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**Truth In Love**



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## CHAPTER 1

# GOD WITH US

Written by **Brad McNutt**

### INTRODUCTION

“So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’” (Matthew 1:22-23). Words seem insufficient to convey the significance of this truth to our minds. Just as God had promised to be with Ahaz and Israel, He is now with us in a more significant battle to win on our behalf over sin. Having accomplished that victory, He promised His disciples, “...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19).

The message communicated above, contained within the bookends of Matthew’s gospel, is central to the message of Scripture. When surveying the various themes and motifs of God’s revelation, numerous images can be traced from beginning to end. One of those themes is the subject of this study: God and His presence with His people. When tracking this theme throughout the story of Scripture, there are many significant stops along the way. However, space would not let us look at each stop in detail. Therefore, attention will be given to the essential markers to learn this message: God will stop at nothing to be with us!

### GOD’S FACE IN EDEN

The first stop of this investigation begins where all investigations must, at the beginning. The Bible begins by powerfully illustrating God's creation of the world from nothing (Genesis 1; Hebrews 11:3). On the first three days, God creates spaces (Genesis 1:1-13). Then, He spends the next three days filling those spaces with the appropriate inhabitants (Genesis 1:14-30). While Genesis 1 gives an account of the creation of the cosmos, Genesis 2 gives more details concerning God's creation and relationship with His crown of creation, humanity.

First, He forms man from the dust and gives man's body the kiss of life, thus making him live (Genesis 2:7). God then proceeds to plant the Garden of Eden for man to live (Genesis 2:8-14) and to work (Genesis 2:15) and to eat (Genesis 2:16-17). This is followed by God creating woman and performing the first marriage ceremony (Genesis 2:18-25). As Genesis 2 closes, there is perfect harmony. Adam and Eve share no secrets and harbor no resentment toward one another. It appears that the first couple lives in peace with the animals and vegetation of the earth. Ultimately, they are at peace with the God who made them.

This peace with God may have even involved face-to-face fellowship. After Adam and Eve sin, the Bible says something interesting, "And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day..." (Genesis 3:8). While this statement is made after their sin, there is a way of reading this text that gives the impression that God coming down to the couple to commune in the cool of the day was not a singular event. It would seem that this was a relatively routine experience. However, what was

not routine was that Adam and Eve were now hiding from the God with whom they once walked and communed (Genesis 3:8-11). This interpretation may be strengthened by the fact that part of their punishment was to be expelled from the garden, away from the presence of God and the Tree of Life (Genesis 3:22-24).

While the above reading of God's walking with man in the garden may be debated, one thing has never been debated: God was with His people in a special way as they lived in the paradise of Eden. Sin forever changed that reality. It is undoubtedly true that God would continue to be with His people, but as Genesis illustrates, it would be different. Thus, the first major stop on this theological tour has the reader with God in Eden only to find himself outside of Eden. From this point forward, God will begin working toward returning humanity to His presence. Remember, God will stop at nothing to be with us!

### **THE FATHER BEHIND THE VEIL**

The next stop of this investigation finds the reader in the book of Exodus, where God saved Israel from Egypt (Exodus 12-14) and made them His people (Exodus 19-24). As God's people, one of the many things that would set them apart was that God would be with them in their midst (Exodus 33:15-16). In fact, God states His desire to be among His people clearly, "And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8). However, His presence could not be among them in the same way that it was in the garden.

Almost half of Exodus is dedicated to the details concerning the design and construction of the Tabernacle.

When everything was completed, then God took up residence in the Tabernacle. "Then the cloud covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tabernacle of meeting, because the cloud rested above it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exodus 40:34-35). More specifically, His presence would dwell behind the veil of the Most Holy Place on the Mercy Seat between the cherubim (Exodus 25:22; Numbers 7:89). Thus, God was with His people again, but not in the same way as before.

Many years later, Solomon would erect a more permanent structure than the Tabernacle known as the Temple. David desired to build a temple for God but was refused and told that his son would build the Temple (2 Samuel 7:7:1-17). A significant portion of the record of Solomon's reign is dedicated to the construction and dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 6-8). This structure was extravagant and befitting to honor the presence of God. Upon its completion, God declared His approval by once again residing with His people. "And it came to pass, when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priest could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD" (1 Kings 8:10-11).

As history progressed, the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25). Upon returning from captivity, the first of the returned exiles were tasked with building a new temple (Ezra 3), which was completed after some difficulties several years later (Ezra 6:13-18). It was a renovated and expanded version of this temple that



stood in Jesus' day (John 2:20). Therefore, whether in the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, Zerubbabel's Temple, or Herod's Temple, God was with His people.

Although God was with His people in these temporary and transient structures, it was not without its challenges. There were significant restrictions in getting to God's direct presence. Specific individuals were never allowed to enter the Tabernacle or Temple (Deuteronomy 23:1-8). In later versions of the Temple, Gentiles were granted a court in which to pray but could go no further without the punishment of death. Beyond that court, there was a court for the Jewish women to pray, which seems to have been synonymous with the treasury (John 8:20). Further into the Temple precinct was the court of Jewish men who would pray as did the Pharisee and Tax Collector in Jesus' famous parable (Luke 18:10-14). The next step would be to enter the Temple's Holy Place, where only the priests could serve (Luke 1:8-9). Last of all was the Most Holy Place, where the presence of God dwelled. Only one person, the High Priest, one day a year could enter His presence to offer sacrifices for his sins and the people's sins (Leviticus 16:1-34).

With this second stop in investigating God's presence with His people, God has returned to dwell among them, but only in a restricted sense. Although it was restricted, the people of God loved the Tabernacle/Temple dearly. At times, they used it as a magic wand to ward off evil (Jeremiah 7:1-11). However, the faithful of God always loved it because it was the place of God's dwelling (Psalm 27:4; 84:1-12).

## THE SON WITH US

Now, our study is beginning to intensify. The story and images of the Tabernacle and Temple are about to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. In John's prologue, Jesus is introduced as the eternal creating God who came down to humanity to reveal the Father to the world (John 1:1-18). Initially, John identifies Jesus as the new Tabernacle when he writes, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). It has long been noted that the term translated "dwelt" in this text could and maybe should be translated "tabernacled." Considering this truth, consider the message of Jesus' incarnation: God is now with us in the flesh as the new Tabernacle.

As John continues presenting Jesus to his audience, he identifies Jesus as the new Temple. Upon investigation by the Jewish officials for cleansing the temple, Jesus responds, "...Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). John then clears any confusion by writing, "But He was speaking of the temple of His body" (John 2:21). Thus, Jesus is the new Temple.

These two images converging in the person of Jesus Christ present a glorious truth. The Tabernacle and Temple represented the presence of God among His people. However, as the previous section details, God was with His people but in a very restricted way. Now, in Christ, the God behind the veil put on flesh and walked among people. People did not come to visit Him in the Tabernacle or Temple anymore. He came to them and walked into their lives. Jesus allowed Himself to be touched, and He

touched people. Christ began a new day and an intensification of God dwelling with His people. This is why, upon His death, the veil in the temple was torn asunder (Matthew 27:51). The writer of Hebrews interprets that event as indicating the way to God was now open (Hebrews 10:19-22). Therefore, this third stop of biblical investigation has seen a significant change in God's presence with His people.

### **THE SPIRIT IN US**

This is now the fourth major stop of biblical investigation. In this area of consideration, God's presence with us is only intensified more. The truth of this landmark is that God is not only with us but is in us! No matter a person's view on the nature of the indwelling of God's Spirit, all views have in common the biblical fact that the Spirit lives within Christians as the people of God.

The Bible unequivocally declares that the Holy Spirit dwells within the Christian. "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory" (Ephesians 1:13-14). "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? (1 Corinthians 6:19). The above texts illustrate an intensification of God's presence with His people as He dwells in them individually.

Further, the Spirit also dwells in the church collectively. Paul wrote, "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If

anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). As His Temple on earth, the people of God should be places where people can meet God. This fourth stop of investigation is where Christians currently are in the plan of God being with His people. It is the next and final phase that we long to see.

### **GOD'S FACE IN THE NEW EDEN**

In this final stop of investigation, it becomes apparent that the old storytelling axiom is true, "All good stories are circular." Just as every good story concludes in a way that explains and illuminates everything that came before it, so does the Bible in its conclusion; the final step of the investigation shows that the fellowship enjoyed in the garden by our first parents is once again restored and will never be fractured again.

As the church enters Heaven, God declares these words, "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3). Notice that God is with His people forever! His people will see His face (Revelation 22:4) in a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1), where a river flows (Revelation 22:1), and the tree of life is present and has multiplied (Revelation 22:2). God is dwelling with His people forever in Heaven! God is with us!

### **CONCLUSION**

One could truthfully claim that the message of the Bible is that God is with us! He was with our parents in the

Garden of Eden. Later, He was with the Jews in the Temple and Tabernacle structures. Even later, He was with them in the person of Jesus Christ. Now, He is with us through His Spirit and dwells within us until we are at home in Heaven with Him forever. This message must be continually preached to us, especially when times are hard. If God moved heaven and earth and stopped at nothing to be with His people, would there ever be a moment when God is not with us?

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## CHAPTER 2

# IN TEMPTATION

Written by **Justin Rogers**

An ancient Christian proverb reports “a man untested is unproven” (*Didascalia Apostolorum* 2.8). Temptation and testing are biblical ways of describing how God seeks to “prove” the faith of His people (James 1:3; 1 Peter 1:7). While the modern Christian tradition regards temptation as almost entirely negative, the Bible often presents temptation as positive, for it offers God’s people an opportunity to overcome by faith. In this sense, the Bible’s focus on testing is instructive. If we surrender to God’s will, accept God’s help, and maintain our resolve, we can overcome. In this essay we will first discuss what temptation is, then advance to an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 10:13. Finally, we will draw conclusions about the value of temptation in our lives.

### INTRODUCTION

#### What Temptation Involves

Three things are necessary for temptation to occur. First, a standard must exist. There must be a law or generally known, acceptable pattern of proper behavior. I knew as a child that ice cream before dinner was not allowed. The standard was clear, and I understood it. Second, a circumstance for temptation must exist. The ice cream must be available to me, or it cannot be a temptation. Oklahoma law may prohibit whaling, but since there are no whales in Oklahoma, no one can be tempted to hunt them there. Or suppose I am the rare child who doesn’t like ice cream. I will not be tempted by my uncle’s

illicit offer of homemade vanilla. Finally, a rational, autonomous subject must exist. Temptation implies a choice between alternatives. Assuming I am capable of making rational decisions, I can choose to indulge my desires and have the ice cream, or I can dutifully refuse it and obey my mother.

We can observe the three elements of temptation in God's instruction to Moses. "Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not'" (Exodus 16:4). We find here the statement of a standard (the daily "quota"), a circumstance (daily "bread from heaven" to be collected), and a subject (the people). The "test" or temptation is whether the Israelites will trust God and stick to the divine instruction (Exodus 16:16). Of course, the people failed the test and became guilty of sin (Exodus 16:17-21, 27-29). Temptation is a test as to whether we will choose to follow the will of God, which is usually the more difficult option, or whether we will choose to follow what seems best to us, which results in our guilt and punishment.

### **Temptation Is A Test**

In modern English, we like to ascribe to God "testing" and to Satan "temptation," but in so doing we create distinctions not found in Scripture. The primary Hebrew and Greek words for temptation and testing are the same (Hebrew: *nissah*; Greek: *peirazō*). So, English translations of the Bible are clearer than the underlying biblical languages they purport to translate. From an original language perspective, every temptation is a test.

Let us imagine a student taking an exam. The teacher has prepared the exam, but the exam is neither good nor bad. It only becomes good or bad when the student approaches it either prepared or unprepared. To the unprepared student the test is bad, but to the prepared student it is good. Those prepared are grateful for the test because it gives them the opportunity to study and learn. The goodness or badness of the test is determined by what the student does with the opportunity. The test is a temptation to do well or to do poorly.

The same thing is true of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:15-17). The tree is the basis of temptation, for God instructs Adam not to eat of the tree. So, we have a standard of behavior in God's revealed word. We also have circumstances that make that standard into a temptation. Adam must live in the garden with the tree. Every day he is confronted with the choice of whether to indulge his curiosity and eat. Finally, we have the subject, Adam himself, fully capable of choosing good over evil. Notice that the tree is just a tree; it is morally neutral, neither inherently bad nor inherently good. It is not the tree of good and evil, but of the *knowledge of good and evil*.

Knowledge in this context means experience. Evil is created in the eating, for by getting a taste of rebellion, the thrill is impossible to forget. Each new experience of sin makes the next temptation harder to overcome (cf. 2 Samuel 11). In fact, the experience of evil always diseases the memory to forget the previous good. The student who cheats on the test feels guilty the first time, but may have no qualms at all on the twentieth occasion. Once the seal is broken and sin is introduced into a righteous life, guilt is



the only brake. Once the conscience is seared and guilt no longer a factor, God's blessings are forgotten. To a degree, God can help us to reconstruct our lives, but they will never be the same. Sin changes us for the worse, and in this sense we "die" (Genesis 2:17). Temptation is a test. Will we trust God and live, or will we refuse him and die? (cf. Isaiah 1:19-20).

## **PART II: AN EXEGESIS OF 1 CORINTHIANS 10:13**

1 Corinthians 10 is a warning against the arrogance of infallibility. Some Christians may be inclined to think they are incapable of sin because they have been called by God, redeemed by God, and saved by God. "Once saved, always saved," they may think. Paul counters such an attitude with the example of Israel in the Wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:1-11). Like contemporary Christians, the ancient Israelites were called out of Egypt, redeemed from slavery, and saved by grace to become a special people. Yet, "with most of them God was not well pleased" (1 Corinthians 10:5). Paul draws this powerful comparison to a close with a striking warning: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (v. 12). Then he switches to words of comfort. If one falls, he need not stay down. There is hope in God's continued presence to save. Paul writes, "No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). We will isolate three lessons from this verse: (1) temptations are common, (2) God is faithful, and (3) we can escape.

### **TEMPTATIONS ARE COMMON**

In 1 Corinthians 10:1-12 Paul has a purpose, to insist that sin is deadly dangerous. However, he softens his message with a note of understanding in 1 Corinthians 10:13. Paul declares that “no temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man.” The phrase “common to man” renders a single Greek word, which in other contexts is rendered simply “human” (*anthrōpinos*). Paul is saying two things. First, temptation is part of the human experience, and second, resistance is possible.

First, temptation is simply part of being “human.” There are two points we can draw from this statement. First, every human is tempted by the same things in the same ways. The ancient Stoic philosophers categorize all offenses into one of four classes: (1) desire (Greek: *epithumia*; Latin: *libido*), (2) grief (Greek: *lupē*; Latin: *aegritudo*), (3) fear (Greek: *phobos*; Latin: *metus*), and (4) pleasure (Greek: *hēdonē*; Latin: *laetitia*). Every temptation can be classified in relation to one of these four cardinal “passions.” Modern psychology only furthers the Stoic insight. The reason therapists can treat the human condition is that human disorders are common. One can learn about the varieties of aberrant behavior and how to treat them. Humans operate according to established patterns of behavior, and the troubles we encounter are limited.

Further, no one is tempted in an exceptional way. It is the tendency of those who suffer to withdraw into the perceived safety of self-loathing. They convince themselves that no one understands, that no one has ever suffered as they are suffering. They take pride in being the victim of circumstances, or of someone else’s mistreatment, or even

of God's wrath. Yet, 1 Corinthians 10:13 teaches us that temptations are not exceptional. Temptations are part of the shared human experience. The philosopher Epictetus tells of a Roman gentleman who was unjustly stripped of everything he had. When he requested that Epictetus write a letter on his behalf, naturally the philosopher shared some of the man's tragic biography. When the Roman gentleman read the letter, he responded in anger, "I wanted your help, not your pity; nothing bad has happened to me!" (Epictetus, *Discourses* 1.9.27-28). The man resisted the low-hanging fruit of victimhood, refusing to view himself as the special target of some sinister power. By viewing himself as unexceptional, he had the courage to face the world chin up and shoulders squared (cf. Matthew 5:38-48). Everyone encounters temptation, but no one is defined by it. Our choices, not our circumstances, make us who we are.

Second, Paul's statement that "temptation is human" means the playing field is level. If I am human and temptation is human, then I ought to be able to resist. Indeed, this is the case. James writes, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). While temptations may come from demonic forces, the demons have no control over human behavior. We have the power to resist. Christ has conquered the demons (Luke 10:17; Colossians 2:15). We thus can proudly proclaim that "we are super-conquerors through Christ" who has achieved a total victory (Romans 8:37). Temptation holds no sway over us.

This is not the way many people think. They do not want to believe they can resist temptation. They would rather reject personal responsibility and construe

themselves as helpless victims. In 1981 the town of Brookfield, Connecticut witnessed the first and only attempt in legal history to use demonic possession as a criminal defense. In what became known as the “devil made me do it” case, 19-year-old defendant Arne Cheyenne Johnson cited demon possession as the reason why he murdered his landlord, 40-year-old Alan Bono. Of course, the judge disallowed all of the evidence cited in favor of demon possession, provoking Johnson to change his plea to self-defense. He was convicted of manslaughter and was released from prison in 1986 having served only five years. The trial is the subject of a 2023 Netflix documentary entitled *The Devil on Trial*. Johnson tried to use a defense that simply does not hold up to rational scrutiny. We are free moral agents, and Satan cannot have any power over us that we do not allow him to have. Temptation is human, not satanic.

### **GOD IS FAITHFUL**

The next part of 1 Corinthians 10:13 is that “God is faithful.” Preachers spend a great deal of time discussing our faith in God but comparatively little time discussing His faith in us. Yet, Scripture repeatedly teaches that God is faithful to His children. God is faithful in keeping His promises. As the Hebrews author encourages, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). God is faithful in helping us to avoid temptation. “But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one” (2 Thessalonians 3:3). God is faithful to forgive when we fall. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Even in our moments of weakness, when we turn

away from God, He is faithful. "If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

The faithfulness of God is a necessary entailment of His nature as witnessed in His immutability. Immutability means unchangeableness. God does not (and cannot) change. He is perfect goodness, perfect love, and perfect faithfulness. Change requires one to move from lesser to greater, or from greater to lesser. Since God is perfect, He can suffer no diminishment and can admit no improvement. God declares, "For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob" (Malachi 3:6). The implication is that God would have consumed the children of Israel long ago if He were capable of change. Since He isn't capable of change, the people are preserved in accord with His promise. Likewise, James declares, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning" (James 1:17). It is the nature of God to give good gifts. He cannot give bad ones or else He would violate His nature.

God has expressed His faithfulness through Jesus Christ. We did not (and cannot) earn God's grace, but even in our helplessness, God sent Jesus to die for us (Romans 5:6-8). We have the advantage of a Savior who understands our temptations since He too was tempted (Hebrews 4:15). As the Hebrews author puts it, "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (Hebrews 2:18). I used to enjoy rock climbing occasionally, and I was fortunate to have friends who climbed lead. Because I was less experienced than they were, they would sometimes see me struggling

on the rock face and lend a hand. Jesus does the same for us. Because He has led the way, He is able to lend a hand.

## **WE CAN ESCAPE**

Last of all, human beings can escape temptations. God helps in two ways. First, He “will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able,” and second, He “will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” It is crucial that we recognize the way of escape is provided along “with the temptation.” In other words, God does not remove us from trials; He allows us to be tempted. Like a good father who refuses to rescue his children from every stressful situation, God knows that struggle makes us stronger.

Abraham suffered a temptation when God “tested” him in the matter of Isaac (Genesis 22:1). What was the test? Since his call in Genesis 12, God had promised him a son (12:2, 7; 13:15-16; 15:5, 13, 18; 17:7-10). In Genesis 21, Abraham receives the son of promise, Isaac. When in Genesis 22 God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son, he is most certainly putting Abraham’s loyalty to the test. Who does Abraham love more: God or Isaac? Has Abraham served God for all these years to get the reward of a cherished child, or does Abraham serve God for God’s own sake? The very foundation of Abraham’s faith is on trial. Does he serve God for what he receives in return, or is he so completely changed by his faith that he will follow God even when it seems to make no sense?

