

When the Going Gets Tough

[adversity]

Jesus said, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

John 16:33 NIV

Everyone knows that tragedy and heartache are an inevitable part of life. But when adversity strikes, that doesn't stop most people from asking, "Why me?"

It's human nature to feel that life should be fair, and so much suffering seems undeserved. The Bible affirms this hunch—life wasn't supposed to be this way. But in fallen creation, no one escapes trouble and loss.

The good news is that God's plan to set things right is already in motion. Through Jesus' suffering and death, the perfect life we long for on earth is available in heaven. And because of Him, we can find meaning and a redemptive purpose in our own suffering. Pain can be a means of refining you, as gold is refined by fire. Or it can provide an opportunity for God to speak His message of hope or do His healing work.

When trouble comes your way, don't ask, "Why me?" Instead seek God and His purpose in it. What does He want you to learn? How will this help you to grow or draw closer to Him? No one welcomes adversity, but it sets the stage for some of God's greatest work.

Troubles are often the tools by which God fashions us for better things.

Henry Ward Beecher

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Where's God When You Need Him?

[the Holy Spirit]

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness . . . [He] intercedes for us
with groans that words cannot express.*

Romans 8:26

Everyone has times of feeling so confused or lonely or weak when there seems nowhere to turn. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have someone to help at times like these? You do, of course. When Jesus announced to His closest friends that His time left with them was short, He promised to send another in His place—a comforter, a counselor, a helper. Jesus promised His followers the Holy Spirit.

The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit resides within anyone who welcomes Him. Think about that—the God who created the universe living inside of you! The implications are staggering. He is there to provide every good gift God has to give—guidance, power to overcome, comfort, healing, renewal, a source of genuine and unconditional love. He is there plumbing the depths of your soul, fully aware of your deepest needs.

There may be beautiful places where some feel especially close to God. There may be churches that have good reason to be known as "God's house." But if you're a follower of Jesus, you need to look no farther than your heart to find Him.

Men do not know God is here. What a difference it would make if
they knew.

A.W. Tozer

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Walking With Jesus

[Daily walk]

*Jesus said, "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but have the light of life."
John 8:12 NRSV*

Some people see the Christian life as a performance—do the right things, don't do the wrong ones. Others see it primarily as a test—learn the right answers.

The Christian life, however, is best viewed as a journey, a daily walk with Jesus. Along the road you'll learn many answers, and you will certainly change the way you act. But the central point is to follow Jesus—to trust Him as your guide, whether or not you understand everything or always know what to do.

The Bible describes many instances in which Jesus' closest followers didn't seem to understand Him or His words. But—with few exceptions—they stayed by His side. They didn't go about their own business, then try to find Him when they needed Him. They stuck by Him and let Him set their agenda. Because they did, He eventually used them to turn the world upside down.

Jesus has a plan and a mission for you too. Stick by His side—He'll be there when you need Him, and He'll make sure you arrive where He wants you to go.

If we behold Jesus going on before us step by step, we shall not go astray. . . . For He Himself is the way.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

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What Did You Expect?

[disappointment]

*The Lord says, "Those who hope in me will not be disappointed."
Isaiah 49:23*

Experiences with disappointment start early. You wake up to find that the tooth fairy forgot to visit. You don't get that pony you wanted for your birthday. Your dad forgets to pick you up from T-ball practice.

Whether caused by unrealistic expectations, others letting you down, or your own inadequacies and mistakes, disappointments are inevitable—and they often stab deeper and ache longer as you get older.

Enough disappointments can make you cynical, dashing your hopes for a truly happy life. But having faith in God means there's always reason for hope. Imagine Jesus' followers' disappointment when He was arrested and put to death. They had no idea their hopes for a king and deliverer were only being fulfilled in a bigger and better way—that He would rise to establish a kingdom open to all people of all times.

When life brings disappointment, it's often a precursor to God doing something even better than you expected. You may need to look at your situation differently. You may need to be patient to see it. But if you let God draw near in these times, a blessing is sure to follow.

There are more tears shed over answered prayers than over
unanswered prayers.
St. Theresa of Avila

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Can You Hear Him?

[listening]

When you go to the house of God, go near to listen.

Ecclesiastes 5:1 NIV

Do you ever wish God talked to people the way He did in the old days? The Bible is full of stories in which He spoke out loud to people. Why doesn't that seem to happen anymore?

It may be that God has never spoken audibly very often—that the instances in the Bible just seem common because they're concentrated in a relatively few pages. It could also be that if most people today heard God's voice, they would be more likely to visit a psychiatrist than talk back to Him!

