” to have daily devotions with God. They routinely never get “to it.” Their duties and responsibilities of the day crowd out getting alone with God. How do we maintain an intimate connection with God on a daily basis?

Make thanksgiving more than a “casual” one day affair. If we have been delivered from tragedy or intense pain or affliction, we wake up everyday thanking God for another opportunity to be free of these terrible things. But why do we need such tragedies to be thankful everyday? Gratefulness is a learned habit birthed through a heart and soul and mind that truly understands God’s love and power. Those who understand these words nod their heads and bow their hearts before the One who has given them life and sustenance and grace day after day. Do we realize the greatness of our deliverance from sin and shame? If so, then daily thanks and devotions become important, indeed the most important practice of the day.

Make daily connection with God a discipline. There is no secret to athletic fitness and success. They practice everyday. They exercise everyday. They have a daily routine from which they never sway, because they know how important each day is to their bodies and activities. So it is with spiritual
health and fitness. Everyday devotions builds our spiritual bodies and makes them fit for God’s use. We are able to run spiritual marathons because we have built up our spiritual selves on a daily basis.

Don’t run on feelings. Too many Christians run on the way they feel. If they feel good and things are going well, they have no felt need to seek God. If things are going badly, they seek God out of desperation. This is emotional sabotage and blackmail. There is an old hymn that says it is in the singing that the joy of worship comes. We worship because God deserves it, not because we feel like it. We pray daily because God is honored thereby and our souls are fed. One writer once said that he cannot remember a single sermon out of thousands but he can view his spiritual growth and know that he has been fed well on a regular diet.

_O God, today I earnestly and early seek You. Thank You for being my Lord and my God. Thank You for giving me daily grace to run the spiritual race. Make my commitment a daily one to You. For Your honor and glory and praise._
Seeking Vindication
Psalm 35

“You have seen, O LORD; be not silent! O Lord, be not far from me! Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my Lord! Vindicate me, O LORD, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me!” (Psalm 35:22-24) Seeking vindication from God toward enemies. The Psalmist was unjustly maligned, accused, tried and convicted by his enemies. They were always “at him,” always condemning him, always picking at him. This grieved him, and he brought his grief and injustice to God for vindication. How do we seek vindication from God?

Not in personal getting back at people. In fact, the Psalmist says when his enemies were down and sick, he prayed for them. He showed them good for evil — “But I, when they were sick- I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest.” (Ps. 35:13) This is often the case for the follower of Jesus. We have been taught, by word and example from our Lord, to love our enemies and pray for them — “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matt. 5:44-45) This, of course, should be the natural stance of the Christian believer. We are not allowed personal vendettas, even against those who attack us unjustly.

Taking our case to God our righteousness. We handle the taunts and afflictions of our enemies by taking them before the All-wise, All-knowing, Just God — “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to
the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Rom. 12:19) The God who sees all, who knows the end from the beginning, will exact justice on those who persecute and unjustly accuse and taunt the follower of Christ. But in his own time and in his own way. This must be our satisfaction. Is it yours?

“Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad and say evermore, “Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant!” Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long.” (Psalm 35:27-28)
Springs In The Desert
Isaiah 44–48

“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour my Spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up among the grass like willows by flowing streams.” (Isa. 44:3-4) Springs in the desert. Such imagery is used to describe the refreshing presence of the Lord with his beleaguered people. “For my name’s sake I defer my anger; for the sake of my praise I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction.” (Isa.48.9-10) God will indeed judge and discipline his people and show them the folly of their ways. God as sovereign Creator, Sustainer and Controller is demonstrated throughout these chapters and verses.

No other Name! — “Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.” (Isa. 44:8) Idolatry is “feeding on ashes.” The same wood that a person warms himself by, or uses as fuel for cooking, is also used for making idols. Plain stupidity! But any substitute for the real and true God will do for those who have rebelled against God and blocked Him out of their minds and hearts. “Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: “I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself.” (Isa. 44:24) “There is no peace for the wicked.” (Isa. 48:22)

No other force. God uses unbelievers to carry out his plan — “Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to
subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed.” (Isa. 45:1) “I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me.” (Isa. 45:5) God as sovereign Controller will so influence and move on Cyrus that he will be the discipliner of Israel. Babylon will be destroyed and turned to dust. All of this is not due to the power or plans of evil forces, but of God. While man says “I am and there is no other,” God laughs at such foolishness and still accomplishes his will and way.