Ancient Jewish readers were bothered by Genesis 22. They assign responsibility for the test to Mastema (another name for Satan), and they distance God from the

story (see Jubilees 17:16). However, the Bible does not do this. Apparently, Scripture does not regard testing to be out of step with the character of a supremely good God. God is good, and His tests are always fair, but human beings can fail His tests. James declares, "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:13-14). Note the emphasis on personal responsibility. Just like the student who approaches the examination unprepared, so human beings must be prepared for each temptation.

Implicit in Genesis 22 is the notion that God helps Abraham in the two ways Paul outlines. First, Abraham was "able to bear" the temptation, great and shocking as it seems to us. Modern readers tend to struggle with God asking Abraham to sacrifice his son, not to mention Abraham's following through with it. Perhaps we struggle because we do not understand the magnitude of Abraham's faith. He was simply able to bear greater temptations than you and I can even fathom. A famous passage from the Talmud might be translated, "The greater the man, the greater the temptation to evil" (*b. Sukkot* 52a). In other words, the degree of one's temptation matches the degree of his faith. Indeed, it is instructive that God asks no one else to sacrifice a son. By comparison, Moses would not even circumcise his son (Exodus 4:24-26). The only other biblical person comparable to Abraham is God Himself at the cross of Christ.

Second, Abraham trusted that God would provide some "way of escape" so that he might be able to endure.

Genesis 22:5 reveals a tiny detail that teaches much about the faith of Abraham. To his servants the great patriarch declares, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." That "we" was understood by the Hebrews author to reveal Abraham's faith, for he believed "that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense" (Hebrews 11:19). Even though it seemed to Abraham that he would indeed need to kill his son, he also believed the promise that "in Isaac your seed shall be called" (Genesis 21:12). Somehow, some way, God would keep His promise to preserve Isaac. Trust in the divine promise offered Abraham the way of escape he needed to remain faithful under trial.

## **CONCLUSION**

In a world where humans are regarded as totally autonomous, answerable only to themselves, one would assume our society would be obsessed with personal accountability. However, the opposite seems true. We are quick to claim our "rights" and take credit when things go right, but we are slow to accept blame when things go wrong. We assume our mistakes are not our fault, but God or the devil or someone else is responsible. Yet Scripture is clear that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10). We will be held accountable for how we hold up in temptation. Thanks be to God that we serve a Lord and Master who never leaves us in temptation, but faithfully walks alongside us to give aid, mitigate the pressure, and open a door of escape.



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## CHAPTER 3

# IN DOUBT

Written by **Kyle Butt**

### INTRODUCTION

When my oldest son was about a year old, he began to have a cough. At first, my wife Bethany and I assumed it was a cold, but after several days, the cough did not go away. Not only did it not go away, but it gradually grew worse and worse. I remember lying on the floor of his bedroom one night while he was sleeping in his crib and he coughed all night. As I listened, I timed his coughs that were coming roughly every 3-5 seconds (as I recall), all night long. About 20 coughs per minute, 120 coughs an hour, 1200 coughs in a ten-hour night. It did not stop. We took him to every specialist we could. One doctor thought it might be chronic ear infections, so we put tubes in his ears, which did nothing. We bought a breathing machine and every night gave him a treatment of Pulmicort, a breathing medicine. I remember the little-dragon shaped mask he would wear as he sat and read a book breathing deeply from his mask strapped around his head. If we missed only a few days of his treatments, the cough would immediately start back. It did not quit. We would have to explain to people that he was not sick, he just had a perpetual asthmatic cough. We did everything in our power to cure his cough. It took him almost a decade to grow out of it. Thankfully, it was not life-threatening, mostly just annoying.

I thought about my son as I read the story in Mark 9:14-29 of the demon possessed boy and his father. In this

episode of Jesus' ministry, He and His three closest followers had been on the Mountain of Transfiguration, and they were rejoining the other apostles. As Jesus drew near, He saw a large multitude of people arguing with the apostles. When He inquired about the cause of the dispute, a man stepped forward and explained that he had brought his demon-possessed son to the apostles in order to be healed, but they could not cast the evil spirit out. When Jesus saw the boy, the Bible explains that "the spirit convulsed him, and he fell on the ground and wallowed, foaming at the mouth" (Mark 9:20). When Jesus asked the father how long this had been going on, the man said it had been happening to the son "from childhood," indicating that it had been many years. What's more, the father explained, "And often he has thrown him both into the fire and into the water to destroy him" (Mark 9:22).

Let us pause here in the telling of the story and think about this distraught father. What do you think this man and his family had already tried in order to heal their son. No doubt they had visited every doctor and holy man within many miles, grasping at any hope that some new treatment or invocation would at last remove the evil spirit. Notice that this was no mere annoyance. This demon often attempted to kill the boy. How vigilant the family must have been in order to keep him alive this long. What measures had they taken to keep him safe? Did the mother and father alternate staying awake at night to watch and make sure the child did not come to harm? When they traveled, did they make sure the boy was not near water that would allure the demon to throw him in? How many times do you think they paid a "professional" to heal their son, only to be disappointed. The fact that he still had the demon and was

coming to Jesus shows us that all treatments up to this point were ineffective. Can you imagine how many times this persevering father had his hopes set on a cure, only to discover nothing worked? Have you ever tried something so many times, and had your hopes dashed so often, that you refused to get your hopes up because you just did not think you could handle one more failure?

As we jump back into the story, we hear the man say to Jesus, "But if you can do anything, have compassion on us and help us" (Mark 9:22). We can feel exactly where the man's "if you can do anything" statement originated. He had most likely been through the drill dozens of times. He heard of a person that might could help. He visited that person and presented his son. The person did everything in his power to help, but the son remained possessed. In fact, that is exactly what had happened to this man earlier in this story. Most likely he had heard of the miracle working power of Jesus. He arrived to find Jesus absent and His followers healing all kinds of sickness and disease. Possibly, he watched other people be healed and even some demons be cast out (since the apostles were astonished that this one gave them trouble and was impossible for them to cast out; indicating that others were not). And yet, with every word and effort from the apostles, this man lost more and more hope. Once again, he had brought his innocent, tortured child to someone whom he thought could help, and once again there was nothing that could be done, at least by the apostles. "If you can do anything," was the most hopeful response he could muster for Jesus because no one else ever had been able to "do anything" in this child's case.

I am sure Jesus' response shocked the man. He literally said to him, "If you can" (Mark 9:23). Think about that response. How much effort had the man put into protecting his son? How often had he tried to get him help? How many years had he spent going everywhere, trying everything. Surely, there was nothing more he could do. He could do nothing. And yet, Jesus' response forced him to recognize that something was lacking in his attempt. Jesus continued, "all things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). After all this man had done for his child, was there more he could do? What was Jesus trying to get him to see?

As I read the story again for this manuscript, I can almost feel the man break down. He has come to the end of his rope. He has believed in so many people, practices, medicines, incantations, and nothing has ever worked. It is as if he does not have one more "belief" in him, not this time, not to have his heart broken again, not to face the crushing disappointment of going home with a child who will be plagued by this demon his whole life. "Immediately the father of the child **cried out and said with tears**, 'Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!'" (Mark 9:24). Can you hear the desperation in his voice? I can. I have been reading this story for 40 years and I just now, this time through, can feel the father's despair and hope and helplessness, trying to convince Jesus that he is doing all he can do.

I think this is where all of us find ourselves at one time or another in our lives. There are aspect about the Christian faith that, for some reason or particular circumstance in our lives, strike us as difficult to believe. Maybe it is the college freshman who is sitting at the feet of

an extremely well-spoken, highly credentialed atheistic professor very convincingly (albeit deceptively) arguing that modern science has finally done away with the idea of a supernatural Creator in the minds of all those “educated enough to have an opinion on the subject.” Maybe it is the divorced mother who gets another call from the principal of her son’s school telling her that he is in trouble again. What else is she supposed to do? She works a full-time job. She comes home to cook and clean. She takes the kids to church, prays for them, begs God to put someone in their lives that can be a father figure, and yet nothing seems to be working. Or maybe it is the mother and father of the little 5-year-old girl who is on her third round of chemo. This time there is only a 10% chance any of the treatments will do any good, and the odds are their daughter will be gone in a year. These people believe in God, but their circumstance make it nearly impossible to “really” believe. What is God’s response?

### **“IF YOU CAN!” YOUR DOUBT IS YOUR FAULT**

God has never skimped on providing evidence of His reality and of His power to accomplish anything and everything that He wants to do. When He sent Jesus into the world, He expected honest-hearted people to be absolutely convinced by the evidence He provided of Jesus’ deity. The Old Testament is filled with predictive prophecy documenting the life of Jesus. Jesus did miracles the likes of which no person had ever accomplished that validated His claim to be the Son of God. God the Father spoke from heaven at least twice (at Jesus’ baptism and on the Mount of Transfiguration) and claimed Jesus as His Son. Jesus confounded the false teachers with the truth in a way no other human ever had. He was constantly right about

everything He ever said while on Earth, including predicting His own death and resurrection. And yet, when He met the apostles in Galilee after His resurrection, as He repeatedly told them He would, “they worshiped Him; but some doubted” (Matthew 28:17). How is that possible? How could Jesus show all those miracles, fulfill all the prophecies, predict His own resurrection, and some still doubt. “O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you?” (Mark 9:19). How much more could Jesus have done to bring about faith in those He encountered.

I often think that we look at those “faithless” people in the first-century and feel a moral superiority, thinking that if we had lived in that time, we certainly would have understood Jesus was/is the Messiah and would have followed Him right up to the foot of the cross, never flinching. And yet, we have the whole story. We have seen how it ends, but we still doubt. We doubt that God has a plan for the little girl with cancer, even though He tells such little children are the citizens of heaven. We doubt that God loves the child or her parents, if He did, surely He would not allow them to suffer so much pain and emotional trauma. Yet, we claim to know and believe that He watched as His own Son hung on a cross, having the power to stop His torture, but allowing it to continue because of His great love for His human creations. The college student doubts the credibility of Creation, yet the entirety of the modern scientific world has not even been able to build a flying machine that would compare to a common house fly. The divorced mother doubts God’s activity in her life, yet she knows He is the heavenly Father who sees, and watches, and knows. Doubt about God, His ability, His care, or His

plan is never God's fault and it is not viewed in the Bible in any positive way. When we doubt, it is our fault, and it will do us no good. "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12).

### **JUST ADMIT IT**

The father in the story in Mark did what all of us must do. He admitted that his doubt was his fault and begged that Jesus help him anyway. "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). All too often, we want to blame our unbelief on God. We do not directly point a finger to heaven and accuse God of failing us, but our thoughts and words often veil that sentiment. The college student opines that if God really did create the Universe, why didn't He show Himself more clearly and give us more substantial evidence. The grieving parents wonder why, if God is so powerful and loves us so much, he let their only son die in a car accident. Why would God do that? The homosexual teen who grew up in a Christian home, wonders how God could have created her to have homosexual desires. If such desires are wrong, why did God create her like this. Why would God give Adam a wife who would tempt him to disobey? How can a loving God cause the death of innocent children in the Old Testament? And on and on the list goes.

Many times, questions such as these are not asked with a sincere, I'm honestly looking for an answer motivation. Instead, they are posed in a way to challenge God's righteousness, love, power, and care for us. They are often designed to cause, or are the symptoms of, doubt. Doubt about God, His moral perfection, His love, and His



power. Until we recognize that any and all doubt about God's care, love, power, and plans spring from our own weakness, then we will not find a solution to our doubt struggle, and it will only grow worse and worse. "Let no say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God', for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (James 1:13-14). "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (1 John 1:8-10). Until we recognize that our doubt is our fault, it is not good, and God is not to blame for it, we will not be able to get over it.

The story is told of a child several years ago that had misbehaved and had been spanked by his mother. The spanking did no serious damage to the child, but it had left red whelps on the child's legs. He was in the bathtub looking at the whelps when his mother walked by the door. He called her in and said, "Look what you did to me," showing her his legs with the whelps. The mother responded by saying, "I did not do that to you, who did?" The child thought for a minute and blurted out "God did." The wise mother responded, "God did not do that to you son, who did?" After much thought, the boy reluctantly spoke up, "I did." Oh, that we would all learn to be as honest and humble.

Interestingly, I have in front of me as I write a two-page paper written by a young man who says he does not

believe in God. He has titled his explanation for his lack of belief as “The argument from Non-resistant Non-belief.” In a rather lengthy syllogism, he attempts to argue that no perfectly loving God exists. He reasons that if a loving God exists, then no human would ever be “non-resistantly in a state of non-belief.” In other words, no person would be an unbeliever who was not actively trying to resist the evidence for God. And yet, he argues, that he has tried all he can to believe in God, to have faith as a grain of a mustard seed, and he is not trying to resist God, just the opposite, and yet he does not believe in God, so God does not exist. Notice the lengths that a person will go to avoid taking personal responsibility for their own doubt. Our doubt is our fault. Just admit it.

### **ASK GOD TO HELP, HE WILL**

As soon as we recognize that our doubt is our fault, and we admit that, we are in the perfect position to begin finding a solution to our doubt struggles. Notice, that the father of the demon possessed child begged Jesus to help his unbelief. And Jesus healed his son. Do you believe it was easier for the man to believe in Jesus after he saw Him cast out the demon than no other person, not even the apostles, could cast out? Of course it was. Jesus readily supplied the man with evidence that would lead his humble, honest heart to a stronger faith in the Son of God.

God will do the same for us. Imagine this prayer, “God, I do not see how my daughter having cancer can be something that a loving Father would do. I do not understand how this can help anyone. But, I believe you sent your son to die for me, and I believe that ‘all things work together for good to those who love the Lord.’ Please

help my unbelief and show me how this can be part of your plan." Dear reader, do you believe God would answer such a prayer and open the heart and mind of such a humble soul to gradually understand at least some reasons why He would allow that pain? Do you believe He would help such a parent find comfort drawing near the Creator?

Or can you hear the humble prayer of the struggling homosexual, "God, I know that you are just and all that you do is right. I know that you have said that homosexual behavior is a sin. I do not understand why I have these feelings, and I sincerely believe that I'm trying my hardest to fight them. I know, however, that you have promised that you will not allow me to be tempted beyond what I can handle. Please help me overcome these temptations and my own sinful desires." Can you imagine that a prayer such as that prayed by a sincere heart with the motivation to overcome temptation and sin would not be met with help from the Father? Nor can I.

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matthew 7:7-12). "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." If you say that and mean it with all your heart, God will walk with you through your doubt.

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## CHAPTER 4

# IN PRAYER

Written by **Ty Rhymes**

### INTRODUCTION

It is really hard to narrow down which of Paul's letters people love the most. Generally, it would depend on which season of life we are in, and what our circumstances seem to be at the time. To accomplish the purpose of our title, we look to the rich book of Ephesians. We use the word "rich" because that is exactly what the book does: It tells us how rich we are in Jesus Christ. We are spiritually wealthy because of what Jesus has done. We have received spiritual blessings in high places because of Him (Ephesians 1:3). We are adopted and chosen (Ephesians 1:4-5), and sealed with His Holy Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). We have been united with Jesus after our trip through the darkness (Ephesians 2), and have been added to His church under His rule and authority (Ephesians 3-4). The redemptive work of Jesus was a blessing to us and we have to learn to walk out the spiritual reality that is ours through Him (Ephesians 4:1-7). But...in that walk, there is a war. In that war, we have to learn how to stand. The enemy is real and wants to annihilate us. The war isn't against flesh and blood, but is against the darkness. Though invisible, it is more true than any flesh and blood battle you've seen on FOX or CNN. Our war is a legitimate spiritual struggle.

Thankfully, for this war, God made provision for His people. He gave them armor. Spiritual armor of course! Included in His provision is a belt, a helmet, a breastplate,

shoes, and even a sword. Perhaps the most powerful weapon of all: prayer. "Prayer is the energy that enables the Christian to wear the armor and wield the sword" (Wiersbe 182). For every spiritual battle, there is always a spiritual opportunity to talk to God. Paul said it this way: "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak" (Ephesians 6:18-20).

In Scripture, countless great moves of God begin with prayer! Sometimes tons of people pray (Acts 1-2). Sometimes one man prays (Elijah/Nehemiah). Sometimes the prayers come as a result of trials (Exodus 1-2). Sometimes prayer comes because of sin (Psalm 51). But the great moves of God, corporately or personally often start with prayer, for God is always listening to His children.

Isn't that a great blessing? To know that God is always listening to the prayers of His children? It doesn't matter the circumstance. It doesn't matter the time of day. It doesn't matter the geographic location. It doesn't matter how many times we might have prayed already that day. God is with us when we pray.

In Ephesians 6, when listing the armor that we need to fight our spiritual battles, Paul begins the paragraph this way: "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" (Ephesians 6:10). The phrase "in the Lord" is twofold. It speaks of location and relation. Jay Lockhart said, "In the

Lord' identifies both the source of strength and the sphere in which Christians are to find strength" (315). In terms of location, when we imitate the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus by dying to sin, being buried in the watery grave, and raised again to new life (cf. Romans 6:3-6), we are in Christ. Being immersed in water for the remission of our sins puts us in Christ (cf. Galatians 3:27). It also speaks of our relationship to Jesus. "The Greek word translated 'be strong' in verse 10 is in passive verb voice. It might be better understood as 'be strengthened,' as translated in some more dynamic translations. We do not make ourselves strong; rather we are strengthened or empowered in the Lord" (Lockhart 315). Being strong in the Lord requires that we lean on Him for our strength instead of ourselves. Notice, though, that this strength is something that comes when we are "in the Lord." It is only when we are in union with Christ that we can be strengthened by Him. Since then we are in a union with Him, it is logical to conclude that when Paul admonishes the church at Ephesus to pray, that they could do so knowing that when they fought their battles through prayer, their being in Christ meant that God was right there with them.

From this great text (Ephesians 6:18-19) and that wonderful thought we just mentioned, we draw out multiple aspects of prayer to consider as we fight our spiritual battles with God right beside us. Knowing that God is with us when we pray changes the way that we fight. What advice does Paul give that helps that become a reality?

**"PRAY AT ALL TIMES"**

This is a phrase that we read regularly when it comes to prayer (cf. Luke 18:1; Philippians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 5:17). It might be hard to understand at first, but it really isn't as hard as we would like to make it. Paul isn't inviting us to a nonsensical prayer life when he says "at all times." He doesn't mean walk around mumbling prayers out loud to God all day long. He isn't suggesting a ridiculous way of living, but rather, a way of living that is incredibly helpful and peaceful. "Because prayer is an attitude as well as an act, we should constantly live in the spirit of devotion. While acts of prayer may be intermittent, the spiritual attitude should be incessant" (Lockyer 249). The cross of Christ won us forever access to the throne of God. We can pray at all times. We don't have to get all dressed up in our spiritual best before we can pray. We don't have to sing worship songs for thirty minutes before we can pray. We don't have to confess every known or unknown sin before we can speak to God. We don't have to read ten chapters of Psalms before we can pray. Christ won us a way into the Father's throne room and because of that we can pray non-stop at all times!

One of the verses we mentioned previously, 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul says "pray without ceasing." There Paul isn't describing an unbroken, constant flow of words. Instead, it really is more fellowship actually. He wanted them to interact with God all day long. Start with prayer. End with prayer. But "at all times," interact with Him.

Through these statements, we have been invited into an unbroken flow of dependence and fellowship with God. He is an "ever-present help" (Psalm 46:1-2). What does that look like? Are you in a hard conversation? Pray!

Are you tempted? Pray! Are you feeling discouraged? Pray! Did you see something read something that hurts your heart? Pray! Do you need wisdom in order to make a decision? Pray! Did someone ask you to pray for them? Pray! The enemies desire in this war is for you to delay. Right now! Pray. Develop open and continual communication with God. He is with us!