But if you read the Scriptures closely, you'll see that God has always communicated in a wide range of ways—through spiritual leaders, visions and dreams, circumstances, inward convictions. Probably the most common method—then and now—and the one by which the reliability of the others can best be measured is through the Scriptures.

If you don't hear God talking to you, could it be that you don't expect to? Instead of making your prayers a monologue, take time to listen. What is He saying as you read Scripture, listen those around you, or attentively await his voice within the silence of your heart? However He chooses to speak, rest assured He has a message for you.

[God] is more anxious to speak to us than we are to hear Him.

John White

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The Strongest Force in the Universe **[God's love]**

Neither death, nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:38-39 NRSV

If you were to judge by the number of celebrity break-ups on the cover of supermarket tabloids, you'd be tempted to think that love is among the weakest forces there is.

Even if your experiences are a bit more positive, you know that love between people can be fragile—requiring commitment and nurturing to survive. In fact, whether between lovers, friends, or members of the same family, human love is no stronger than the often frail people who express it.

God's love, in contrast, is the strongest force in the universe. It has made good men out of murderers and slave traders. It has enabled addicts to start new lives, sustained souls in the darkest prisons, and moved the wealthy to give up all they have to serve the poor.

Most importantly, however, it drove Jesus to the cross to pay for the sins of wayward humanity. Then it raised Him from the grave, conquering death for all who would believe in Him. No matter what life brings, remember God's infinite love for you. Nothing can stand against it or tear you from its grip.

Love has power that dispels death; charm that conquers the enemy.

Kahlil Gibran

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Never Give Up! **[perseverance]**

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair.

2 Corinthians 4:8 NIV

There are many ways to succeed at something, but there's only one sure way to fail—quit trying. Of course, it's one thing to believe this; it's another live like you do. When faced by trials or difficulties, it's easy to get tired and discouraged and wonder if you can continue—or if it's even worth the attempt.

To persevere through difficult times you must first believe that your efforts are worthwhile. In fact, quitting makes sense if what you're doing is a waste of time or is leading to destructive results. But if your goals line up with God's values and His desires for you, then you can be certain your efforts are not in vain.

Persevering also requires the strength to do it. But if God wants you to do something, it doesn't matter if you don't feel up to the task. He delights in showing His strength in our weakness.

When you're tempted to give up or look for an easy way out, resolve to hold on to God and stay on the path He's laid before you. He's promised rewards greater than anyone can imagine for those who stick with Him till the end.

God does not give us overcoming life—He gives us life as we overcome.

Oswald Chambers

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Amazing Grace [God's grace]

Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.
Romans 5:20 NIV

Imagine that your boss asks you to bring him a cup of coffee. When you walk into his office, you "accidentally" trip and spill it all over him—as a payback for making others wait on him and for accepting so much credit for all your hard work.

After a few days of relentless guilt, you resolve to go in, admit the whole thing, and accept the consequences. He listens patiently to your confession, then hands you an envelope. Instead of your walking papers or even a dry cleaning bill, you find he's given you a promotion—along with a generous bonus check.

Could you accept it? If you feel you couldn't, you can understand why God's grace is so hard for many people to embrace. When we confess our sins to Him, instead of the punishment we deserve, we get grace—forgiveness plus all the blessings and privileges of being God's child. Many people are more comfortable believing that they can earn God's favor, but this is simply impossible—we've all metaphorically spilled the coffee. You may feel motivated afterwards to show Him your gratitude, but the offer must be accepted as a gift.

God's grace sounds too good to be true—but accepting it is the key to His kingdom.

*In the end there are only two things to say: "Forgive me" and
"Thank you."
Rich Mullins*

Praying Like You Mean It [prayer]

Jesus said, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for
in prayer."

Matthew 21:22 NLT

Prayer is a natural human impulse. A person may never darken a church door or could even profess to be an atheist, but when life and limb are at risk—and there is no one else around—his or her spirit almost inevitably cries to God for help.

The thing that separates true believers from others is whether they really expect it to make a difference. God promises to answer prayers offered in faith—which basically means believing that you're talking to someone who not only cares what you're saying but can do something about it.

When you pray do you really expect an answer? Once you tell God about something or make a request, do you trust that He's heard you-or do you get up and go on as if nothing had happened?

Prayer isn't a last-ditch measure for when nothing else works—or even a means to have your daily wish list fulfilled. It's a conversation between you and your loving Father. When you talk to Him like He's really there, you will find plenty of reasons to believe that He is.

*We look upon prayer as a means for getting something the
Bible idea of prayer is that we may get to know God.*

Oswald Chambers

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God Shows Up [Jesus]

[Jesus Christ] is the image of the invisible God.
Colossians 1:15 NIV

Do you ever think that if God would just show Himself more clearly it would be easier to believe in and trust Him?