No other salvation — “But Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you shall not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity.” (Isa. 45:17) “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” (Isa. 45:22) Salvation is found in none other than in Jesus Christ, the Anointed of the Lord, the true Messiah, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. People today still look for substitutes for God. There are none and no other salvation has been provided. Seek the true God today!

Lord, for the many around me who think they are forming and planning their own destinies, open their eyes to see, their ears to hear and their hearts to understand there is salvation and true freedom in no one but You. Do that for your honor and glory.
“Treasures of darkness” are what God promised Cyrus as he was appointed to punish Israel for their sins. “For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me. I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.” (Isaiah 45:4-6) It was a dark time for the people of God. Yet, God promised through these events and tragedies a Savior, a Messiah, to be born and brought to this earth for all mankind. What can we learn from God as we go through our “prisons of circumstances?”

We can learn that God and God alone is the Lord. Many people, including many well-meaning Christian people, think they can engineer their circumstances to their ends. After all, technology and technological advances have made so much possible, and the promise of more to come should be able to take care of us, it is reasoned. Yet, we need to learn over and over again that God and God alone is the only One who gives blessing. He and He alone rules and will give his glory to no other. To learn this lesson over and over again is often why we go through prisons of circumstances and periods of darkness. God does not just want mental compliance here, but heartfelt submission and love. Are you learning this fundamental lesson?

We need to live fully in the moment. Os Hillman well says, “We must live each day to the fullest. We can’t live in the past or in the future. We must
live in the moment that God gives us right now. Our time of deliverance will come according to God's schedule. Meanwhile, we need to be faithful in doing what God has given us to do and be content in the place where He has placed us.” (Os Hillman, TGIF, Vol 2, Jan 12, 2017) It is hard to plow through life. But that is exactly what God wants of us in our prisons of circumstances. He is there, with us, beside us, guiding and guarding us, but we must go through these circumstances for his glory and our eventual good.

As a young boy, my family went through a terrible time of financial and emotional hardship. We lived on welfare for five long years, and they were tough and demanding on all of us. My father had gotten so ill that he could not work. Neighbors took mercy on us and at times provided milk and eggs. I searched the neighborhood streets for bottles to return to the store for money for bread. I had to learn to live fully in the moment. Looking back, it was a hard but good lesson.

Cherish the daily lessons in these times. Look for God’s surprising lessons in these dark days and times. Not that there is easy deliverance, but strength to go on day by day and season by season. These lessons can be used for the good and support of others down the road (Read 2 Corinthians 1). My desperate experiences as a boy helped me understand the desperate needs of inner city kids and adults when I worked for a time as a math teacher in a federally funded “model cities” program in the mid 1970s. A gang leader became a friend as I showed him the love of Jesus while understanding his prison of circumstances. God never wastes any of our seasons of life, and He uses lessons learned through difficult times for future good and expectant hope. So, cherish those lessons, though they are hard.
"I loathe my life; I will give free utterance to my complaint; I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me." (Job 10:1, 2) Why, God? I have a good friend who has been through a long stretch of intense suffering. She is a dedicated Christian mother and wife and church leader. She has been through multiple hospital stays, surgeries, diagnoses and prognoses. She continues to serve and praise God for His mercy in her life journey. But at the lowest points, she has asked, “Why, God?” And no answer has come her way. Multiple friends and pastors and counselors have met with her. When I read Job’s complaint, I hear and see this lady. I take note of the following.