### **“IN THE SPIRIT”**

This may be an aspect of prayer that is often overlooked but the entire God-head Three is present in the action of prayer. Amazingly, it isn't just God that is with us. The cross is the way, the throne of God is the destination, and the Spirit is the helper (cf. Romans 8:26-27). His “cooperation and fellowship in prayer gives power to intercession. It is the Spirit that creates the atmosphere of prayer, assuring us of its acceptance on high” (Lockyer 250).

But what does it mean to pray in the Spirit? Perhaps, an easy thing to do is to consider the alternative. To pray in the flesh is to pray our own wills, desires, and insights. To pray in the Spirit is to pray with a heart filled with Heavenward longings and goals! God's heart and will, revealed to us by the Spirit, take center stage. Spiritual things, and not fleshly things should be the focus of our prayers! Praying in the Spirit is more than just having the Spirit's help in our prayers, but in the Spirit is the atmosphere in which we live, which enables us with power to pray.

In the Old Testament tabernacle, there was a small altar before the veil where the priest burned the incense



(Exodus 30:1-10). "The incense is a picture of prayer. It had to be mixed according to God's plan and could not be counterfeited by man. The fire on the altar is a picture of the Spirit, for it is He who takes our prayers and 'ignites' them in the will of God. It is possible to pray fervently in the flesh and never get through to God. It is also possible to pray quietly in the Spirit and see God's hands do great things" (Wiersbe 183). God is with us!

### **"WITH ALL PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION"**

Prayer is a really big word; there are tons of distinctions and subsets. Sometimes we pray in adoration of Who God is. Sometimes we pray to confess sins, to reveal ourselves to God (Who already sees), hiding from Him no longer. Sometimes we pray to ask for forgiveness. Sometimes we pray to bring God specific requests from our own lives, and sometimes we pray requests for others. Sometimes we pray prayers of submission to God, devoting ourselves to Him. Sometimes we pray to just thank Him.

On occasion, we pray in groups. Sometimes we pray alone. We pray on our knees, and we pray standing up or seated. We pray to start the day and we pray to end it. We pray long detailed prayers, and we pray quick prayers. We pray with a light happy heart, and we pray with a heavy sad heart. Sometimes we are fervent, and sometimes we are barely there. The good news is that at any time, we have any kind of prayer right at our disposal. Even better news... God is with us!

### **"KEEP ALERT"**

One of the words Jesus often used in combination with prayer was “watch.” We are to “watch and pray” (Matthew. 26:41). “‘Watch and pray’ is the secret to victory over the world (Mark 13:33), the flesh (Mark 14:38), and the devil (Ephesians 6:18). Peter went to sleep when he should have been praying, and the result was victory for Satan (Mark 14:29-31, 67-72)” (Wiersbe 184). Spiritually alert people are prayerful people, and vice versa. There is a precedent set in the New Testament that demands we keep our eyes open (cf. Ephesians 5:15-17). When our eyes are open to the dangers of temptation, we will pray. “Watch and pray” Jesus said, to His disciples in the the garden of Gethsemane, “that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mark 14:38).

But, our eyes are open to more than just temptation. The pains of this world and this life, not just for ourselves, but for others, are an important part of our prayer lives. Like soldiers on watch at their posts, we look out for potential threats to others and cry out on their behalf. We open our eyes to see what to pray for, asking God to show us how and what to pray. “Constant attention was to be given to prayer” (Lockhart 327). We have to be a people who have alert, discerning, praying eyes. God is with us!

### **“WITH ALL PERSEVERANCE”**

The work of real, true prayer takes perseverance. Truth be told, it takes perseverance to do anything in life. Take golf for example. It requires ample amounts of perseverance to excel at it, as does any sport. Learning the scripture and teaching it requires immeasurable amounts of perseverance as well. However, none of them require

the level of endurance and perseverance prayer does. We could probably come up with a million things that are easier to do on a regular basis than pray. Prayer is hard. It takes courage. It takes great faith. It is pushing through the stuff in life, lazy attitudes, and distractions of the moment. The enormity of it all can cause us to quit praying all together. Problems never cease, trials never go away. The enemy is never fully vanquished (for now). But, life without prayer is a much worse alternative.

Some have suggested that we are really without a choice. They say it is like chopping wood, or freezing in the winter. If we chop wood, we will grow strong and the benefits of the task refresh us. Prayer is like chopping wood. It is hard work, but it is good for us and the benefits are great. Plus, the deeper in prayer we go the easier it gets, like chopping wood. God is with us!

### **“MAKING SUPPLICATION FOR ALL THE SAINTS”**

Prayer is more than just lifting up our own lives, and we see that in the “model prayer” (Matthew 6:9). The Lord Jesus prayed, “Our Father.” It is like Jesus was trying to help us see that prayer reaches far beyond just ourselves. We should think of others when before God in prayer. Paul surely did! His “last injunction was ‘Brethren, pray for us’ (1 Thessalonians 5:25). The apostle was always conscious of the duty and power of intercessory prayer. And, his request for prayer was never selfish, but always for the progress of the Gospel” (Lockyer 255).

It is in these kinds of prayers we find life! We know others pains, struggles, and desires and we cry out to God on their behalf. Some we know well, some we know less,

but they are all worthy of being before God's throne. No longer are we swallowed up by self. Praying for others has a unique way of making our burdens seem lighter. That is what happens when God is with us. Praying for others might just help them see that God is with them too!

**“PRAY FOR ME...THAT I MAKE KNOWN WITH BOLDNESS...THE GOSPEL”**

Please, please pray for the work of the Kingdom. Let's pray for our elders, deacons, preachers, and teachers. Pray for our missionaries. Pray for our moms and dads who are raising children. Pray for our youth group who are trying to find their way in the world. Pray for new Christians. Pray for those fallen away. Pray for the lost who may soon be Christians.

Paul asked for prayers for the Kingdom and its expansion. He wanted to speak boldly and clearly. He wanted to share the message of Jesus with all who would hear. This was Paul's desire: For the whole church to pray Kingdom prayers. Pray for the speaker, the listener, and the soil. The Kingdom was a part of Jesus' model prayer, and is still as much a part of our prayer life as any. Why did Paul pray such bold prayer? Because He knew God was with Him, as He is with us!

**THE CHALLENGE AND A REMINDER:**

In all of the weapons God gave us for our spiritual fight, please don't forget prayer. There was once a preacher who used the story of the five loaves and two fishes as a filter for prayer. Prayer is the five loaves and two fish we bring to God. Our prayer may seem small, meager,

and seemingly nothing, but when in the hands of God, they become more than enough.

May we bring our small, meager, seemingly nothing heart to God, cry out to Him as best we can. Talk to Him about the cares of life, because He cares. As we pray, we are taking up a great weapon, because God is mighty and He hears the cries of His people. He is with us!

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## CHAPTER 5

# IN GRIEF

Written by **Lonnie Jones**

### **\*SPECIAL NOTE\***

**Due to a conflict with a book currently in the publication process, a manuscript could not be provided at this time. However, once the conflicting book is published, the manuscript will be added.**

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## CHAPTER 6

# IN DEPRESSION

Written by **Lonnie Jones**

### **\*SPECIAL NOTE\***

**Due to a conflict with a book currently in the publication process, a manuscript could not be provided at this time. However, once the conflicting book is published, the manuscript will be added.**

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## CHAPTER 7

# IN LONELINESS

Written by **Chuck Webster**

### INTRODUCTION

When Mosie Lister wrote the following lyrics in 1955, he almost certainly had no idea how many hearts he would touch:

Once I stood in the night, With my head  
bowed low, In the darkness as black as  
could be, And my heart felt alone and I  
cried, "Oh Lord, Don't hide your face from  
me."

Like a king, I may live in a palace so tall,  
With great riches to call my own, But I don't  
know a thing, In this whole wide world,  
That's worse than being alone.

Hold my hand all the way, every hour, every  
day, From here to the great unknown, Take  
my hand, let me stand, Where no one  
stands alone, Take my hand, let me stand,  
Where no one stands alone (Lyric Advisor,  
online).

The plaintive tone resonated with millions of souls, many of whom had experienced the sense of standing alone. Jimmie Davis recorded it in 1960. Merle Haggard and Willie Nelson included it on their 1981 album, "Songs for the Mama Who Tried." Alison Krauss, Loretta Lynn, and the Gaither Vocal Band followed suit, and then in 2002 it



was the title track of Blue Murder's album, "No One Stands Alone" (Mainly Norfolk, online).

Most famously, though, Elvis Presley sang it on his 1967 album, "How Great Thou Art." He performed it on stage in Montgomery, Alabama, just a few months before he died . . . alone. In the years before his death, Elvis was heard to say often, "I'm intensely lonely at heart." After the singer died, Wayne Newton found a crumpled-up note on which Elvis had written these heart-breaking words: "I feel so alone sometimes. The night is quiet for me; I'd love to be able to sleep. I'm glad everyone is gone. I'll probably not rest. I have no need for all this. Help me, Lord" (Pompadour, online).

### **AN EPIDEMIC OF LONELINESS**

It's difficult to believe that a man who was constantly surrounded by adoring people could be lonely. He had everything the world could offer—incredible amounts of money, millions of fans—and yet he seemed miserable. But apparently what he experienced decades ago is common in the lives of many people in our world today, and evidence suggests that it is getting worse. In an article in *The New York Times*, Arthur Brooks wrote:

America is suffering an epidemic of loneliness. According to a recent large-scale survey from the health care provider Cigna, most Americans suffer from strong feelings of loneliness and a lack of significance in their relationships. Nearly half say they sometimes or always feel alone or "left out." Thirteen percent of Americans say that zero people know them

well. The survey, which charts social isolation using a common measure known as the U.C.L.A. Loneliness Scale, shows that loneliness is worse in each successive generation (“How Loneliness Is Tearing America Apart,” 23 November 2018).

In a later article, Brooks pointed to the increasing number of suicides among young people, particularly women, between the ages of 15 and 24, with one factor being loneliness (“We need to pay more attention to the epidemic of suicide,” 24 January 2020).

Many factors seemingly contribute to a growing sense of loneliness in our country. The nature of work has changed, and people are now more likely to hop from job to job and city to city, leading to fewer deep connections with people and communities. Long gone are the days when kids grew up in a community and then worked and raised their own families in the same area. The result is a pervasive sense of “homelessness” . . . many people no longer have a place they think of as home. Most do not stay long enough to put down roots and establish meaningful relationships (Brooks, “Loneliness,” online).

Another glaring factor is decreasing religiosity in America. Millions of (especially younger) Americans have abandoned any kind of commitment to organized religion, as evidenced by less church attendance and membership. Churches were once the place where members of a community went to form relationships and friendships, and these churches cared for them when hard times struck. Many have replaced churches with online pseudo-

communities via social media outlets that simply cannot attend to human beings' deepest needs. The confluence of these factors and others have led to feelings of isolation, disconnection, and loneliness.

### **A STRUGGLE FOR CHRISTIANS TOO**

But loneliness isn't something that only people "out there" experience, of course; it affects God's covenant people as well. Psalm 102 is a haunting testimony to the ubiquitous nature of the human experience of isolation. The Psalm's superscript is telling: "The prayer of one afflicted, when he is faint and pours out his complaint before the Lord." He begins by crying out, "Hear my prayer, O Lord, And let my cry come to You. Do not hide Your face from me in the day of my trouble; Incline Your ear to me; In the day that I call, answer me speedily" (Psalm 102:1-2). He describes himself as a "pelican in the wilderness" or an "owl in the desert" (Psalm 102:6). Pelicans frequent marshy, desolate places, and owls are solitary creatures, only coming out at night. Both birds pointed to feelings of separation and disconnection. These Hebrew words are somewhat ambiguous, though, and could be referring to a sparrow or chickadee, which are normally sociable creatures. So the writer might be describing a bird that has been left behind in the normal migration. Regardless, the meaning is clear: the Psalmist feels alone and abandoned, so he cries out to God for help.

His experience echoes that of so many other biblical characters. Job experienced something similar in his suffering. He complained,

He has removed my brothers far from me,  
And my acquaintances are completely  
estranged from me. My relatives have  
failed, And my close friends have forgotten  
me. Those who dwell in my house, and my  
maidservants, Count me as a stranger; I am  
an alien in their sight. I call my servant, but  
he gives no answer; I beg him with my  
mouth. My breath is offensive to my wife,  
And I am repulsive to the children of my  
own body. Even young children despise  
me; I arise, and they speak against me. All  
my close friends abhor me, And those  
whom I love have turned against me (Job  
19:13-19).

Moses, in his position as Israel's leader in the wilderness, sometimes experienced something that sounds almost like hopelessness. It's hard not to sense a leader's loneliness in these words:

So Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You afflicted Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I beget them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom, as a guardian carries a nursing child,' to the land which You swore to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all these people? For they weep all over me, saying, 'Give us meat, that we may eat.' I am not able to bear all these people

alone, because the burden is too heavy for me. If You treat me like this, please kill me here and now—if I have found favor in Your sight—and do not let me see my wretchedness!” (Numbers 11:11-15).

In what was probably his last letter, the apostle Paul felt abandoned by many of his co-workers in a Roman prison: “This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me” (2 Timothy 1:15). Near the end of the letter, he wrote, “Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica—Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia” (2 Timothy 4:10). It’s difficult to think of the great man struggling with isolation as he nears the end of his life (Philip H. Towner).

But he wasn’t completely alone, of course. Before he ends his letter, he wants Timothy to know that there was One who never left him. “But the Lord stood with me . . .” (2 Timothy 4:17). Like the writer of Psalm 102, Job, Moses, or Paul—and like so many of our peers—we will probably struggle with loneliness at times as well. But the same Presence who comforted Paul in his final days also promises to be with us always.

## **I AM WITH YOU IN THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY OF BELIEVERS**

The church is described in myriad ways in Scripture, but one of the most beautiful is as a family. Paul wrote 1 Timothy so that Timothy might know how to conduct himself in the “house of God” (1 Timothy 3:15). Paul refers to “Phoebe our sister” (Romans 16:1) and calls Timothy his “son in the faith” (1 Timothy 1:2), “whoever does the will of

[Jesus’] Father in heaven is [His] brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:50), we are to treat older men as fathers, “younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, [and] younger women as sisters” (1 Timothy 5:1-2), and fellow Christians are called “brothers” and “sisters” (cf. 2 Corinthians 13:11).

Perhaps God had the church in mind when He inspired Psalm 68:5-6: “A father of the fatherless, a defender of widows, Is God in His holy habitation. God sets the solitary in families; He brings out those who are bound into prosperity; But the rebellious dwell in a dry land.” *God sets the solitary in families . . .* He gives His people a place to develop relationships, in part to address our need for connection with other human beings. We have a community of faith where we can laugh and cry together, grow in faith together, and praise God together.

Scripture encourages us repeatedly to care for one another in the church. In the Lord’s well-known description of Judgment Day, He said that one of the clear indications of being His follower is that we will care for the needs of one another (Matthew 25:31-46). In His descriptive phrase—“the least of these My brethren”—both expressions (the “least of these” and “My brethren”) are used throughout Matthew’s gospel to refer to other disciples. In other words, Jesus is describing the family of God as a place where no one is left alone: “I was a stranger and you took Me in . . . I was sick and you visited Me” (Matthew 25:35-36).

Notice how often the phrase “one another” is used in the New Testament to point to our caring for and watching out for one another in the body of Christ:

“Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ”  
(Galatians 6:2).

“And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you”  
(Ephesians 4:32).

“but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Hebrews 3:13).

“For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another” (Galatians 5:13).

“bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do”  
(Colossians 3:13).

“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another”  
(Romans 12:10).

God is clearly present with us in His family, the church, and one way He is present is through working through us to care for one another.

### **I AM WITH YOU IN CHRIST**

“But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me,” Paul wrote from prison near the end of his life (2 Timothy 4:17). It must have brought incredible comfort to the

apostle to know that even though he was isolated in a dungeon, he would never be truly alone. It's a common experience to struggle with loneliness, especially when life's circumstances turn against us. As Moses led Israel toward Canaan, there were times when he felt an incredible sense of isolation. On one occasion, his desperation became intense.

Then Moses said to the Lord, "See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people.' But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.' Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people." And He said, "My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." Then he said to Him, "If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth." So the Lord said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name." And he said, "Please, show me Your glory." Then He said, "I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I



will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." But He said, "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." And the Lord said, "Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen" (Exodus 33:12-23).

In Exodus 34, God responded with an awesome display of His presence, followed by His most thorough self-description in all of Scripture: "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7). That theophany assured Moses that he would not be left alone, and it gave him the courage to continue.

Elijah's struggles with loneliness are some of the most memorable in all of Scripture. After God worked a momentous victory over the prophets of Baal through Elijah, the prophet found himself running from Queen Jezebel's death warrant. He was exhausted, discouraged, and alone, and he complained to God: "I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars,

and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life" (1 Kings 19:10). God responded to Elijah in a way similar to His response to Moses. He sent a strong wind that tore the mountains and broke the rocks in pieces, then He sent an earthquake and finally a fire. "After the fire," the text says, He came to Elijah in a "still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12). He comforted the prophet, assuring him of His presence, and then challenged him to get busy doing what He had called him to do. Elijah, assured that he wasn't alone, "departed from there" and fulfilled his mission as God's prophet (1 Kings 19:19).

Probably all of us have had moments when we, like Moses or Elijah, have wanted to be assured of God's presence, especially in times of great distress or uncertainty. But God's miraculous responses to Moses and Elijah are atypical. When the apostles were grieving at Jesus' words that He would soon leave them alone, He told them, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever—the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:16-18).

God promises us repeatedly that He will never leave His children alone. Just before Jesus ascended back to the Father, He told the apostles, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). When Paul felt anxious about his work in Corinth, the Lord told him, "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I

have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). Quoting several Old Testament passages, the Hebrews writer encourages us to remember, "For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5; cf. Genesis 28:15; Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; Joshua 1:5).

There will be times when we experience loneliness. Church leaders face it, especially when the churches they lead go through difficult times. Grief often brings acute loneliness to those who have lost a spouse, child, or parent. Younger Christians struggle with it as well. As they live their faith in the presence of secular friends, they feel like no one understands them. In the middle of all of it, though, we have the same confidence that Paul had as he suffered in the Roman dungeon: "But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me . . ." (2 Timothy 4:17).

### **THE LORD KNOWS WHAT IT FEELS LIKE TO BE ALONE**

It should encourage us to know that Jesus too experienced loneliness. We know that "we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). John tells us that Jesus "came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (John 1:11). He was rejected by His own nation, by His own family. He was rejected in His hometown. He knows, He cares, and He understands.

As finite creatures, we'll never be able fully to grasp the depths of Jesus' suffering on the cross, but there is one remarkable moment that especially causes us to lean closer. As Jesus hung on the cross and the sun reached its apex in the sky at noon, it suddenly stopped shining. There

was “darkness over the whole land” for three hours (Mark 15:33), an earthquake came, and the veil of the temple was torn in two (Luke 23:45). It was as if the sky above Jesus and the earth beneath Him were expressing their disapproval at the spectacle of the cross. And in that moment Jesus cried out with a loud voice, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46).

None of us know exactly what that means. How can God forsake God? Surely Deity cannot be divided. And though we know that the unity of the Godhead has never been broken, something mysterious happened on the cross. In some sense, at the moment when Jesus became a “curse for us” (Galatians 3:13), He experienced the fullness of God’s judgment (“Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree,” Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). Paul writes, “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). He was “made . . . to be sin for us,” and consequently, it was as if He were completely alone.

He was alone, so we would never have to be. As a result, we look forward to the day when we stand before God in judgment. We know that on that day we won’t stand alone. God will look at us, and instead of seeing our sinful record, He will see the righteousness of Christ. We will be saved not because of works that we have done but because of what Jesus has done. It’s a beautiful thing, then, to know that on this side of eternity, we will never be truly alone because of the promise that God’s Spirit will always be with us. But it is even more comforting to know that on the final day—that day that we anticipate our whole lives—we will experience His presence in a way that we cannot

even imagine. "And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17).