God knows this desire, and history itself is divided by His effort to address it. The Bible says that God took on human form when Jesus was born. Like the God who's hidden from view, Jesus isn't easy to understand or describe. But some of His noteworthy characteristics should be reassuring to anyone longing to see God.

For example, no one who had a close encounter with Him left unchanged. Though some find the idea of God boring, Jesus created interest and commotion wherever He went. He attracted children like a magnet, and He wasn't repulsed by sinners. His heart went out to the grieving, crippled, and outcast-and He usually sent them away rejoicing. Finally, He always knew what to do in a difficult spot. Whether it was replying to angry adversaries or dealing with a hungry throng, He was quick with a surprising solution.

Jesus not only shows the kind of God most would want to believe in; He shows one who's difficult not to trust.

What Christ brought to light in the unfolding of the Eternal Gospel is the Face, the personal aspect, the revelation of the heart . . . of God.
Rufus Jones

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Sweet Surrender

[surrender]

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD . . . If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land.
Isaiah 1:18 NIV

Toward the end of any good movie involving war or police or sheriff's posses there's a scene everyone loves where the good guys triumph and the bad guys—if there are any left—surrender. No one wants to waste good money and two hours of their lives watching a film where the good guys give up in the end.

Here's where these feelings get us in trouble: In the most important battle of our lives, we are the bad guys. Everyone wants to run his or her own life, but the only path to eternal life—the only way to experience life as it was meant to be lived—is to surrender control to God.

Surrender seems bitter, but if you realize you are on the wrong side and your opponent is the good guy, it can be an experience of release and rebirth. Whether it's your initial decision to put your life in God's hands or whether it's one the many points of letting go after trying to resume control or finding a new area you hadn't let go in the first place, surrendering to God is a new beginning, not an end.

To gain that which is worth having, it may be necessary to lose everything else.
Bernadette Devlin

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Joining the Team [discipleship]

Jesus said, "Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."
Luke 14:27 NASB

Jesus has always fascinated the masses. Whether traveling the hills and highways of the Holy Land or as the subject of a modern feature film, crowds have flocked to see Him.

Despite His widespread popular appeal, however, relatively few have been willing to follow Him as disciples. You can appreciate Jesus' charisma and power without it ever affecting your life. But being a disciple means being fully devoted to Him personally—to learning all He has to teach and living out the implications.

It's the difference between watching your favorite athlete from the stands and joining his team. Being on the team requires commitment and hard work. It means learning to play by new rules and letting go of old ways of doing things. But it means being a part of what's really important—the action—and personally sharing in the glory of the victories.

Jesus has always been looking for followers, not fans. You can admire and respect Jesus, you can even allow yourself to be called by His name, but unless you're part of His team, you're missing out on the only game that really matters.

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found lacking. It has been found difficult and left untried.
G.K. Chesterton

Righting Your Wrongs [atonement]

For Christ also died for sin once for all, the just for the unjust, so
that he might bring us to God.

1 Peter 3:18 NASB

When you let people down, your first impulse is probably to try to make it up to them. You were late for dinner despite promising to be home on time, so you bring flowers. You hurt your friend's feelings, so you take him or her to lunch.

But your good deeds don't really erase the effects of the original offense. The other person still must forgive you. It's a similar situation with God. When you sin—when you rebel against God or break His moral code—it's natural to hope your good behavior can cancel the effects of your offense. But it can't.

Our sins cut us off from God. Since God is the source of life, being cut off means death. Jesus came to reconnect us with God. By dying on our behalf, Jesus took the effects of our sin upon Himself. By rising He made life in God available once again.

God cares a great deal about how you act, but don't count on your good deeds to make up for your sins. You need His forgiveness, and He offers it to anyone who trusts Jesus as the way to eternal life.

*Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life.
Ancient liturgical prayer*

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God's Story in Your Life

[Bible]

God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true . . . for correcting our mistakes . . . for making our lives whole again.

2 Timothy 3:16 NIV

The Bible has sold more copies and been translated into more languages than any other book. It has been preserved with greater care than any other ancient text. And there are more resources devoted to spreading its influence and helping people understand it than ever before.

But none of this matters much if you don't discover its riches for yourself. The Bible is the record of God's interaction with His people. But as you read it in faith, you find its stories come alive in you. You become the Israelites being led out of bondage toward the Promised Land. You cry out in distress and sing God's praises with King David in the Psalms. Best of all, you meet the author Himself as you follow Jesus with the disciples in the Gospels.

It would be hard—some would say impossible—to know God without the Bible. But if you read it in faith, you will find that God not only knows you, He's led others through situations like yours to a glorious conclusion.

A Bible that's falling apart probably belongs to somebody who isn't.

Christian Johnson