Well intentioned, but worthless counselors. “As for you, you whitewash with lies; worthless physicians are you all. Oh that you would keep silent, and it would be your wisdom!” (13:4, 5) I sat with this lady when one of her long term doctors met with her and actually offered an apology for “missing something” in the past. She wept, was angry, accused him of not treating her well—all normal reactions, I thought. Zophar, the third of Job’s so-called counselors, speaks to Job of the mystery of divinity and sovereignty and still comes back to the theme of the other two friends—God does not afflict the guilty, unless you are guilty—“If iniquity is in your hand, put it far away, and let not injustice dwell in your tents. Surely then you will lift up your face without blemish; you will be secure and will not fear.” (11:14, 15) Be careful of well-intentioned but deficient spiritual diagnoses, or thinking you know God well enough to account for your friend’s suffering.
“Tell me what I have done to deserve this!”, this dear Christian lady said to me. “But I would speak to the Almighty, and I desire to argue my case with God.” (13:3) Job’s response to his three so-called counselors is to retort that he knows all that they know, that what they have told him is not unknown or hidden to him. The strain and pain of his affliction keeps wearing him down. He wants to meet with the Great Physician and state his case! I have kept the faith. I have prayed daily and offered the appropriate sacrifices for my family. I have been honest with all peoples. A study and meditation of Job’s complaints before God reveal the heart of a faithful follower of God, but one who does not get why he has been so afflicted. God’s final response will come, but in his time and in his way.

Lord, what a case study of intense suffering and asking You the “Why” questions. If I am a counselor or friend seeking to help someone in such pain and agony, please teach me through this story what not to say and how to listen well. Teach me your way more perfectly, O Lord!
A Word Directed Life
Psalm 119:89–96

“If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life. I am yours; save me, for I have sought your precepts.” (Ps119.92-94)

A Word directed life. Why do you read the Bible? The answer one gives to that question can reveal how we view the Scriptures and their impact on our daily lives. If the Bible is just an information source, or just a habit we have picked up as Christians seeking to obey God, or just something we study in Sunday School or small group settings then we have missed the life giving qualities they possess. To the Psalmist, the Word of God was life and health and strength for the daily grind and beyond.

The Word rescues us in times of difficulty and affliction. We usually think that this is the job or task of the Holy Spirit, but that Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” that directs us back again and again to the written Word of God. In times of unrest and affliction, God’s Word tells us this is not the end, that God has a destiny and plan for us beyond our present circumstances, and that God is fully in control of our lives. These truths are all in the Scriptures, if we will just search them out and lean upon them. As we “delight” in God’s Word we find strength and direction and meaning and purpose, even during and especially during times of affliction. What verse or verses come to your mind in these times?

The Word confirms our relationship to God. As we read and study and imbibe Scripture we find confirmation of our faith choices and of God’s grace in our lives. That Word becomes a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. It tells us what not to do and more importantly what to do for God
in this world and life. As we meditate on the different parts of Scripture we find that our trust in the Lord is not in vain or a mere dream or wish. We plead the promises of God for daily sustenance. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ we find new insights and truths missed as we review familiar Scriptures. That Word is a never ending fountain of truth and life. It puts everything and everyone in perspective.

And so, with the Psalmist, we sing — “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.” (Ps119.18)
Titles
By The Author
**The Two Talent Church: Truths for Health and Growth, 2010**

This is a biblical and practical guide on the eight universal natural church development qualities necessary for church health and growth. It is aimed for churches under 400 in attendance and is available as a copyrighted guide to those ministries who choose to proceed with an NCD survey.*

NOTE: All books are available from Lulu Press at lulu.com and many from Amazon at amazon.com as well as other book distributors.

(*NCD Survey required for purchase due to copyright restrictions. See www.carlshankconsulting.com for more information.)
Upfront and Indepth: Deeper Devotional Studies on Psalm 119, 2010 printing

This little exposition of Psalm 119 unlocks some of the deeper truths of the longest Psalm recorded in the Bible. Not for the tame, or for a quick read, this devotional study will challenge you to personally go places you have never visited within your own walk with God. Ebook edition also available.
Making Christianity Work: Letters and Lessons on Leadership, Theology and the Church, 2012

Insights shared by the author from letters, emails and various mentoring situations involving a number of lay and professional ministry leaders over an almost forty year span. Sections include “Feeling About God and Life,” “Knowing God Better,” “Faith and Culture,” “On Church Health and Growth,” “On Church Difficulties,” “On Preaching and Teaching,” and “On Theology.”
The In-between Book for Church Leaders: What You Need to Know and Do To Get To Where You Want To Be, 2013

For leaders of smaller to mid-sized churches seeking to go from where they are to where they may want to be. Sections include “Fighting the Three Ds,” “Attending to the Five Cs,” “Is This What God Really Wants?,” “The Role of Godly Complaining,” “Intentional Patience,” “Mentoring Not Modeling,” and “Stop Whining!”