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## CHAPTER 8

# IN SICKNESS

Written by **Paul Sain**

### INTRODUCTION

The powerful amazing book of Job states correctly that,

Man who is born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He comes forth like a flower and fades away; He flees like a shadow and does not continue (Job 14:1-2)

Whether young or old, sickness may come to all of us. It is a reality all around us. Most are not strangers to various types of physical body ailments. So how do we handle those moments in life? What keeps us going when sickness raises its ugly head? Do we just sing a sad song and give up on life? What should be the Christian's perspective? It is our goal in this lesson to offer words of direction and comfort during times of sickness.

### Consider The Human Body

The "vehicle" that carries us through this life is an astonishing creation. Our sovereign all-powerful Father created (as recorded in Genesis 1-3) Adam and Eve, the first two human beings on earth. Pause and consider what occurs in a mere single minute, sixty seconds of time. The rushing of blood as it flows from arteries, veins and capillaries, pumped by the heart at the average rate of 60 to 100 beats a minute (blood makes a complete cycle

throughout the body in a brief time). Yet, an adult's blood vessels could circle Earth's equator four times! Oxygen is inhaled (breathed in), air enters your lungs, and oxygen from that air moves to your blood. Simultaneously, carbon dioxide, a waste gas, moves from your blood to the lungs and is exhaled (breathed out). Arteries carry oxygen-rich blood from your heart to the rest of your body. Veins return oxygen-poor blood to your heart. The immune system is working during this entire time to purge infection and other potential maladies. The human heart beats more than three billion times in an average lifespan. As food is consumed, the digestive system receives and injects it for nourishment and expels that which is not needed. The nervous system is astonishing as it functions throughout our bodies. Maybe most amazing of all is the human brain which weighs on average about 1.2-1.4 kg (2.6-3.1 lb) which is about 2% of the total body weight. The brain consumes up to 20% of the energy used by the human body, more than any other organ.

With SO much occurring at the same time, is it any wonder that problems or issues may arise. Considering also how at times, without doubt, we abuse our bodies that can result in major problems.

### **Burdens ~ What Saith The Scriptures?**

The apostle Paul wrote to the brethren at Galatia regarding what Christians should do regarding burdens. He spoke of burdens that we individually must bear. He also addressed that we should help one another bear their burdens. Note this text:



Brethren, if a man is [a]overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. 2 Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ ... But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. 5 For each one shall bear his own load (Galatians 6:1-2, 4-5).

What might appear as a contradiction, "*bear one another's burdens*" and "*bear his own load*" is not a conflict at all. Without doubt, there are burdens that each of us must bear, and we alone can and should bear them. But likewise, we are blessed to be able to assist others and help them bear their burdens (load). Paul is addressing two separate matters and each being a reality in our earthly journey,

### **If We Try To Walk Alone**

First, I cannot imagine anyone who knows about God and His marvelous works, His infinite love and kindness, who would want to walk alone. God is available. God wants to walk with you throughout your journey here on earth. Yet, our Heavenly Father will not force Himself upon anyone. Each individual must respond to the precious invitation of Almighty God and come to Him submissively and obey His will.

If we try to walk alone, we are doomed to fail spiritually. If we walk alone, we have no hope, being

without Christ in the world (Ephesians 2:12). If we try to walk alone, and try to solve our own problems or think we are invincible and eternal - without doubt, we will ultimately fail.

### **Sickness Comes In Various Forms**

Sickness is not one size fits all. Most everyone has had, has presently or will have some form of sickness in their lives. From a minor head cold to life-threatening diseases. Whatever comes our way, the faithful Christian has the power at their disposal to continue their victorious journey toward heaven eternal.

If we face cancer, leukemia, A.L.S., Alzheimers or other serious diseases, it will profit nothing to sing a sad song and cry "*Woe is me!*" As we continue to explore this topic in this lesson, we will be assured of what really matters and what will aid us in our fight over sickness.

### **Our God Is With Us!**

As is the theme for this series, our Lord has promised, "***I am with you always...***" What comfort! What a magnificent promise! When the fact of that promise dwells in our mind for a moment then we KNOW we will be all right, all is well, we can and will still be victorious ultimately.

The key consideration often is...

### **Do We Believe And Trust God's Promises?**

Reflect for a moment once again on God, who He is and all He has done and can do. He is everywhere! He is all-powerful! He is all-knowing! But for emphasis sake, He is FAITHFUL. Our Father has never promised anything but

what He did exactly what He said He would do! He keeps His promises! We can believe each precious one.

So what has God promised to His faithful followers? Our theme/text for this lecture series says it beautifully: *"I am with you always"* (Matthew 28:20). Further hear the inspired Hebrews writer declare from God: *"Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"* (13:5). Go back to the Old Testament and hear this sentiment expressed to those of olden days (Joshua 1:5; Deuteronomy 4:31; 1 Samuel 12:22; 1 Chronicles 28:20; Psalm 37:25). For emphasis, consider the a few of the many additional passages that refer to God's loving promises to His faithful followers:

The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed (Psalm 41:3).

Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me (Psalm 50:15).

Blessed is the man whom You instruct, O Lord, And teach out of Your law, That You may give him rest from the days of adversity, Until the pit is dug for the wicked (Psalm 94:12-13).

I will extol You, O Lord, for You have lifted me up, And have not let my foes rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried

out to You, And You healed me ... For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; Weeping may endure for a night, But joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30:1-2, 5).

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, But the Lord delivers him out of them all. He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken (Psalm 34:19-20).

God has promised, IF we will submit to His will and are fully obedient, many rich and wonderful blessings. Yes, He will be with us (Matthew 28:20). He will also not allow us to be tempted more than we are able to bear, but with the temptation make a way of escape (1 Corinthians 10:13). Paul speaks of the victory we have in Christ (1 Corinthians 15:57). John, the inspired writer, spoke of the eternal life that is promised (2:25). Paul said, *"having these promises ... cleanse yourself ... perfecting holiness in the fear of God"* (2 Corinthians 7:1). Simon Peter spoke of the *"abundant entrance"* (2 Peter 1:11).

When we think of God's promises, is not 2 Peter 1:3-4 the most confident, assuring passage in all the Bible?

...as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us **exceedingly great and precious**

**promises**, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

Do we believe God? Do we really trust Him to provide for our needs?

### **Every Human Being Is Terminal**

The world is not our home, our final place of eternal existence. It is a temporary place. Simon Peter speaks of life on earth as a *"pilgrimage"* and *"journey"* (1 Peter 2:11). It is as if we are merely traveling through this land to ultimately reach our eternal place of existence. The plan of our Heavenly Father is for His faithful servants to come to a *"prepared mansion"* (John 14:1-3), receive an *"inheritance"* (Acts 20:32; Colossians 3:24), go to our *"long home,"* and be *"gathered to our people"* (Genesis 25:8; 49:33).

Thus, the Hebrews writer states a bold undeniable fact: *"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment"* (9:27). James adds: *"whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away"* (4:14).

Thus, whether by sickness or old age, maybe by an accident or otherwise, we all will one day depart from this life in death - unless the Lord returns in the sky and all things and the earth will be dissolved, destroyed (2 Peter 3:9ff).

### **Conclusion**

Life on earth is a marvelous journey - we might compare it to a trip to a location where we have not been before. In our automobiles we travel, mile after mile, stopping for gasoline occasionally. Misfortune may occur with a flat tire or a breakdown of some kind. Ultimately we reach our desired destination. Likewise, physically we have our "vehicles" that carry us day by day through this life. Misfortune may occur and sickness may rage through our human body, sometimes minor and other times severe. Doctors and medicines aid in our recovery. Though at times, sickness ends our life here on earth.

We travel in this human body, yet, our greatest treasure is our eternal soul. Based on the great and precious promises of God we have assurance, upon our submissive obedience to God's will, of our mansion in paradise (John 14:1-3). Nothing can prevent that! Nothing (including sickness and even death) can take that away! It is reserved (1 Peter 1:3-4) in heaven for you.

May I offer a few SUGGESTIONS which might help you in your time of sickness and turmoil:

1. Remember God is THE God of comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3ff).
2. Remember our purpose in life is solely to please God and reach heaven, our eternal home of the soul.
3. As we age and time passes so quickly, sickness will most likely occur.
4. God has promised to be with us, never forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6; Matthew 28:18-20).
5. Recall and reflect on the perspective of the apostle Paul as found in Philippians 1:21ff. He said to go home and be with the Lord was far better.

6. Look forward to one day going HOME – to be with the righteous of all ages - family, friends, all faithful servants of God - eternally.
7. Ever keep fresh in your mind that in paradise - all the “*former things*” such as sickness and death will be gone, non-existent. Praise the Lord from whom all blessings flow,

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## CHAPTER 9

# IN FAILURE

Written by **Austin Johnson**

### INTRODUCTION

I dropped off my eight-year-old son at a basketball camp that was to last an hour in town. I had arranged for the father of one of his friends to drive him home after the basketball camp was finished. I had an appointment with two families and could only stay for the first 20 minutes of the camp. He made it home from basketball camp safely, sweaty, and worn out. However, he told me he did not want to go back to the camp again. What happened in those 40 minutes I wasn't there that turned him against it?

This camp was the most intense basketball practice he had ever participated in. The coach was serious, business-like, and intense. He is incredibly gifted at teaching basketball, but incredibly stern. Not a problem, it's just the way he teaches the mechanics of the game. Well, my son told me that since he couldn't do all of the drills, forms, and workouts correctly, he felt like a failure. He felt singled out. He felt like a "loser." And then, the straw that broke the camel's back, it happened. During the final few minutes as the coach was having the kids do 25 pushups and sit-ups along with 50 up-downs, my son, who has asthma, began to have an asthmatic episode. He said he looked over to the sideline to find me and noticed that I wasn't there.



Now, before you think I'm a terrible father for leaving (ha!), we had had the discussion about the nature of the camp and how I couldn't stay for the entire hour. We discussed it and he told me he was okay with it, especially since he had three friends there with him. However, despite our conversation, preparation, and initial buy-in to the arrangement, failure changed it all. He felt as if he wasn't performing to his or the coaches standards—failure. The coach called him out for his mistakes and he was being corrected in front of the crowd—failure. His breathing became a struggle as his asthma began to flare—failure. Failure can affect the mind, body, and emotions of a person in any situation.

But what ultimately tipped the scale for my son and his emotions? I believe it was the feeling of perceived failure, combined with searching for me, and I was not there. Facing failure without the presence of the father in that moment became too much.

### **GOD IS WITH US**

Isaiah 41:10 says, "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand." Deuteronomy 31:6 says: "Be strong and of good courage, do not fear nor be afraid of them; for the Lord your God, He is the One who goes with you. He will not leave you nor forsake you." Hebrews 13:5 says: "Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'"

When Jesus ended what we call “the Great Commission,” He reaffirmed the reality that He would never leave them or forsake them. Matthew 28:18-20 says: “<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’ Amen.” Jesus’ very name, shown to us in Matthew 1:23, has a meaning that teaches a truth about the proximity and divine presence of God in the life of all humanity—“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,’ which is translated, ‘God with us.’”

What is the power of “God with us?” Consider the story of a young boy praying in front of the congregation. Young men in his church were expected to pray aloud at some point in their youth. So, the young Larry Crabb felt pressured to pray, even though he had a problem with stuttering. He remembers offering a terribly confused prayer in which he thanked the Father for hanging on the cross and praised Christ for triumphantly bringing the Spirit from the grave. When he was finished, he vowed he would never again pray out loud in front of a group.

At the end of the service, Crabb made for the door. Before he could get out, an older man caught him. “Larry, there’s one thing I want you to know,” the man said. “Whatever you do for the Lord, I’m behind you 1,000 percent.” Crabb, who became a bestselling book author, psychologist, and speaker spoke about that moment. He

said tearfully, while remembering the moment, “Those words were life words. They had power. They reached deep into my soul and encouraged me to keep serving God” ([Crabb 81](#)).

The power of God with us, is that He can be our permanent voice of encouragement in times of failure. He, and the Godhead in one, are behind us 1000% (Ephesians 4:1-6). Unlike me with my son at basketball camp, God is with us always. His ever-present power is such a well-spring of life and peace that even when we fail, we know He is near. That general truth needs to resonate with us today. However, there is more. God goes deeper, and so should we. Let’s now consider the details of what Jesus did when He was with people in the midst of their failures, because my thought is this, what Jesus did back then in person, God continues to do today in our spirits.

### **JESUS CONFRONTED THE PHARISEES AND THE WOMAN IN THEIR FAILURE**

The Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, “in the very act” (John 8:4) and set her in His midst. How did Jesus respond? He said plainly in John 8:7: “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” Wow! The Pharisees thought they had done it. They believed they had created a situation where they could catch Jesus in violation of some law, in some way, so they could accuse him of something (John 8:6). But Jesus handled it perfectly. While the Pharisees attempted to trap Jesus using some woman’s failure, Jesus confronted the Pharisees in the midst of their own failure.

The Pharisees showed their heart in this story recorded in Scripture. The Bible seems to portray a scenario in which the Pharisees were camped out waiting and watching for the adultery to take place (John 8:3-4). How else could they have caught her *in the very act*? Having caught her, the Pharisees then took advantage of her for their own vindictive schemes to put away the Son of God. These men abused their position of authority using a woman of low estate to catch their perceived enemy in violation of the law. What a bad look, and potentially, bad hearts.

Jesus confronted the Pharisees in the midst of their failure perfectly. After the Pharisees laid the woman in front of Jesus and gave Him their story, notice how Jesus' response was sent directly to the Pharisees and not the woman. "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." The Bible records that the Pharisees were so moved by Jesus' confrontation that they left the scene one by one. John 8:9: "Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst."

It does not need to be overlooked that Jesus also confronted the woman in her failure as well. Once the Pharisees left, Jesus spoke to the woman privately in John 8:11, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." Did you catch it? He told her to "sin no more." What she was involving herself in was sinful and wrong. Jesus confronted her perfectly. However, this confrontation also contained a degree of comfort that must be examined further.

## **JESUS COMFORTED THE WOMAN CAUGHT IN ADULTERY IN HER FAILURE**

Jesus did not accidentally wait until the Pharisees left to confront the woman. No. He purposefully sent them off so He could speak privately with the woman. Why? She was a woman caught in adultery! If she was caught in the very act, then she was probably in a very compromising setting. Did they “catch” her and then just throw a blanket over her? Did they allow her to clothe herself? Did they bust open the door and yell at her? Were they strangers to her? Why did they not also bring along the man she was committing the act with? She was singled out, seen undressed, caught off guard by strange men, and carried away to shoulder the blame for an act that “requires two to tango.”

Jesus was perfectly aware of the situation and understood that her confrontation needed a degree of comfort that the Pharisees confrontation did not have. Jesus was keenly aware of her womanhood, how violated and singled out she must have felt, and knew that if she was to truly become repentant, she needed to receive comfort as well. Isn't that beautiful? Jesus, in His confrontation, was also perfectly aware of the needs of each individual *to bring about the result* of repentance from their failures.

## **JESUS CONVICTED PETER IN HIS FAILURE**

Moving on from the powerful lessons found in John 8, let's discuss Jesus preparing His apostles for His upcoming arrest and death, along with their falling away. In Matthew 26:31, Jesus told His apostles that they “will be made to stumble because of [Him] this night, for it is written: ‘I will strike the Shepherd and the sheep of the

flock will be scattered.” Peter responded boldly—incorrectly—but boldly in 26:33, “Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble.” While we might be able to sympathize with Peter and his bold exclamation of faith and commitment, he was wrong. Jesus told him as such in 26:34, “Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.”

To briefly review the text under consideration, Jesus told the apostles that they will stumble, a.k.a. fall away, on account of Him and His soon-to-be arrest, trial, and crucifixion. Where did Peter mess up in this conversation? First, Peter told Jesus that what Jesus said was not true. Secondly, Peter placed himself above the rest of the apostles when he said, “Even if all are made to stumble...I will never” in Matthew 26:33. Thirdly, in his reaction to Jesus’ statement, Peter did not take the time to acknowledge where his strength comes from—it comes from the Lord! Peter proclaimed, “I will never,” without even mentioning the strength that comes from above.

So now, Jesus is praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and there is betrayed, arrested, and taken off to “trial.” In Matthew’s account, 26:69-75, Peter denies Jesus three times, the rooster crows, and Peter, remembering what Jesus said, went out and wept bitterly. However, Luke gives a detail that I would like to emphasize. Upon the third denial and the rooster crowing, Luke 22:60-62 shows what Jesus did when Peter failed him. “<sup>60</sup> But Peter said, ‘Man, I do not know what you are saying!’ Immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. <sup>61</sup> *And the Lord turned and looked at Peter*

[emphasis added]. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, 'Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.' <sup>62</sup> So Peter went out and wept bitterly." Jesus turned and looked through the crowd. It could have been out a window, through an open door, or colonnade, and stared at Peter amid his failure. I can't even imagine.

## **GOD IS WITH US IN OUR FAILURES**

Whatever Jesus did with people while in the flesh, I suggest that God is still doing for us in our spirits today. When Jesus was with people in their failures, He confronted, comforted, and convicted their hearts (at least those three). The truth of God's presence with us in the midst of our failures is embarrassing (because He sees us in our sin), encouraging (because He is aware of our emotions and needs), and enlightening (because some need to know He is near). His presence needs to be taken one step further, in the midst of our sin, God is also ready to cleanse us of the affects sin has in our lives. God with us, in the midst of our failures, is willing and waiting to cleanse us *if* we respond to our failures properly.

Michael Pollan wrote a book on gardener's education called "Second Nature." Pollan made applications that can be applied to any area of life in which we experience failure. The question is not, will we fail? But, how will we respond when we inevitably do fail. I love how Michael Pollan describes a typical gardeners' response to failure, that is, with examination of what went wrong and how can it be corrected it moving forward:

All the accomplished gardeners I know are surprisingly comfortable with failure. They may not be happy about it, but instead of reacting with anger or frustration, they seem fairly intrigued by the peony that, after years of being taken for granted, suddenly fails to bloom. They understand that, in the garden at least, failure speaks louder than success. By that I don't mean the gardener encounters more failure than success (though in some years he will), only that his failures have more to say to him - about his soil, the weather, the predilections of local pests, the character of his land. The gardener learns nothing when his carrots thrive, unless that success is won against a background of prior disappointment. Outright success is dumb, disaster frequently eloquent. At least to the gardener who learns how to listen (143-144).

Learning how to listen to God in the midst of our failure is an ongoing lesson for the individual who is growing in recognition of God's presence and transformative power (2 Corinthians 3:18). Is God confronting me in my spirit, telling me to walk away from the sinful situation I am in (Pharisees)? Is God comforting me in the midst of my failures because of the sensitivity of the situation and how my emotions are on edge (woman caught in adultery)? In God's comfort, do I still see the confrontation of sin He is placing before me (woman caught in adultery)? Do I appreciate how God perfectly



knows my failure and sees me intricately as an individual in need of Him (Pharisees and woman)? Is God convicting me of wrong because of my pride (Peter)? Is God convicting me because I have placed myself above others (Peter)? Is God convicting me because I am not acknowledging His empowering in this moment (Peter)?

Failing in general is hard. Failing God is frustrating to miserable to, at times, debilitating. Learning how to listen to God in the midst of our failures could take us from falling deeper into the depression of sin to rising up out of the depths of my failures by the power and presence of God! The famous Thomas Edison experienced a failure at his manufacturing facilities in West Orange, New Jersey. How Edison responded to the failure stands as a lesson for us as we learn to listen and respond to God in the midst of our own failures.

One night in December 1914, Edison's manufacturing facilities were damaged by fire. Edison lost almost \$1 million worth of equipment and the record of much of his work. The next morning, walking about the charred embers of his hopes and dreams, listen to what the 67-year-old inventor said—"There is value in disaster. All our mistakes are burned up. Now we can start anew" (McGinnis, online).

How do we respond when God is with us in our failures? First, we lean into the Godly sorrow brought about by our sin. 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death." Secondly, we see a God who loves us and is there for us. 2

Corinthians 7:10 says, “godly sorrow” because when I recognize my sin, in the presence of God, I am sorrowful that I have shamed Him and His image that I have professed to glorify. Finally, we repent when we sin. Since God is there, my sorrow for shaming His name and His love for me as His child causes me to say how sorry I am and turn away from my sin. In His love He forgives and removes the punishment of my sin through the blood of Jesus. We respond to our failures with sorrow, seeing God who loves us, and are therefore motivated to ask for His forgiveness.

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## CHAPTER 10

# IN VICTORY

Written by **Jimmy Jean**

### INTRODUCTION

The late great Vince Lombardi once said, “if you show me a good loser, then I will show you a loser.” I don’t know of anyone that has played or that is playing any type of sports that likes to lose. When anyone goes into a sporting event, there is a chance of getting beat. A lot of the time the team or individual that works the hardest is the one that will come out on top. I remember several years ago when my two oldest boys were on the state championship team in basketball at Moore County, the hard work and dedication it took for them to accomplish this. Not only my sons, but the entire team worked really hard to win the state championship. By losing the year before in the sub-state, it lit a fire under these boys and they worked very hard. This should be our attitude as a Christian. James says, “but be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

Joe Namath, the quarterback of the New York Jets “guaranteed” a win against the Baltimore Colts in the 1969 Super Bowl. People thought he had lost his mind. There was no way that the New York Jets could even come close to beating the Baltimore Colts. Baltimore was just too good. But when the dust settled, the New York Jets had defeated the Baltimore Colts 16-7 becoming the first American League Football team to beat a National League Football team. I’m saying all of this to say that God guarantees us VICTORY. We are on the winning side. If you

want to win, and win big, be a follower of God. Paul says, "but thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 15:57-58).

We are in a battle. Those of us who are striving to please God know that Satan is out there watching and waiting on us. Peter tells us, "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). It is sad to think that many Christians don't realize we are in war. We are fighting against Satan, the strongest, most intelligent person known to man. Satan has the power to persuade many of us into doing what we know isn't right. Paul tells us that Satan is the "god" of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4), that he has blinded the minds of those that are perishing. Satan has always been able to convince people to sin. When he does this, he wins and we lose. If we go all the way back to the beginning of time, Satan has had his hands into everything that is bad. Satan convinced Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit, and in return, she gave it to Adam and he ate it. Therefore, he defeated God, he thought. God won when He sent His Son to the cross. We too will win when we put our faith in God.

One thing that needs to be mentioned about having victory in Christ is the effort that it takes to accomplish this. We have looked at this a little but it needs to be stressed how important this is. "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Everything we get in life takes effort. All the things in life that make people happy take hard work. Many of us

have worked long and hard hours just to have things. Things that, for a lot of us, really should not matter. As a Christian, we can never put in enough hours for the Lord. As we saw earlier, our laboring in the work of the Lord WILL NOT be in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). Paul says, “for we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Paul also says that we should be “zealous” of good works (Titus 2:14).

“Pistol” Pete Maravich practiced eight hours a day. While his friends were running up and down the road, “Pistol” Pete was in the gym. Did his hard work pay off? YES!! One of the greatest shooters that has ever played the game of basketball. He averaged 44 points a game in college. Oh, by the way, that was without the three-point line. As a Christian, hard work will pay off. We need to remember that we do not work to earn our salvation. We could never put in enough hours for that. Always remember this: “We work because we are Christians, we are not Christians because of our works.” The great preacher Solomon once said, “let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter, Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all. For God will bring every work into judgment. Including every secret thing. Whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). By this we should realize how important it is to work knowing the outcome for us will be a VICTORY!!! Let’s now look at three ways we can have “Victory in Jesus.”

### **VICTORY OVER THE WORLD**

One of the hardest things to do in life is to not get caught up into the worldly activities that we face on a daily

basis. John says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world-the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life-is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it, but he who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-17). Many Christians try to play both sides but that causes us to become unfaithful. James tells us that people who do this are adulterers, spiritually (James 4:4). We cannot be a friend of the world and a friend of God. This will not work. No matter how hard we try to make this happen, God will not "play" second fiddle to anyone. We are to seek Him and His kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). Nothing should interfere with our walk with God, NOTHING. We are in a battle with Satan. Paul tells us, "You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of the life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier" (2 Timothy 2:3-4). As Christians, the fight is well worth the reward we will receive.

Paul tells the Christians at Rome, "I beseech you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2). Notice that Paul is begging these Christians to live a life of righteousness. They were to live a sacrificial life. What does this mean to live a sacrificial life? How can I offer up sacrifices? As Christians there are things that we can and cannot do. When our friends are going out to some party

where there will be drinking and drugs, we must say that we will not take part in activities like this. This is a sacrifice for many. Struggling with this world's pleasure can sometimes be a sacrifice. Our everyday life should be a living reminder to those around us that we are living this life for the next one. Our goals in this life are to spend the next life in heaven and I am not going to live by this world's standard. To be not "conformed" to this world is to not act like the world. This world and everything in it are going to perish. Nothing is going to be left. Why do so many Christians get caught up in this world's pleasure? SATAN!!! He can and will do anything to separate us from God. Paul asked this question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine. Or nakedness, or peril, or sword" (Romans 8:35)? Paul continues saying that nothing or no one should be able to separate us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:37-39).

I remember several years ago my wife and I getting our boys transformers for Christmas. There were several different ones to choose from. All of these transformers basically worked the same way. They would look like a car or truck then you could twist and turn them into a big monster. No way could you tell what these toys were going to look like. But a little twisting and turning and BAM!! They had been "TRANSFORMED." God works with us the same way. He doesn't twist or turn us to make us into something, but He does work with us through His word to make us what He wants us to be. In order for us to allow God to transform us, we must have a willing heart. To overcome the world, to have victory over the world, we must allow God to work in us. We find Jesus giving us four different

types of soil in the parable of the Sower. One was the way side, one was the rocky soil, one was the thorny soil, and the last was the good soil. Out of these four types of soil only one had a genuine, transformed soil (Heart), the good soil. You notice that Paul said we were transformed by the renewing of our mind (Romans 12:3). Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet our inward man is being renewed day by day" (2 Corinthians 4:16). As I get older this verse rings deep into my soul knowing that every morning when I wake up, I'm a new person. Yesterday is gone, tomorrow may never come; therefore live today with a renewed spirit. To have victory over the world, we must have a renewed spirit every single day.

### **VICTORY OVER SIN**

The second thing I would like for us to look at is how we can have victory over sin. Sin separates us from God. Isaiah says, "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save. Nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isaiah 59:1-2). God has never nor will He ever like sin. Sin is disgusting to Him. Sin is what put His Son on the cross. Why is it that for many Christian's living a sinful life really doesn't bother them. They go about their everyday life as though sin is no big deal. Sin can and will cause us to lose our soul. It will cause us to spend eternity apart from our loving God. But thanks be to God that He made provision for mankind. That provision is Christ!!! The Hebrew writer states that, "By faith Moses when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God



than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin. Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt, for he looked to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26). The pleasures of sin never show you the end results. On the surface, people may not think sin is that damaging until they see the effects of sin. Drinking alcohol may not seem that bad until you have to go to the hospital to visit someone who has been in an automobile accident or even worse the funeral home to pay your last respects to the family. Satan does not want us to see the end results. James says, "Let no one say when he is tempted that he is tempted by God, for God cannot be tempted by evil nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin, when it is full-grown brings forth death" (James 1:13-15). God does not tempt man to sin but Satan does. Why would God tempt man to sin when sin separates us from God?

Paul says, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). As Christians, one of the first things we need to realize is that ALL MEN sin. But I thought sin separates us from God. It does. So why should I even try if all men sin and sin separates us from God. Looks like to me it's a no-win situation. It took me several years to come to realize the difference between sinning and willfully sinning. Willfully sinning is to have sin dictate your life. Paul states, "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lust. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law but under grace" (Romans 6:12,14). When a Christian is controlled by sin, they wake up in the mornings not really worried about

hurting God. Sin has become their king. Sin is now ruling their life. They go throughout the day not being concerned about how they act or what they say. I have known people who were once faithful in the service of God, only to become unfaithful due to sin. Little by little Satan attacks us from areas we may never see coming. Peter says, "Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8). The danger of sin is that it can creep upon us before we realize it. If this happens, we need to repent ASAP because sin is like cancer, it can spread slowly or quickly. It all depends on us. The Hebrew writer says, "for it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6). Christians who sin willfully "crucify" Christ over and over and over again. If they are not careful, they can get to a point in their sinful life that they have no desire to repent. That's the power of sin.

Jesus says, "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many I say to you will seek to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24). If we as God's children try our very best to please Him, we will enter the joys of heaven when this life is over. Even though we all sin, we are trying our very best to walk down that pathway that leads to heaven. Sin does not rule a Christians life. God through His word leads us to be faithful. John says, "but if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John

1:7). This verse teaches us that as long as we are walking and striving to please God, the blood of His Son and our Savior continuously washes away our sin. Remember we are renewed every single day by the precious blood of Christ. Many times, we may say or do things that are not right. That is where the blood of Jesus Christ comes in to play. We strive and yet we sin. Thanks be to God for the blood of His Son. Because of this, we can have victory over sin.

The apostle Paul states, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). When you think of having victory over sin, what comes to mind? This verse tells us that we have been saved, past tense. When we, by faith, obey the gospel call by being baptized into Christ, all of our past sins are washed away. John the Revelator says, "and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth, To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood" (Revelation 1:5). Many times, I'm afraid we may put limits on the power of the blood of Christ. John says the blood of Christ washes away ALL sin. All means All. When I think about the blood of Christ and the power that it has, my mind always goes back to a statement the Apostle Paul made. "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). What Paul is saying is that there was no one any worse than he was on the face of the earth. You look at his life, and the damage he caused to the body of Christ, and the blood of Christ can wash away his sins. We can be victorious over our past sins. I've known some

Christians that could not enjoy their new walk with God because they still lived in the past. Their life before becoming a Christian was so bad, they thought, that they could not believe that God would forgive them. This same Apostle Paul who said he was the chief sinner also said, "not that I have attained, or am already perfected, but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold on me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended, but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead. I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14). Paul learned from his past but he did not live in the past. If Paul can have victory over sin, so can we.

Because we have victory over sin, we live in a constant state of being saved. As we've noted earlier, the blood of Jesus Christ keeps on keeping us clean. We can have the confidence of knowing that when our life on earth is over, we will go to heaven. It's so sad for many Christians today living without the confidence of knowing their eternal destination. John says, "these things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). Living in today's world, knowing our eternal destination is heaven, can help us get through the day. The apostle Paul knew where he was going while in prison in Rome. Even a man like him. "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous

Judge, will give to me on that day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Knowing that we are being saved on a continuous basis, may we soon come to heed the promises God gives to His children, one of which is heaven as our eternal abode. To the church at Rome Paul tells them, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us, much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him" (Romans 5:8-9).

### **VICTORY OVER DEATH**

"And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Death is one of the hardest things to go through. The physical death of a loved one can cause pain for months, even years. I dare say that if you are reading this lesson, you have lost a loved one. I have dealt with death from an early age. My twin brother and I left for school one morning as freshman not knowing that we would never see our mom as we knew her. Our dad was off from work that morning so he was cooking breakfast while our mom was out feeding the pigs and cows. We always hugged and kissed our mom but that day we didn't get to because of where she was. Later that day our sister-in-law came to school saying that our mom had a massive heart attack. At fourteen years of age that did not mean that much to me at the time. Once we got to Huntsville Hospital and went in to see her, it didn't take long to realize our mom probably wasn't going to make it. All the tubes she had running into her and the machines she was hooked up to was a little too much for a fourteen-year-old kid. Our mom lived for six months but we never got to bring her home from the hospital. Knowing her

faithfulness to God helped us deal with the loss. Not every family can say that. Paul states, "if in this life only we have hope in Christ Jesus, we are of all men the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). One of the easiest things to do as a minister is to conduct a funeral service for someone who you knew was a faithful Christian. One of the toughest things to do as a minister is to conduct a funeral service of someone who wasn't a Christian or died as an unfaithful Christian.

When King David had a son with Bethsheba, the Bible says that the LORD struck the young child with sickness (2 Samuel 12:15). While David's son was living, he mourned for the child. David fasted and laid around all night hoping that the LORD would spare his son. This lasted for seven days until the child died. David's servants were afraid to tell David because of the way he had been acting. Surely if David acted the way he did while the child was living, just think how he is going to act once he finds out the child is dead. David could tell by looking at his servants that his son had died. David picked himself up, washed himself then went and worshipped God. His servants were so confused. One of the servants said to David, while the child was living you were sad. Now that the child has died, you're happy. Why? David replied by saying, "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept, for I said, who can tell whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live. But now he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:22-23). Like David, we too will lose a loved one never to see them again on this side of heaven. This is the hardest thing about death. But guess what?? There is hope. Physical death is a separation between our body and our

spirit. James says, "for as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (James 2:26). But thanks be to God through His son we can defeat death. Paul tells us, "So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55). I often think of the jubilation that was in Hell when our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ died on the cross. The temptations that Satan put before our Lord over and over again (Luke 4:13). Finally!!! Jesus has died, so Satan thought. But early that Sunday morning when the stone was rolled away and the tomb was found empty, Jesus had conquered death. Even death could not defeat our Lord and Savior. Because of this, we too can and will conquer death.

I saw a sign once that said, "born once die twice, born twice die once." This statement rings true for all who have rendered obedience to the gospel. Physical death is bad; it really is. But nothing like the second death. Paul says, "and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels. In flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). There are a lot of things that are bad about being lost. The pain and suffering that will be there. The outer darkness and the weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:30). The rich man pleaded with Abraham to allow Lazarus just to dip his finger in water so he could cool the rich man's tongue,

why? Because the rich man was in torment (Luke 16:24). But the one thing that keeps popping in my mind over and over again is being apart and separated from the very presence of God. A God who loved me so much that He sent His only begotten Son to die for me, a sinner. How can anyone live a life that will send them to torment. Many people do. As a matter of fact, most people will fail to spend eternity with God. Jesus once said, "Enter by the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14). Being a faithful child of God will give us victory over death.

## **CONCLUSION**

Many athletes work really hard in the sport they play. They workout in the gym. They spend hours upon hours of training and doing drills to make them better than they were and also better than their opponent. Why?? SO THEY CAN WIN!! That's the name of the game. To become victorious. To gain a physical award. Whether it's the Lombardi trophy, the Green Jacket, or some other trophy, it's temporary. All the hard work that is put into sports still doesn't guarantee you victory. Billions and billions of dollars are spent every year on athletes and their sport. One hundred years from now will anyone remember the 2023 Super Bowl? The 2023 World Series? We can go on and on with questions like this. The answer to these questions is NO!! I'm saying all of this to show all the effort that is spent on "worldly" things.



We can be victorious in our life, victorious over the world, victorious over sin, and victorious over death. This is a guaranteed victory. It's impossible for God to lie, and He promises us heaven if we strive to please Him (Hebrews 6:18). To live everyday knowing we are going to win this battle we're fighting should encourage each and every one of us to be dedicated to God. Everyone loves to win. They love to be victorious. Live faithfully-VICTORY IS OURS!!

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## CHAPTER 11

# IN DIVORCE

Written by **Jacob Evans**

### INTRODUCTION

Divorce is gut-wrenching. As a preacher, I have spent countless hours listening to spouses and couples who are either contemplating a divorce, experiencing a divorce, or recovering from a divorce. I am no longer so naïve as to think that divorce is anything but complicated and catastrophic, and I have yet to meet a divorcee who was not profoundly and permanently affected by divorce. I am aware that some churches treat divorcees like pariahs, as if divorce is an unpardonable sin worthy of excommunication. Those who operate with this mindset would undoubtedly scoff at the title to this lecture, but divorcees need to know and be convinced that God's grace is open to them and that He desires their healing and inclusion in His church.

### THREE DIVORCE STORIES

The following stories are products of my imagination, but there may be points of contact with your own divorce story or the divorce story of someone you know. Not only do these stories prevent this lesson from becoming purely academic, but they are also helpful in illustrating some of the dynamics of divorce, which we will explore in subsequent sections.

*Divorce Story #1 (DS1).* By their sophomore year, Derek and Melinda had become high-school sweethearts. Before turning twenty, they were married. Derek was

working at a local factory, and Melinda was putting in about thirty hours at a nearby nursing home. Neither one was good at managing money. Within two years, they had maxed out several credit cards and made the mistake of purchasing both a new vehicle and a timeshare. Halfway through their third year of marriage, Derek was laid off at the factory, but not before Melinda showed him a positive pregnancy test. With the financial stress mounting, Derek became anxious and angry. For the first time in their relationship, he yelled at Melinda while they were trying to troubleshoot their financial situation. Derek struggled to find another job, and he assumed that Melinda was disappointed in him as a provider, which wrecked his self-esteem and heightened his insecurity. His treatment of Melinda worsened over the next several months, and by the time the baby was born, Derek was no longer living at home. They divorced before their fifth year of marriage.

*Divorce Story #2 (DS2).* Jim and Lainey fell in love as graduate students. Within three years, they were married. Both landed good jobs. They bought a house, they each had a car, and they could afford nice vacations. Over the course of eight years, they welcomed three children into their home. The more the kids grew, the more hectic life became. But they embraced the chaos: school programs, recitals, ball practices and games, youth group activities, birthday parties, etc. Jim and Lainey loved their children. Their kids essentially became their sole focus, and little time, if any, was spent nurturing their own relationship. By the time all three children were out of the house, leaving behind an empty nest, Jim and Lainey found it difficult to reconnect. In fact, certain unresolved issues raised their ugly heads, and their kids were not there to serve as a

buffer or to distract them. After twenty-seven years of marriage, Jim and Lainey chose to divorce.

*Divorce Story #3 (DS3).* John met Marissa at a local gym. John was thirty-two, and Marissa was twenty-seven. Both were firmly entrenched in their careers. John was a financial planner who liked weightlifting, and Marissa was a personal trainer. Since they were older, everything moved rather quickly. In less than a year, they were engaged, and within a year and a half, they were married. For the first two years of their marriage, everything seemed to be going relatively well, but by the third year, John perceived that Marissa was pulling away from him. John had never been the jealous type, but her late-night arrivals, her lies here and there, and her reluctance to be intimate with him all pointed to the same conclusion: his wife was having an affair. John hired a PI to track Marissa's movements and interactions over the course of one week. Within two days, the PI informed John that he had indisputable evidence that Marissa was, in fact, having an affair with one of her clients. John's heart sank. When he confronted Marissa, she readily and coldly acknowledged her infidelity and confessed that she was bored with their marriage. She had discovered that monogamy wasn't for her, and she wouldn't blame him if he filed for a divorce.

### **THE CAUSES OF DIVORCE**

Among these three stories, several *causes* of divorce are discernable: (1) personal immaturity (DS1); (2) flawed communication (DS1; DS2; DS3); (3) escalating conflict (DS1); (4) prolonged stress (DS1); (5) relational imbalance (DS2); (6) sexual unfaithfulness (DS3); (7) personality disorder (DS3). To these potential causes of divorce, we

could add addiction, abandonment, and abuse. There is no one cause of divorce, and no one cause of divorce travels alone. As Gary Collins observes, “Every marriage is different, and each divorce is precipitated by a unique combination of causes and circumstances” (612).