A selection of daily devotionals for Christians wanting to know how to go deeper with God on very practical matters such as character, leadership and spirituality. Gleaned from the author’s daily devotionals.

This is a study guide for selected Psalms from the Bible. It’s fill-in-the blanks format is perfect for a small group study, or even a personal study of the Psalms. It references 67 of the most read Psalms and includes a special study of Psalm 1. A selection of “Psalms for Christmas” is included in the study. Leader’s Guide also available.


A Bible study and discussion guide on the Old Testament story of Jonah. Grace transforms everything it touches. It does not discriminate, based on race, tradition, church experience, selectability, preference, timing or worth. There is no sin so great that grace cannot conquer and transform. There is no life so lost that grace cannot find and reclaim it. There is no one so wicked or unworthy that grace cannot totally change and renovate. This study of Jonah shows God’s amazing, mighty and magnificent grace.
This study guide on the little book of Esther in the Old Testament surveys the lessons of God’s providence that the story invites. Rather than just a study of the Jewish celebration of Purim, this study draws us to adoring the sovereign God of all providence and wisdom.
Church Warnings! The Seven Churches of Revelation for Today, A Bible Study, 2017.

A Bible study with Teacher Notes and discussion guide on the seven churches cited in Revelation 2–3. Christ’s messages to the seven churches of Revelation are as relevant today as they were then. Ephesus-like churches who have “forsaken their first love,” and churches like Pergamum and Thyatira which tolerate false teachers and teaching, as well as churches like Sardis and Laodicea who are lackadaisical about the faith are in danger. Churches like Smyrna and Philadelphia who have endured much persecution are told to hold on and overcome. To all seven, Jesus says, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”
Going Deeper With God Every Day, 2017-2018

Going Deeper With God Every Day is a starter devotional guide for a new year. It covers the month of January, with daily readings and Study Guides for those who wish to dig deeper into God’s Word. Daily devotions for February through December are available online for those who purchase this starter volume.
Arguing for God: A Monograph on Logic and the Christian Faith, 2018

Arguing for God is a monograph discussing typical examples used in logic from a Christian viewpoint. It examines the philosophical basis for the conversational and academic use of logic and proposes a biblically based and God-centered approach to rational arguments.
Nehemiah was an unknown servant to a great ancient Near Eastern king, a cupbearer by trade. He was not a famous Jewish prophet, scribe or known leader. Yet, through this man, the torn down and burnt walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt in an amazing fifty-two days. He faced opposition and ridicule by the appointed leaders on the ground in and around Jerusalem. He had to deal with recalcitrant people, scared people and lazy, unproductive people. He had to conquer unfair business practices and engineer conflict resolution, all while facing enemies from a secular empire.
Following Hard After God: Discipleship and Faithfulness
In Our Day, 2018

I am going to contend in this book that faith in Jesus is simply and profoundly faithfulness to Jesus. Faithfulness is what God wants in a follower of Christ. What I am at the end of my faith journey is what God looks at, not my moments of greatness or excitement or visionary declarations. God’s measuring stick is faithfulness.
Winning Others For God: Effective Gospel Sharing, 2018

I must admit that for me, next to biblical preaching and teaching of the Word of God, is reaching others for Jesus Christ. This deep passion and desire has been birthed in me, no doubt, by my father who passed away when I was in college. One of his final sayings to me was, “Son, I know what I must do to be saved, but I am not ready for that.” He passed away a few months later.
Francis Schaeffer once said and wrote that we live and minister before a “watching world.” The non-Christian world often wants us to stumble and falter and fail. They want committed believers in Jesus Christ to betray their Lord and Savior. They watch for it, wait for it and then report it when it happens as evidence of moral and institutional failure and sickness. The real question for those daring to enter into full-time professional ministerial service for the Lord Jesus Christ is how do I not fall and finally fail my Lord and Savior? How do I make sure that my ministry years will be biblically fruitful and that I will remain faithful to Christ? How can I leave a legacy of godliness and faithfulness that others can follow safely and surely? This book explores some of the answers to those questions.