Overshadowing all of these potential reasons for divorce are certain cultural and theological shifts that have occurred over the last century relative to divorce (Collins 613; Flatt 211). Divorce no longer carries the same stigma in our society that it did in decades past. Legal barriers to divorce have been drastically lowered or completely removed. At one time, a person had to prove that his/her spouse was guilty of an egregious breach of the marriage vows to secure a divorce; today, however, a spouse can get a no-fault divorce or hang his or her case on the ever-nebulous “irreconcilable differences.” Churches have become more permissive in their teaching about divorce and remarriage. As Bill Flatt puts it, “There is not only no-fault divorce but no-guilt divorce as well” (211). Indeed, for many folks in our society, marriage is no longer viewed as a *covenant* relationship; it is considered more of a *consumer* relationship (Keller and Keller 80-82). This explains, in part, why we often hear that half of all marriages in America end in divorce. Divorce has unfortunately gone from rare to routine.

## **THE CONSEQUENCES OF DIVORCE**

The three stories above do not highlight the devastating *consequences* of divorce, though it is not difficult to imagine what these three couples and their families would have experienced in their respective circumstances. To experience divorce is to take a ride on

an emotional roller coaster that is as disorienting as it is distressing. Because divorce involves “the tearing away and the death of a part of oneself” (Collins 616), it produces all the emotions that we usually associate with grief: anger, anxiety (even panic), depression, and guilt. More times than not, the emotional toll is greater for those who are being put away than for those who are doing the putting away. Divorce is *emotionally brutal*.

Divorce is not good for one’s health. We all know what anxiety and stress can do to the brain and body, and besides the death of a spouse, there is nothing more traumatic or stressful than suffering through a divorce. Not only does the stress of divorce affect one’s immune system, making a person more susceptible to sickness and disease, but it can also negatively affect one’s mental stability, blood pressure, and digestive system. Furthermore, spouses sometimes choose to engage in destructive habits, like smoking, drinking, or overeating, to offset the stressful tension that divorce inevitably produces. Divorce is *physically harmful*.

Divorce also has a systemic effect that extends to family and friends. Among family members, there may be disbelief, disappointment, hurt, confusion, and anger. The proverbial “circling of the wagons” transpires, as each family seeks to support and encourage their family member. Sometimes unsolicited advice and opinions from family and friends do more harm than good. At other times, those experiencing divorce can be exasperating as they seek the counsel and perspective of those close to them. If children are involved, they will usually feel the brunt of the divorce more than anyone else. The effects of

divorce on children are far-reaching, and they vary depending on the age of the children. Divorce is *socially disruptive*.

Divorce may create financial insecurity for one or both spouses. The division of accounts and assets can substantially affect a divorcee's standard of living and retirement portfolio. Divorce may force the liquidation of a house, car, or other prized possessions. Alimony and child support can greatly reduce what a spouse has at his or her disposal for paying bills and funding hobbies. A spouse may have to go to work for the first time to support himself/herself. Divorce is *financially worrisome*.

For Christians, divorce can be detrimental to their walk with God. While some run to God and His people for stability and comfort, others run from God and His people in shame, embarrassment, or anger. It is not uncommon for Christians who are experiencing a divorce to refrain from gathering with their church family, especially if they have been ostracized or criticized by brothers or sisters in Christ. Moreover, the termination of sexual intimacy with one's spouse is a breeding ground for sexual temptation, such as viewing pornography or engaging in illicit sexual activity with someone else. Divorce is *spiritually taxing*.

In view of divorce's destructive potential, couples should obviously spend much more time planning for their marriage than they do for their wedding day. The best time for a couple to get a "divorce" is before they get married. This may involve making the heart-breaking decision to call off an engagement or a wedding to the disappointment of family, friends, and one's fiancé/fiancée,

but it is worth it. Nevertheless, divorce happens, even among people who love God and are doing their best to follow Jesus.

## **GOD, DIVORCE, AND DIVORCEES**

Astute Bible students are aware that Malachi 2:16 has been translated differently among standard English translations. The New King James Version renders it as follows: "For the Lord God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence." The English Standard Version, however, opts for the following translation: "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence." Scholars debate about which translation is best. In my judgment, both translations teach that God is highly displeased with divorce, though the NKJV's translation is more explicit than the ESV's. The phrase "covers his garment with violence" equates divorce with a violent act, which raises God's ire.

No one can seriously question why God hates divorce. First, *God hates divorce because it involves making "un-one" what He has made one*. In the beginning, God expected a husband and wife to leave, weave, and cleave (Genesis 2:24; cf. Matthew 19:4-5; Ephesians 5:28-31). Viewing God as the ultimate officiant who joins the man to the woman in marriage, Jesus warns, "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matthew 19:6). From a biblical perspective, there is both a horizontal as well as a vertical aspect in the marriage relationship. The covenant made between a husband and a wife is done "before God" and therefore with God as well as the spouse (cf. Malachi 2:14-15). To break faith with



one's spouse is to break faith with God at the same time. Divorce is a deviation from God's original intention and ideal for marriage; therefore, He hates it. Second, *God hates divorce for the same reasons that divorcees hate it.* The previous section regarding the effects of divorce explains why God hates divorce. Imagine if God said, "I love divorce." Would that not be a huge slap in the face of everyone who has ever endured the agonizing fallout of divorce?

There are three important caveats regarding God's hatred of divorce. First, *while God may hate divorce, He does permit it in certain circumstances.* Not everyone who has studied this subject would agree with this qualification. In fact, some exegetes have worked hard to demonstrate that Scripture never sanctions divorce, but the biblical evidence suggests otherwise. We will confine our investigation to the New Testament, though Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and Ezra 10 are pertinent to this discussion. In Matthew 19:9, Jesus teaches, "And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." Jesus does not discuss the sinfulness of divorce *per se*. What He does highlight is that when sexual immorality is not the grounds for a divorce, a husband or a wife who divorces his or her spouse **and** marries another commits adultery. An unsanctioned divorce must be coupled with a subsequent marriage to constitute adultery. An unsanctioned divorce **without a subsequent remarriage** does **not** constitute adultery. We can also safely infer that a husband or a wife would be justified in divorcing his or her spouse for sexual immorality. Though one is not obligated to divorce his or her spouse for sexual immorality, putting away a spouse for

sexual immorality is apparently authorized by God and does not constitute a sin.

In 1 Corinthians 7:15, the apostle Paul is dealing with a situation where an unbelieving spouse deserts a believing spouse, presumably because of the latter's faith. Paul's response is that a brother or sister is "not under bondage," i.e., enslaved. In other words, a Christian spouse is not so bound to the non-Christian spouse that he/she is obligated to renounce his/her Christianity to maintain the marriage relationship with the non-Christian. The bond between the Christian and Jesus Christ is greater than all bonds. This bond takes precedence over any other bond. Incidentally, nothing in the language here suggests that a deserted believer may subsequently marry someone else (cf. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11), though some do argue that a sanctioned divorce necessarily entails the right to remarry (Stein 195-196, 198).

Setting aside the question of remarriage, elderships, preachers, and Christians in general have wrestled with whether divorce would be sanctioned in other circumstances not specifically addressed in Scripture. What should our counsel be if a wife comes to us and says that her husband has been physically and verbally abusing her for years and that she has finally mustered up the courage to get away from him? What about in cases of addiction where a spouse repeatedly fails to get sober, plunging his/her family into financial ruin and creating an environment that negatively affects the mental, emotional, and spiritual stability of all other family members? Whatever our responses to these questions might be, they should undoubtedly be tempered with compassion and

sympathy (Mathew 5:7; 23:23; Luke 10:25-37; Colossians 3:12; James 2:13).

Second, *while God may hate divorce, He does not view an unsanctioned divorce as an unforgivable sin.* In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul catalogues several kinds of unrighteous or sinful people that will not inherit the kingdom of God, including “fornicators,” “adulterers,” “homosexuals,” and even “the covetous” and “revilers” (cf. Galatians 5:19-21; Colossians 3:5-7). However, in 1 Corinthians 6:11, he acknowledges that the Corinthian congregation was comprised of people who used to practice these very things, but their sins had been forgiven. Should an unsanctioned divorce be classified as some “super sin” that cannot be forgiven, eclipsing even adultery and homosexuality? Or, as Dana Baldwin writes, “Do congregations who treat divorced people as lepers also shelve the greedy, the gossip, and the arrogant” (243)? God’s grace is available to transparent, penitent divorcees (cf. 1 John 1:9), and since God doesn’t treat forgiven divorcees as second-class citizens in His kingdom, Christians shouldn’t either. In fact, our churches should be doing all they can to encourage, support, counsel, comfort, and include those who become single because of divorce.

Third, *while God may hate divorce, He loves divorcees and wants what is best for them.* God knows the number of hairs on the head of divorcees, not just non-divorcees (cf. Matthew 10:30). In other words, God’s concern for those who walk through the fire of divorce is just as strong as it is for those whose marriages are relatively trouble-free. God hates divorce, not divorcees, and He certainly desires for those who are experiencing

divorce to run to Him, not from Him. As we have already discussed, riding out the storm of divorce and dealing with its aftermath is difficult emotionally, physically, socially, financially, and spiritually. Coping with divorce is a multi-faceted and complex endeavor, often requiring countless hours of both formal and informal counseling, but divorcees should acknowledge that God wants to walk with them through the fire of divorce. In fact, every person going through a divorce should want to draw near to God, the One who followed the darkest day in human history (i.e., Jesus' crucifixion) with the brightest day in human history (i.e., Jesus' resurrection). If God could manage something as monumental as that, then He is perfectly capable of helping and redeeming those who are trying to navigate through the dark days of divorce.

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## CHAPTER 12

# IN REJECTION

Written by **BJ Clarke**

### INTRODUCTION

Picture yourself as a child on the playground, ready to play a game with the other neighborhood children. The team captains begin picking their desired teams, and you stand there, anxious to hear your name. You don't expect to be the first one picked, but you certainly don't want to be the last. Name after name is called, but not your name. Your greatest fear is becoming a reality—you are standing alone, and no one wants you on their team. When you are finally chosen, it is only because there is no one else to choose. You try not to show it, but join your team, feeling dejected and rejected.

No one likes the feeling of rejection. In fact, the fear of rejection has kept many a boy from asking out the girl he really likes. He cannot bear the thought of rejection, so he says nothing at all. Rejection is such a painful experience that, even if you are not the one being rejected, it is hard to watch others experience it. We feel for the guy who proposes to his girl on the JumboTron at the big game, only to see her reject his proposal on national television! And we feel for the girl, who wants so much to be noticed by the boy of her dreams, only to have him walk by without even a glance.

Sadly, the land of rejection is not a new territory for human beings to experience. Moreover, God's people

are not exempted from experiencing rejection. Throughout the Scriptures, we see many of God's people experiencing rejection. However, the thrust of this chapter is the good news that there is Someone Who understands what it is like to be rejected, and He has been/will be with His people in times of rejection. Consider some prominent Biblical examples.

### **CONSIDER NOAH**

To an exceedingly wicked world (Genesis 6:5, 11), Noah prepared the ark year after year and decade after decade and preached righteousness (Genesis 6:3; 2 Pet. 2:5). Although Noah was no doubt thrilled that his family was saved, and onboard the ark (1 Peter 3:20; Hebrews 11:7), it must have been heartbreaking for him to preach his heart out for so many years, only to have his message rejected by all others who heard him. Did Noah ever wonder why everyone rejected his preaching? Did he ever blame himself for the lack of a favorable response to his message of righteousness? Did he ever get discouraged and want to quit? The Scriptures do not tell us, but Noah was a human being, and it is very plausible to suggest that he felt a sense of personal rejection at the rejection of his message. It must have been a bittersweet moment when Noah boarded the ark with the seven other family members and left the entire world behind. What a sad and lonely feeling that must have been.

Noah, no doubt, needed mental comfort at this difficult time. The knowledge that Almighty God was present with him on the ark was a soothing salve to Noah's aching heart. One of the most comforting statements in all of Scripture was spoken when God said to Noah, "Come

thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation" (Genesis 7:1). It is noteworthy that God did not command Noah, "Go into the ark." Instead, God said, "Come into the ark," thus signifying that He was already there and that He would be with Noah! Indeed, God "remembered Noah" (Genesis 8:1), and remained with Noah for the entire time he was aboard the ark—around 370 days! Rejected by the men to whom he preached, nevertheless, Noah was accepted by God, Who never left his side!

### **CONSIDER JOSEPH**

Oh, the pain that Joseph experienced at age 17 when his own brothers rejected him and sold him to the Ishmaelites (Genesis 37:18-28). It is one thing for complete strangers to sell you into slavery. It is quite another to be sold and abandoned by your own family! We can only imagine the thoughts racing through his mind as he arrived in Egypt: "How could my brothers be so cold and calloused to do this unto me?" "Will I ever see my father again?" "Will my heavenly Father still be with me in Egypt?"

Whatever his exact thoughts were, he soon learned that God was with him, even in the midst of his rejection: "And the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a prosperous man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. And his master saw that the Lord was with him, that the Lord made all that he did to prosper in his hand" (Genesis 39:2-3). However, it would not be long until Joseph's sense of rejection would be experienced yet again when Potiphar's wife falsely accused him of sexual assault, and Potiphar threw him in prison (Genesis 39:20). Had God abandoned him in his hour of need? The record reads, "But



the Lord was with Joseph, and shewed him mercy, and gave him favour in the sight of the keeper of the prison. And the keeper of the prison committed to Joseph's hand all the prisoners that were in the prison; and whatsoever they did there, he was the doer of it. The keeper of the prison looked not to anything that was under his hand; because the Lord was with him, and that which he did, the Lord made it to prosper" (Genesis 39:22-23).

Joseph was far from home, but God was not far from Joseph. His providential care took Joseph from the pit to the palace, positioning him as second in command in all of Egypt (Genesis 41:37-45). Joseph's appreciation for God's abiding presence is reflected in the names he gave his sons. He called his firstborn son Manasseh, "For God, said he, hath made me forget all my toil, and all my father's house" (Genesis 41:51). He named his second son, "Ephraim: for God hath caused me to be fruitful in the land of my affliction" (Genesis 41:52). As Joseph reflected on how his life had turned out since his rejection by his brothers, he now treasured their reunion, and comforted them, "Fear not: for am I in the place of God? But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good..." (Genesis 50:19-20). Abandoned by his brothers, Joseph was never forsaken by his God!

### **CONSIDER MOSES**

When God commissioned Moses to lead the people out of Egyptian bondage, Moses feared he would be rejected on the grounds that he was no one special. But God told Moses, "Certainly, I will be with thee..." (Exodus 3:10-12). Protecting the people from the plagues was proof positive that God was with His leaders and people. When

the children of Israel rejected the leadership authority of Moses and Aaron, in the days immediately following the Exodus, God made it clear that He was still with them and would lead them and guide them (Exodus 16-17).

When Aaron and Miriam rejected Moses's authority as the people's primary leader, God made it clear to them that He was with Moses (Numbers 12:1-15). When Korah and Dathan, and Abiram, and 250 princes in the congregation gathered themselves against Moses and against Aaron, rejecting their exclusive authority, God did not abandon Moses and Aaron. Rather, He consumed the rebels by opening the earth, swallowing them up, and sending fire to consume the 250 men offering incense (Numbers 16:1-35). God did not abandon Moses.

### **CONSIDER SAMUEL**

The people did not mince their words when they rejected Samuel: "Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations" (1 Samuel 8:5). Their rejection "displeased Samuel" and in his displeasure he took the matter to the Lord in prayer (1 Samuel 8:6). The Lord was still with Samuel, and explained to him, "...they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them" (1 Samuel 8:7).

Samuel explained to the people that having an earthly king would not be nearly as glamorous as they thought. He warned them of the negative consequences that would accompany having a king. They did not care. Their minds were made up: "Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay;

but we will have a king over us; That we also may be like all the nations..." (1 Samuel 8:19-20). What did Samuel do when the people doubled down on their rejection of him? He took their words to the Lord in prayer (1 Samuel 8:21). He knew that the Lord was still nearby to hear his prayer. The Lord was still with him.

### **CONSIDER ELIJAH**

King Ahab rejected Elijah as a true prophet and accused him of causing all the trouble associated with the famine in Israel. Elijah countered, "I have not troubled Israel; but thou and thy father's house, in that ye have forsaken the commandments of the Lord, and thou hast followed Baalim" (1 Kings 18:18). He then challenged Ahab to a contest to demonstrate whether the LORD was God, or Baal. Elijah said, "And call ye on the name of your gods, and I will call on the name of the Lord: and the God that answereth by fire, let him be God" (1 Kings 18:24). After an embarrassing display by the prophets of Baal in begging, pleading, and shouting to Baal to send the fire, and even cutting their flesh until the blood gushed out, Elijah calmly petitioned the God of heaven to send the fire to consume the water-soaked sacrifice. He said, "Lord God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Israel, let it be known this day that thou art God in Israel, and that I am thy servant, and that I have done all these things at thy word. Hear me, O Lord, hear me, that this thy people may know that thou art the Lord God, and that thou hast turned their heart back again" (1 Kings 18:36). As soon as he spoke these words, "the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water in the trench" (1 Kings 18:38).

The people's reaction was powerful: “they fell on their faces and they said, The LORD, he is the God, the LORD, he is the God” (1 Kings 18:39). Ahab rejected Elijah, but God demonstrated in an unforgettable way that He was still with Elijah!

## CONSIDER JEREMIAH

When God called Jeremiah to become a prophet, He warned him from the start that he would be rejected by the majority of those who heard him. However, God was just as quick to assure him, “for I am with thee to deliver thee” (Jeremiah 1:8). So much of the book of Jeremiah perfectly matches the title of this chapter—“I am with you in rejection.” Accordingly, God told Jeremiah:

Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at them, lest I dismay thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and brazen walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And **they shall fight against thee**; but they shall not prevail against thee: **for I am with thee**, saith Jehovah, to deliver thee (Jeremiah 1:17-19).

Tragically, a survey of Jeremiah and Lamentations describes the specific levels of rejection and persecution he faced:

1. **He suffered verbal abuse.** They smote him with the tongue (Jeremiah 18:18) by cursing him

(Jeremiah 15:10), mocking him and deriding him (Jeremiah 20:7-8). Their lips rose up against him every day (Lamentations 3:62). Part of the verbal abuse he suffered was that of false accusations being leveled against him. He was falsely accused of being a false prophet by those who were actually false prophets themselves (Jeremiah 28:1-17). He was falsely accused of being a traitor when all he was doing was communicating the truth God had revealed (Jeremiah 37:13-14; 43:2). In fact, at the very time that Jerusalem was being besieged by Nebuchadnezzar, Jeremiah "was shut up in the court of the guard...For Zedekiah king of Judah had shut him up saying, Wherefore dost thou prophesy, and say, Thus saith Jehovah, Behold I will give this city into the hand of the king of Babylon and he shall take it..." (Jeremiah 32:2-3). The verbal abuse suffered by Jeremiah even escalated to the point of death threats (Jeremiah 11:21; 26:8).

**2. He suffered physical abuse.** Pashur, the son of Immer the priest, smote Jeremiah and put him in stocks because he did not like what he preached (Jeremiah 20:1-2). On another occasion, the princes were wroth with Jeremiah, and smote him and put him into a dungeon (Jeremiah 37:15). He was released by Zedekiah from this dungeon, but on another occasion it happened again. Some heard Jeremiah preaching and did not like what they heard so they took him and cast him into the dungeon of Malchijah "and in the dungeon there was no water, but mire; and Jeremiah sank in the mire" (Jeremiah 38:6). He would likely have died there were it not for the heroism of Ebed-melech the Ethiopian, who coordinated his release and rescue (Jeremiah 38:7-13). Jeremiah also suffered the

humiliation of becoming a captive and being carried away bound in chains (Jeremiah 40:1). He was released and given the choice to remain in Jerusalem, but later was taken against his will to Egypt where he likely remained until he died (Jeremiah 43:6-7).

**3. He suffered emotional pain.** Even more painful for Jeremiah to bear than physical and verbal abuse was the emotional pain he suffered at the hands of his own family. After the men of Jeremiah's hometown had threatened to kill him, God approached Jeremiah and informed him of two things: (1) I will protect you by punishing them (Jeremiah 11:21-23) and (2) It's going to get even worse for you because members of your own family are going to turn on you (Jeremiah 12:5-6). Someone might say, "Well, at least Jeremiah was comforted in the midst of all of his pain by a loving and supportive wife and by his children." On the contrary, Jeremiah was told by God: "Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons and daughters, in this place" (Jeremiah 16:2). The reason God gave for prohibiting Jeremiah from taking a wife was terrifying enough. He told Jeremiah that wives, mothers, sons and daughters in Jerusalem "shall die grievous deaths: they shall not be lamented, neither shall they be buried; they shall be as dung upon the face of the ground; and they shall be consumed by the sword, and by famine; and their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the heavens, and for the beasts of the earth" (Jeremiah 16:4). No wonder Jeremiah wept!

Indeed, Jeremiah knew firsthand what it felt like to be rejected by those he was trying to help. No doubt, he

found great comfort and assurance in the words God reiterated to him: “And I will make thee unto this people a fenced brasen wall: and they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee: for I am with thee to save thee and to deliver thee, saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 15:20). Very few of us, if any, have experienced rejection at the level experienced by Jeremiah. Yet, he continued to trust in God all the days of His life!

### CONSIDER JESUS

As persecuted as Jeremiah and other prophets were, Jesus Christ is the ultimate example of being unjustly rejected. Isaiah predicted, “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not” (Isaiah 53:3). Jesus came unto His own, and His own received Him not (John 1:11). His Messianic mission was rejected by the vast majority of those who evaluated His claims, because He was not the kind of Messiah for whom they had been hoping! Throughout His ministry, Jesus confronted the people for their rejection of Him (Matthew 23:37; John 5:40-47; 6:60-71; 8:30-58). At one point even his half-brothers did not believe in His Messianic identity (John 7:3-5). Then, in the ultimate exhibition of rejection, the Jews clamored for His blood to be shed, and for Him to be crucified (Matthew 27:20-25).

Even His own disciples would forsake him and flee. However, Jesus told them, “Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is now come, that ye shall be scattered every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: **and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me**” (John 16:32). Jesus was rejected and yet the Father was ever with Him!

## CONSIDER PAUL

The apostle Paul knew what it was like to be rejected. His missionary travels brought many instances of rejection, and it was often manifested in the form of various persecutions. Consider the catalog of persecutions Paul experienced:

Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-28).

And yet, through it all, Paul knew that the Lord was with him. Near the close of his life, Paul told Timothy:

At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. **Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me**, and strengthened me; that by me the



preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (2 Timothy 4:16-18).

The same man who once rejected Jesus became so devoted to Him that he practiced self-control: "Lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway [rejected]" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Yet, Paul did have blessed assurance as evidenced by his confident words:

For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul knew that the Lord was with him, no matter what or where!

## **CONCLUSION**

The worst rejection of all will come for those who reject Christ and receive not His words. The Word that He spoke will judge such in the last day (John 12:48). However, we are also promised that if we follow His Word, we will have life everlasting (John 12:50). It is discouraging to feel rejected, but what an encouragement it is to know that He

will never leave us, nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6)! He is with us always (Matthew 28:20; Philippians 4:5).

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## CHAPTER 13

# ONE IN GOD, ONE IN CHRIST, ONE IN US

Written by **Brandon Britton**

### INTRODUCTION

There was a time, long ago, when we were all one. All of us, every single one of us in existence, was one in God. What I'm describing is a time before the man Jesus, before Israel, before Adam, before creation itself; a time when there was only God. Everything that exists today, at one point, long ago, existed only within the heart of God. John described that time this way:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men (John 1:1-3).

It can be quite difficult for us to wrap our heads around the concept of a time before creation even existed, a time when there was only God, a time when time itself hadn't even begun. It might be difficult, but not impossible to comprehend, if we only think of our mothers. There was a time, not so long ago, when you did not exist, I did not exist, and yet, there was a sense in which we existed within our mothers. Before the moment of our creation within her womb, the materials from which our bodies would be

fashioned already, and only, existed within her. From the love of our parents our whole existence, our very being, was created. Before there was you, there was her.

In an even more grand, and nearly incomprehensible way, before there was anything, there was God, and everything that now makes up what we know as creation existed only in Him. Apart from Him there was nothing. Around fourteen hundred years ago, the Turkish theologian Maximus the Confessor envisioned creation, not as *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), but as *ex Deo* (out of God). Paul described this glorious work of God by saying that He “is above all, and through all, and in you all” (Ephesians 4:6). To the Roman Christians he wrote, “For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:36).

There was a time when we all were one; one in God, one in Christ, one in us. So what happened? Simply put, “we” happened. No sooner than humans became more than just existing within God, we began separating ourselves from the heart, mind, and will of God. From Genesis 3 to Genesis 11 the decisions of each generation separate them more and more from God and as a natural consequence, more and more from one another. Fast forward to the present, and it feels like humanity is more divided than ever. Whether or not that is true, only God can say, but one thing is for certain, there was a time when we all were one but we aren’t anymore, but God is working on that.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament makes it clear that the goal of God is to be united as one with His

creation. In His prayer on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus, Who's only desire was to do the will of His Father (John 4:34), prayed:

That they **all may be one**; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also **may be one in us**: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that **they may be one**, even as **we are one**: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in **one**; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me (John 17:21-23).

The question is not IF God will be one with His creation, but HOW and WHEN? If we are to ever be one again, it will only be in Him, which is precisely what He has been working to do in Jesus. Although this page could be filled with examples from the New Testament, a few will suffice to emphatically make the point. "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: That in the dispensation of the fulness of times **he might gather together in one all things in Christ**, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him" (Ephesians 1:9-10). "And when **all things shall be subdued unto him**, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, **that God may be all in all**" (1 Corinthians 15:28). "To wit, that **God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself...**" (2 Corinthians 5:19). "And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and

all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever" (Revelation 5:13).

Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist...And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, **by him to reconcile all things unto himself**; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven (Colossians 1:15-17,20).

This is true in a grand, universal sense, but it is also true on a personal and individual level. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw (helkyso in Greek, literally "drag") all men unto me" (John 12:32).

All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out...And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day (John 6:37,39-40).

“As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:2-3).

We can know that God seeks oneness, and we can even desire oneness, and still wrestle with the questions of what oneness actually is and even looks like. The concept of oneness can be a difficult one for us to grasp, which is likely why God employs illustrations and opportunities to help us comprehend the concept.

One of those illustrations, that is also a practice in oneness, is that of marriage. Not everyone is married, but a great many people are, and that can be a perfect classroom to instruct those who are married in how oneness can be achieved and maintained. In marriage, two become one (Matthew 19:5-6), providing a perfect practice field for becoming one with God by becoming one with another who is made in God’s image. Whether you are seeking oneness with God, your spouse, a stranger, or an enemy, the center of gravity for all oneness is love. Regardless of how much you have in common or how much chemistry you have, in marriage there are two distinct, unique people. Despite these differences, the commission is for the two to become one, but how? Building upon sacrificial love, you learn to align your goals, your will, and your desires with one another, which might be difficult, but is made easier through a shared love of, and desire for, oneness with God.

Another illustration, that is also a practice in oneness, is the church as a body. We learn to become one with God by striving to become one with God's people. Paul's letter to the Christians in Corinth, Greece is a master class in pursuing oneness in the face of conflicting, and sometimes sinful, diversity. The letter begins by addressing the cancerous division that is killing the body of believers in Corinth.

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? (1 Corinthians 1:10-13)

In the next eleven chapters he will systematically dissect all of the sources of division, culminating in two chapters whose aim is to produce oneness. In one of those chapters is an illustration and in the other a foundation. 1 Corinthians 12 provides us with the illustration of the church as the ultimate example of oneness, a body.

For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized



into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body (1 Corinthians 12:12-20).

When we arrive at chapter thirteen, the illustration is grounded in the foundation of love. Oneness simply isn't attainable apart from love, and yet, one of the greatest impediments to oneness is misunderstanding the nature of love. The love that has its origins in the heart of God and that reflects the nature of God is described as: long-suffering, kind, devoid of envy and arrogance, and selfishness. Oneness is the natural byproduct when everyone involved exhibits these characteristics of love toward one another.

Not content to leave us with illustrations and definitions, God provided us with the ultimate example in the man Jesus.

But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father. Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:13-22).

The One who came to bring about oneness between God and His creation, and between those of us who are part of that creation, embodied this loving oneness in Himself as He walked among those who struggled to even grasp the concept, much less engage in it. Oneness can seem an impossible target, in part because we have a tendency to write people off quickly, something Jesus refused to do. His disciples were sometimes quick to

dismiss people who were different or difficult. On any given day they might be calling on Jesus to send away the starving people who were passing out due to hunger (Mark 6:36) or calling down fire from heaven on Samaritans who refused them hospitality (Luke 9:54). In moments like this Jesus would often respond, “where is your faith” and “how long must I tarry with you” but He didn’t give up on the belief that these dismissive disciples would one day be one in God, one in Christ, one in us.

One of His greatest disciples, Paul the apostle, wasn’t always good at this – see for example the time he was willing to part with two beloved companions, Barnabas and John Mark, over a relatively minor disagreement (Acts 15:39-40), but in his sermon in Athens, Greece he demonstrates the kind of outside the box thinking that is sometimes necessary to taking baby steps toward oneness where only great division exists.

At Mars Hill, Paul demonstrates to us that truth about oneness can be found within the scriptures and sometimes outside of them, while also teaching us a valuable tool in striving for oneness where division seems inevitable. While addressing a very diverse audience made up of conflicting philosophies, all of which were antagonistic toward Paul and this strange new doctrine he was teaching, the wise apostle seeks to find some common ground with his skeptics. Rather than focusing on all of the things wherein they disagreed, he drew from some of their well known, ancient poets, on points they could all agree. The audience was made up of Jews, Epicureans, Stoics, and in the middle of them all was a former Jewish rabbi turned disciple of Jesus, quoting the pagan poets Aratus and Epimenides.

According to the church fathers Clement of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, the phrase, "in him we live and move and have our being" was taken from a sixth or seventh century BC writing by Epimenides called "Cretica." The quote is spoken by the character Minos and is directed to Zeus. Later when Paul says, "We are his offspring" he is using a quote found in "Phaenomena" by fifth century BC philosopher Aratus and in the third century BC "Hymn to Zeus" by Cleanthes.

His goal of oneness begins with the baby step of common ground, and from that common ground he seeks to elevate his audience to walk on higher ground. Let's revisit the illustration of mother and child from the beginning of this writing and follow it as we walk through this famous sermon. While the ancient pagan poets Paul quotes were referring to the Greek god Zeus, the apostle of Jesus refocuses these facts around God and His Son Jesus.

Just as the mother creates the baby, He created us, originally and individually. "God that made the world and all things therein...seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things...as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring" (Acts 17:24, 25b, 28b).

Just as the mother exists separate from the baby, He exists separate from us. "God that made the world and all things therein...neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing" (Acts 17:24a, 25a).

Just as the mother is joined to the baby, He has joined Himself to us. "he be not far from every one of us:

For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:27b-28a).

Just as the mother and the baby are one, through His resurrected Son we are one with God. “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31).

The key to oneness in us is to be one in God, and that comes only through oneness in Christ and learning to love like Him.

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## CHAPTER 14

# IN DEATH

Written by **Chuck Webster**

### INTRODUCTION

The writer of Hebrews referred to people “who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:15), and most of us can relate to that fear. Those who do not believe in Christ are obsessed with avoiding death, or, if not avoiding it entirely, at least putting it off as long as possible. Perhaps finding the perfect workout, eating the right superfood, or taking a magic pill will extend life by a decade or more. In fact, it’s such an obsession that immortality is the subject of scores of books and movies (e.g., “The Age of Adaline,” “Eternals,” the upcoming “Fountain of Youth,” etc.; [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)).

This fear infects all human hearts to some extent, of course, and not just unbelievers. Followers of Christ are still filled with a sometimes-overwhelming sense of dread when we find out that the cancer is terminal. We stand at the gravesides of loved ones and wonder anxiously how we’ll live in a world without a spouse or child. It’s sometimes difficult for all of us to confront the inevitable consequences of aging, in part at least because it reminds us that we will someday die (cf. Hebrews 9:27). Our thoughts about death shape so many aspects of the lives that we live, whether followers of Jesus or not.

But there are important differences between our perspective on death when compared to those outside of Christ. As Christians, we believe in One who went to the

tomb . . . and rose on the third day. We believe that He faced and conquered our greatest enemy, and because of that, our fears of death are tempered. We don't "sorrow as others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Instead, we recognize that God will walk with us "through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4) and that He has unimaginable blessings for those who die in Christ.

## **THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE**

The purpose of the grand narrative of Scripture is to point us to Jesus Christ, God incarnate, and for us to believe in Him with all our hearts. It helps to read the Word of God through that lens, because then God is more likely to reveal Himself to us in all His glory. When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3), Moses offered several objections, but one of particular interest is in Exodus 3:13: "Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?," God's response is enormously profound: "'I AM WHO I AM.' And He said, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" Moreover God said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: "The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is My memorial to all generations"' (Exodus 3:14-15). This name—often written in English as "YHWH" or, with vowels inserted, as "Yahweh"—speaks to God's eternity and omnipotence. It can mean, "I AM WHO I AM" or possibly "I CAUSE TO BE BECAUSE I CAUSE TO BE" (Stuart 121). Theologically, it pointed to God's nature as the Supreme Deity, the one and only true God. Practically, it suggested to Moses that the

success of his mission did not depend on his eloquence, leadership, or effectiveness, but on the One who was commissioning him. Moses would bring about the freedom of Israel not through his own power but through the power of the eternal God.

This unique name of God pointed to His identity and also to His special relationship with Israel, His covenant people. It should not shock us, then, to read about the extreme reactions in John 8 in response to something Jesus said in His dialogue with the religious leaders of His day. The Pharisees despised Jesus and looked for any opportunity to undermine His work. After an extended argument with them, Jesus said, "If I honor Myself, My honor is nothing. It is My Father who honors Me, of whom you say that He is your God. Yet you have not known Him, but I know Him. And if I say, 'I do not know Him,' I shall be a liar like you; but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:54-56). They were incredulous: "You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?" (John 8:57). But Jesus' response shocked them even more: "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). They knew that He was alluding to God's use of the sacred name in His encounter with Moses and that He was applying it to Himself. In effect, they knew that He was calling Himself God. Their response to what they interpreted as blasphemy is consequently unsurprising: "Then they took up stones to throw at Him; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by" (John 8:59).



John's gospel is, of course, replete with these self-referential statements from Jesus:

- "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51).
- "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12; 9:5).
- "I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7, 9).
- "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).
- "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14).
- "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).
- "I am the true vine" (John 15:1, 5).

The most interesting of those as we wrestle with thoughts concerning death is when He calls Himself "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). A few days earlier He had received news that His friend Lazarus was sick. When He and the disciples finally got to their friend's house, Lazarus had been dead four days. Martha and Mary were understandably devastated. Martha confronted Jesus with what sounded like a pointed accusation: "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). Jesus responded, "Your brother will rise again" (John 11:23), to which Martha said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). Jesus took the first-person verb "to be" (semantically related to the "I AM THAT I AM" of Exodus 3) and joined it to a reference to His power over life and death: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26). A few minutes later He went to the tomb of Lazarus and raised him from the dead.

This action had an immediate effect on those who saw it, of course: "Then many of the Jews who had come to

Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him” (John 11:45). But the hearts of others were so hard that they did not believe even when they witnessed this extraordinary act. Instead, they reported what He had done to the Pharisees, who began earnestly to search for a way to have Him killed (John 11:46-53).

The Lord’s raising of Lazarus has far-reaching theological implications. This miracle led inexorably to Jesus’ crucifixion, which points to a humbling and hopeful conclusion. In order for Jesus to bring Lazarus back to life, He had to face the cross. He died so Lazarus could live. But of course the implications extend far beyond Lazarus and his sisters. Jesus would die—not just so Lazarus could live—but so that all who follow Him can live. When He said, “I am the resurrection and the life,” He was alluding to a greater resurrection: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation” (John 5:28-29). Jesus’ message through John to suffering Christians in the first century and beyond was, “I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death” (Revelation 1:18).

Lazarus, though newly alive, one day faced death again, but it’s likely that his fear of it had either diminished significantly or disappeared entirely. He knew from experience that the Lord was present with him in death. In a similar way, we have full confidence that when we face our appointment with the grave, Jesus has already been there . . . and He came back with a promise. Because He

conquered death, He assures everyone who follows Him that death is not the end.

### **O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?**

The Corinthian church had several issues, not the least of which was their questioning certain aspects of the resurrection of Christ. Consequently, in 1 Corinthians 15 Paul went to great lengths to demonstrate the centrality of the physical resurrection of Christ to the Corinthians' Christian faith. He began the chapter by pointing them to the core truths of Christianity: "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The last of those historical facts—"that He rose again"—was Paul's primary focus, though, because he spends the rest of the chapter proving its truthfulness and exploring its implications. He first lists some of the people who saw Jesus in His resurrected body—Peter, the rest of the apostles, over 500 people at once, James, the apostles (again), and then Paul himself (1 Corinthians 15:4-8).

He then forcefully points out that if Christ was not raised, the Christian faith is found to be false: "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are

of all men the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:13-19). But, of course, "Christ is risen from the dead," and—most relevant to our thoughts concerning death—He "has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). In other words, His coming out of the tomb never to die again sets the precedent for the hope of all Christians. In Adam all die, but in Christ all are made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

What this means practically is that His resurrection destroyed death's stranglehold over creation. Death reigned from Adam to Christ, but in Christ death lost its grip. "The last enemy that will be destroyed is death," Paul writes (1 Corinthians 15:26). In the resurrection, our bodies will be changed, and we will be raised incorruptible (1 Corinthians 15:52). We will experience what we long for in the deepest levels of our being: "So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?' The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

These corruptible bodies—wrecked by chronic pain, cancer, the debilitating effects of disease, the inevitable consequences of aging—will be changed in a moment. Christians currently affected by disabilities that make it difficult or impossible for them to walk will move about freely in their renewed bodies. Followers of Jesus who deal with chronic pain will be freed once and for all from their burden. Those who deal with chronic anxiety and

debilitating depression will experience relief that they've only dreamed of. For Christians, death will open the door to living as God intended us to live—free of the consequences of sin's effects on this broken world and equipped to live in perfect union with the Triune God in all of His glory and love.

As a result, we face death differently from our friends who do not follow Christ. When loved ones who followed Jesus pass away, we sorrow, but not as those “who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We trust that He “will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14) and that we will be present together with other believers and with the Lord. Because of this confidence, we “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18).

### **THE VALLEY OF THE SHADOW OF DEATH**

Psalm 23 has probably been read at more funerals than any other passage, and with good reason. It contains a shepherd's beautiful reflections on the Good Shepherd, the One who leads us, sustains us, and protects us. Perhaps the most touching part of the Psalm is the middle, though, where David writes the words that have comforted untold millions of hearts: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). It is true that God gives us hope after death, but it is also true that He provides us with His presence as we are dying. God is omnipresent, of course, but it is consistent with Scripture to understand that He is especially present at particular moments. Isaiah would later write, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; And through the rivers, they shall not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you

shall not be burned, Nor shall the flame scorch you" (Isaiah 43:2). When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the fire, God manifested His presence to them (Daniel 3). He is "our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, Even though the earth be removed, And though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea. . . The Lord of hosts is with us; The God of Jacob is our refuge" (Psalm 46:1-2, 11). "Fear not, for I am with you; Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, Yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). God's presence has been given to us most fully in Jesus Christ. He was called Immanuel, which literally means, "God with us." Just before He ascended to the Father, He promises His apostles that "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). "You are with me" . . . "I will be with you" . . . "The Lord of hosts is with us" . . . "I am with you" . . . Many of these passages that promise God's presence refers to moments of extreme difficulty, such as persecution or death. Perhaps that's why Paul, as he anticipated facing Nero's sword from a Roman dungeon, sensed the Lord's presence in a special way: "But the Lord stood with me" (2 Timothy 4:17). I have noticed that faithful followers of Jesus often experience an overwhelming sense of peace as they face death. They are calm, confident, and hopeful. In fact, many of them experience excitement as they anticipate seeing the Lord in all of His glory, and this shouldn't surprise us. We were created to be in God's presence, and our struggles in this broken world are explained by the fact that we are not at home when we are away from Him. This is why Paul could write these words: "For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest

expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you" (Philippians 1:19-24). Those words should bring joy to our hearts. "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." Because God lived and died among us, and because the grave could not hold Him, we can be hopeful no matter what. As long as we live, we walk with Christ, and when we face our inevitable appointment with death, we know that door is a gateway to experiencing everything that God has promised to His children. "I will fear no evil, for You are with me."