The three New Testament letters, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, are what we call the Pastoral Epistles. Timothy and Titus were young, energetic, trustworthy and effective as Christian workers and leaders. They were both called to difficult and challenging situations. Timothy was more shy than Titus, but both needed encouragement and instruction as how to handle false teachers and difficult questions of pastoral conduct and leadership.

This book is not an exhaustive commentary or study on the Pastoral Epistles. It is rather a close look at some of the major themes of these letters.
How The Christian Church Got To Where It Is:
A Sketch of Historical Theology to 1900, 2018 printing

Why study the history of doctrine? J.G. Vos gives three important reasons to do so. We can unduly romanticize the past. We can give it an ideal quality or character that it does not have nor deserve. The second reason is the problem of absolutizing of the past, seizing upon one period of time as normative and ideal for all future times. Luther and the Protestant Reformers were brave souls in their time, yet their admixture of church and state led to mass persecutions of those who did not agree with town fathers. Vos puts it this way — ecclesia reformata reformanda est — “The church having been reformed is to be further reformed.” Then there is the disdaining of the past, a prideful and noted trashing of past church councils and creeds and discussions. This book takes a “slice” of church history up to 1900 and succinctly examines how we got to where we are today.
We are in desperate danger of making Christianity fit our culture rather than transforming that culture by its radical, life changing message and demands. As Patrick Morley points out, “There is a God we want and there is a God who is. They are not the same God. Cultural Christianity means to seek the God we want instead of the God who is. By default, people become cultural Christians when they do not proactively choose to become biblical Christians.” A. W. Tozer put it this way: “The new cross does not slay the sinner, it redirects him. It gears him into a cleaner and jollier way of living and saves his self-respect. To the self-assertive it says, ‘Come and assert yourself for Christ.’ To the egotist it says, ‘Come and do your boasting in the Lord.’ To the thrill seeker it says, ‘Come and enjoy the thrill of Christian fellowship.’ The Christian message is slanted in the direction of the current vogue in order to make it acceptable to the public.”
People in Jesus are happy when they are at the end of their rope, when they feel they’ve lost what is most dear to them only to be embraced by the One most dear to them, when they are content with just who they are, when they have a good appetite for God, when they care, when they get their inside world put right, when they show people how to cooperate instead of compete and fight, when their commitment to God provokes persecution, and when people put them down or throw them out or speak lies about them to discredit them. (Matthew 5:3–11 The Message) Jesus understands fully the negatives in life, but his concern in these eight ethical lessons is to cheer us and tell us what real, lasting and genuine happiness is all about. That is the approach of this study of the beatitudes. (*Happyness is not a misspelling but intentional.)
This is not an exhaustive book, nor a polemic against my Arminian friends. Nor is this a treatise on systematic theology, though there are many theological points in it. It is rather a personal restating of truths that God has impressed on my heart and mind since my college years. Rather than being weakened by all the different ministries and situations in which I have served, they have been strengthened, deepened and made more real for me by a continual study of God’s Word and interactions with many Christians from a variety of theological backgrounds.
All of us are on a journey of faith. This journey toward God takes many forms and has many twists and turns. The journey may be planned or unplanned. It may be very intentional or rather chaotic and unstructured. It may involve others or not. Perhaps a religious organization, like a church, may be involved, or this journey may be very private and personal. Many want advice, help and partnership on the journey. Some don’t. But even those who say they do not want help would like some sort of “roadmap” on this faith journey toward God. This little book attempts to help you in your journey of faith by presenting what I have called a “faith bridge.”