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## CHAPTER 15

# ALWAYS

Written by **Rodney Livingston**

### INTRODUCTION

What a blessing it is to have the assurance that someone will always be with you! From creation, God knew in His infinite wisdom that it was not good for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). As a result, He made for man a helper. Eve's creation served many purposes, but it ultimately began with God's understanding that man needed someone with him. Personally, there are many times I do not enjoy being alone. For example: when I am traveling, when I am sick, and even when I'm in the dark, I want someone with me! Part of the created nature of mankind is to desire companionship and avoid loneliness. Thankfully, we have the promise made by God through the mouth of Jesus in Matthew 28:20 that we will never be alone. That promise will be our ultimate focus for this lecture. To preface our study, let us take a journey through the Bible and note other passages where God has promised to be with His people and identify important principles that echo the message of "I am with you always."

### WALK THROUGH THE SCRIPTURES

Our journey begins in the Old Testament in Genesis 12 when God calls to Abram and promises to be his God, to bless him, and to give him a nation – a nation that would come through the promised seed of Isaac. Later in Genesis 28:15, God provides more assurance when He speaks to Isaac's son, Jacob, in a dream and says, "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you

back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you." God promises to be with Jacob no matter the circumstances. In fact, even though God acknowledged that the Israelite nation would turn their backs on Him at some point, He still brought Jacob there. The Israelites were brought back through God's providence later, but God was with Jacob always. Soon after this occasion, God would provide assurance to Moses. In Exodus 3, God talked to Moses through a burning bush to convince him to go to Pharaoh to get the Israelites out of Egypt. Even with the phenomenon of a talking burning bush, Moses doubted and needed confirmation. God said to Moses, "I will certainly be with you" in Exodus 3:12. Not long after, Moses' well-trained soldier, Joshua, prepared to lead the people. Like his predecessor, Joshua struggled with confidence in assuming his role. In Joshua 1:5, God reassured him when He said, "No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you." Moses had informed Israel of this promise in Deuteronomy 31 when persuading them of Joshua's role in God's plan. These words were repeated in Hebrews 13:6 as a promise to God's people for the confidence they can have today in the same God of Moses and Joshua. Proceeding to Isaiah 41:10, God again promises to be with the people of Israel. This was a people who had replaced Him with idols and shown disrespect for Him through many generations. Although they had been punished for their disobedience and lack of trust, this was a people whom God desired to be with and not neglect. Verse 10 provides affirmation that the Israelites were not to fear or be dismayed because God was with them and would uphold them with His righteous hand. Continuing through the

pages of the prophets, God spoke a message of restoration for Israel through Jeremiah. He promised to be with them and not make a complete end to them as a nation, even though nations around them would indeed suffer a complete end (Jeremiah 30:11; 46:28). From the pages of the New Testament, we find Paul fearing for his life after departing Athens and headed to Corinth. Jesus said to Paul in Acts 18:10, "for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city." Jesus provided assurance to Paul by promising His presence - I will be with you always. God gives us the charge today to have confidence in His presence. According to Hebrews 13:5-6, He will be our Helper and never leave us, removing any potential for fear.

As we continue the exploration of the concept of God being with us, we must acknowledge that God's people are unique. In Genesis 48, Israel (Jacob) is about to die, and he is giving final instructions and blessings to his sons in Egypt. From verse 21, we read that Joseph is told by his father that God would be with him and deliver him back to the land of his fathers. Bible students know that Joseph's bones were indeed brought back to the promised land (Exodus 13:19) by Moses through an oath he made with his sons in Genesis 50. God chose the Hebrew people by virtue of Abram, which would eventually lead to the Israelite nation after Jacob's name was changed to Israel. The nation would then grow through his twelve sons. This relationship would be further developed with the Levite nation and the roles of priests. Moses explains God's desire to separate them from other people in order to be their Lord and God (Leviticus 20:24). God wants His people. He desires His people to be separate from the nations around

them. He has always been focused on a holy walk of His people, which is something made possible by the work of the priests at the tabernacle.

From my childhood until now, I cannot think about the presence of God without recalling the confidence that the shepherd boy David had in his God when approaching Goliath on the battlefield. As the large champion Goliath stood with his sword and armor before the small unskilled shepherd boy, David remained steadfast in the full trust in the presence of God with him in that moment and in that place. King Saul had granted David permission to go to battle after David reminded Saul of the times God had been with him as he protected the animals. Saul could not doubt God's presence in the life of David, and he certainly was not going to shake David's confidence in God's protection on the battlefield. As the small boy and the giant faced off, David addressed Goliath by saying, "You come to me with a sword, with a spear, and with a javelin. But I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defiled. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you and take your head from you. And this day I will give the carcasses of the camp of the Philistines to the birds of the air and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel. Then, all this assembly shall know that the Lord does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's, and He will give you into our hand" (I Samuel 17:45-47). Do we have that level of confidence in our God? Upon how many "battlefields" are we fighting without recognizing the value of God being there with us? What "battles" in our life need the presence of God to ensure victory and so that others can receive the

knowledge of the saving power of God?

One of the most interesting occasions in the Bible occurs in the book of Ezekiel. In Ezekiel 37:1, God takes the spirit of Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones and sits him in the middle of them. Near the end of the context in verse 14, God reminds Ezekiel of His power and desire for His children. How remarkable that even in a land of dry bones, God desires to dwell in them and live through their lives. In verse 6 He says, "I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the Lord." God's desire is to walk with His people. He wants to be their God. He wants to supply all their needs (Philippians 4:19). What an assurance that the same is true for us today! Even in a valley of "dryness," our God is willing to be present and to refresh our spirit (2 Corinthians 4:16). God desires to supply us and be all that we need if we will only ask (James 1:5). Why would we want to lie around as dried bones when we serve a God who is omnipresent and wants to be our guide in life? His word is to be a light and a lamp to our lives (Psalm 119:105). If God desired to restore a dead Israel, imagine what He can do with our lives if we commit to walking in the light (1 John 1:7) and confessing our sins (1 John 1:9) so that He might be able to cleanse us and forgive us of all unrighteousness. Our God wants to be with us always!

### **MATTHEW 28:20**

Having established God's desire to be with His people from the very beginning, let us now focus on the words of Jesus from Matthew 28:20: "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you

always, even to the end of the age Amen." Those with Bible knowledge will recognize this verse as the conclusion of the larger context referred to as "The Great Commission." These were some of the last recorded words by Jesus and often termed the "marching orders" for His church. Our obligation is to go and disciple people, helping them to understand the essentiality of baptism in salvation, and continuing to teach them all things that God has commanded us. In this effort, Jesus promises to be with us, always. In like manner, God is with us, always. From the beginning in Matthew 1:23, Jesus was called Immanuel, which means "God with us." As His ministry was in full swing, we read in Matthew 18:20 where He promised "where two or three were gathered in His name, He would be in the midst of them." And now here in chapter 28 near the end of His earthly life, He again promises to be with us, always. Stuart Weber states that Matthew 28:20 is written in a doubling of the language: "I myself, am continually with you always" (Holman 486). Likewise, William Hendriksen views this verse as not only a promise, but more than that, a fact (Hendriksen 1003). Jesus is emphasizing this part of the message by speaking in a doublet method. He is committing to be with us every step of the way until the end of the world. It is a daily presence as we take hold of the banner of Christianity and raise it high for the Lord. As we teach and assist souls in baptism for the remission of sins into the name of the Godhead, we can be assured of God's presence. We can take comfort in the confidence that God's presence is with us always as we carry the gospel into all nations. The power is not within us, but rather it is taking the presence of God with us that makes the gospel so powerful.

In addition, the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:20 represent His way of saying, "I am God; I am deity", (Kenner 125). As Christians, we know that God is omnipresent. There are some "religious" groups who present issues with Jesus being God and existing in the beginning with God, as stated in John 1:1. Jesus here claims the omnipresent power of God and His presence with us always. The awesome magnitude of the Great Commission could quickly overwhelm us if we do not remind ourselves of God's promise. The presence of the Lord undergirded the possibility of the Commission because God is going to be with us to the very end of the world (Jackson 77). Terms like "surely," "truly," and "lo" are all attempts to translate God's reinforcement of the promise He has made to His people throughout all of history. God's promise is clear: when we choose to be His people and follow His commandments, He will be with us, always!

Finally, let us consider Jesus' reference to the "end of age" in Matthew 28:20. Sellers Crain states that the end of the age was the Christian Age, the time of the church in which we find ourselves now and will continue until the return of Christ. Jesus is empowering His disciples now to make more disciples until the time arrives when no more disciples can be made due to the closing of the age (Truth for Today, 484). James Burton Coffman concluded the understanding of the phrase in this manner: "A solicitous and loving providence always watches over the fortunes of God's church" (Coffman, 526). "Until the end of the world (or age)" is a promise that far exceeds any one lifetime or generation of people. It is the universal promise to all of God's children in the age of the church. As we engage in each day of our lives with its own trials and difficulties, we

have the same assurance as David to stare into the face of the giant and know that God is with us. That assurance extends to us from the same promise He made to Abram, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Israel, Paul, and so many others throughout history. May we all unite in saying, "Blessed assurance: Jesus is mine!"

### **INVITATION**

Let us be reminded that there is one place where God will not go with us. It's described as the "far country" in Luke 15:13 - the place where the younger son traveled to waste his father's possessions. While God will not go with us to the "far country," He can see us while we are a great way off and will come running to receive us (Luke 15:20). While the father of the younger son in the parable was not in the "far country" with him physically, his heart was longing for his son to return every day. Our God desires to be with us, always. His heart desires that we love Him and remain close to Him, always. He promises to remain with us, as long as our decision is to remain with Him, always. His desire is for all to be saved and to avoid the possibility of perishing (2 Peter 3:9). Our prayer should be not only for God to stay with us, but also for His help in our desire to stay with Him before the ultimate date of separation when He says to those on the left, "depart from me" (Matthew 25:41). Then and only then would we see our fate in such a way that God would not be with us, in a separation that will last an eternity. If our desire is to go to the place prepared for the devil and his angels, God will allow us to go and even send us there. But as a holy God, He refuses to join us if we make that decision. May all our souls choose wisely!

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## CHAPTER 16

# IN THE BUSY YEARS

Written by **Heidi Rhymes**

### INTRODUCTION

The scriptures tell us over and over again that God is with us. "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). "The Lord your God, He is the one who goes with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you" (Deuteronomy 31:6). We often feel like He has left us, but that is not the case. Our selfish desires consume our every move and we fail to devote time to our Creator. We become so wrapped up in things that keep us busy, moving further away from Him.

Webster's dictionary defines "busy" as having a great deal to do or to keep occupied. I get it, I'm a preacher's wife, a mom, a nurse, I have an Etsy business, and I don't live near my family. It is easy to let our priorities shift. But, we must remember that no matter how busy with earthly matters we may get - we must not leave God out. Jesus said "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). God will be with us and it will be encouraging to us, if we seek to do His will first.

I understand why I was chosen for the topic because of the stage of life I am in, but I believe that we can be busy no matter what age we are. The scripture thankfully gives us examples of ladies that God was with, in all stages of life. The first two people we know and can learn from are Mary and Martha in Luke 10. As we remember, Mary is very

attentive and stopped everything she was doing to pay attention to the words Jesus was saying. Martha is distracted by the other duties that she has as a host and fails to give her full attention to Jesus in that moment. It is understandable that she wanted to be a good host, as most do, and that a few extra hands would have helped. We can empathize with Martha and the stress she was under, but verses 41 and 43 remind us that there are times where we must stop everything we are doing to realize what is important and give all of our energy to it. Stopping to listen to Jesus and dive into His teaching was much more important than any home's cleanliness or guest's drink, and Mary understood that.

With that foundation in mind, and to deal properly with the assigned topic, we direct our attention to the word "busy." Each letter represents a picture of a lady, or ladies, in Scripture that dealt with busy times and the prevailing temptation of giving in to their pressures instead of relying totally on God. The challenge here will be to identify myself in these examples, and then resolve to pursue God above all else!

### **B - BUSINESS WOMEN:**

Unlike the model of the home in the past, many women today must work outside of the home to provide for the family. Or, to at least supplement the income of their spouse. It's not always easy, especially if you do not have a support system to help you with all the other responsibilities you have around the house. The woman in Proverbs 31, the virtuous woman, was a worker. She worked with her hands, she bought a field, she planted a vineyard, among other things. She was a busy business woman, and God praised her for all she did. Undoubtedly,

she had a full plate. She was being pulled in different directions. She had so much going on, but even still, God was with her.

Another businesswoman in Scripture is Lydia. We learn of her in Acts 16. Verse 14 tells us she was a dealer in purple cloth, but she was also searching for truth. God sent Paul to her to teach her the truth. The Spirit of Jesus led Paul right to her (Acts 16:7ff). Her business ventures were important to her, and I am sure they weren't ignored by God, but her spiritual condition was of utmost importance. God was making sure that Lydia's soul was saved. He was with her.

What about the story of Ruth? God was with that busy, working woman. Ruth was a widow, and was caring for her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi. Away from her own family and friends, she had to work to support Naomi. God was with her! Ruth chose to follow God (Ruth 1:16). She put God first in all she did, and He was with her. He ultimately provided all the blessings she needed, including a place in the lineage of our Lord and Savior. Ladies, if you are a business woman and you always put God first, He will be with you and He will bless you!

### **U - UP IN YEARS:**

Those who are not up in years yet probably think "surely I won't be busy then," I know I do. But according to those I know who are in this stage, they are still busy. The busyness is a different kind of busy, but the busyness remains nonetheless. Some still must work to pay for insurance. Some have doctors appointments. Some must

care for grandchildren. Some tend to spouses who may be in ill health. Really, the list is endless.

Old age is a time where women can still be busy doing the work of the Lord. Older women may laugh like Sarah did when God told her He still had work for her to do. He may not tell you that you are going to have a baby, but you may find yourself raising a grandchild! God may use you to cook meals for someone, or teach Bible class, or pray for those who are hurting. When we are up in years, it is not a time to retire from the work of the Lord. It can be a time of tremendous opportunities to serve God. God “does not withdraw His eyes from the righteous” (Job 36:7) and those who listen and serve Him will “spend their days in prosperity and their years in pleasures” (Job 36:11). God will be with those who continue to use their older years devoted to God through love and service.

Another worthy example is Timothy’s grandmother. Lois was busy doing God’s work. We know this because God made sure to mention her in Scripture as one who had a good influence on Timothy, with a faith “that dwelt first” in her (2 Timothy 1:5). Yes, every stage of life can be busy, but may our busyness consist of serving the Lord and leading others to Him.

### **S - STAY AT HOME MOM**

There is an ad I saw one time for a mom that said, “On call 24/7, must be doctor, nurse, cook, referee, housekeeper, teacher, driver, shopper, Bible teacher, coach, and much more.” No days off, no vacation, no income. No person in their right mind would say “sign me up, that sounds amazing!” Yet we do. God is with us in each

of these moments. He designed us for this position, and He promised to be with us. We may not have time or means to go on mission trips, or do so-called “great things” in the name of service to the Lord at this stage, but as the famous quote says, “a woman’s greatest mission field is in the walls of her own home.” Peter said that wives can win their husband to the Lord, without a word, submitting to God by serving our husband as the Lord instructs us (1 Peter 3:1-2). We can lead our children to the Lord in this same way. In our homes we can teach them and show them by example that God is with us, and that He is the Lord of our life.

In 2 Timothy 1:5, Timothy’s mother was also able to teach him. She demonstrated a great faith that she passed down to him, which allowed God to use him in a great way. We should be more concerned about teaching our children to be men and women of God, rather than anything else. The most important task we have as a mother is to instill a faith in our children that encourages them to believe God is with them and to seek Him first.

### **Y - YOUNG LADIES**

For this category, we will be referring to young ladies of high school or college age. Ladies in this group are typically very busy with social activities, school, jobs, dating, sports, clubs, and so on. Many decisions are made at this stage of life that will affect their future. It is easy to get so wrapped up in all of this to put serving God on the back burner. Unfortunately, many women make life long decisions, and leave God out, which result in many regrets later in life. Does God leave us when we are busy? No. Serving Him and making time for God must be a priority in our life no matter what stage we are in. You will never

regret making time for God, spending time with Him or clinging to Him.

Mary was a young woman, probably planning a wedding, doing all the things young girls in that age did. Yet God had a job for her to do. Even in her busy life, she lived pleasing to God. He found her worthy to be the mother of Jesus Christ. Was God with her? Absolutely. When her family and friends probably accused her of sinning, when her life didn't turn out like she had planned, when there was no room in the inn, when she couldn't find her Son in Jerusalem, when she had to watch her Son be beaten, and die on the cross, was God with her? Yes. In every stage God was with her, and He will be with you no matter what you have going on in your life.

Life can be busy, but life is short. In her book, [Seek The Precious Moments](#), Becky Blackmon states it best when she reminds us that "Being a Christian woman is your highest calling. It is the greatest honor you will ever know in this life. Being God's daughter is the most supreme honor and blessing a woman can realize, and surrendering to Him is the key" (23). In every stage of life we must not forget to cling to our Creator. There is nothing more important. He cares for us, blesses us, wants what is best for us, and He is with us.

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## CHAPTER 17

# IN THE QUIET YEARS

Written by **Tish Clarke**

### INTRODUCTION

God created the perfect environment in the Garden of Eden for man to thrive, grow and build happy relationships. By His communication to Adam and Eve, and the quality time He spent with them, He provided the building blocks for building a harmonious relationship. He instituted the first person, the first marriage, and the first family. Adam knew his God and communed with Him in the garden. Two souls united to share in love and companionship “until death do them part.” If it is God’s Will, two become three, and four, and five... and a family is born—***truly the busy years!***

Decades zoom by at the speed of light. Before we know it the pitter patter of little feet has grown silent and is replaced by the sound of creaking bones and the tap, tap, tap of wooden canes. Too often time takes away our dearest on earth, our spouse. Whether it is through death or a form of dementia, the years which unfold before our eyes are too quiet, too long, and too alone.

When sin in the Garden of Eden shattered the bond Adam and Eve shared with God, He did not walk away. Yes, they bore the consequences for their sins, but in a beautiful gift of compassion and tender mercy, He created a bridge across this seemingly impossible chasm of sin for this broken couple (Genesis 3:8-19) and all mankind to follow—He gave His only begotten Son (John

3:16). This tragic moment in time was foreseen by God, and He had a plan. Would this same God be caught by surprise at the quiet and lonely years faced by His creation? No, certainly not—He has a plan: God sees and knows all the joys and heartaches our lives will hold, and He will never leave us (Hebrews 13:5). He understands when our lives seem hopeless and meaningless. To feel the comfort and peace through these difficult times, that only He can provide, we must in turn hold onto Him. He created us; therefore, He knows and understands when our hearts break at the silence that surrounds us. How do we rest in His arms when the quiet is closing in around us? We must build a solid relationship with our God and our brethren.

### **MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY GOD**

Let's begin with a beautiful Psalm in the Old Testament. The writer of Psalm 146 opens with a command to the reader to praise the Lord and then he makes it personal, "Praise **ye** the Lord. Praise the Lord, **O my soul**. While I live will **I praise the Lord**: I will sing praises unto **my God** while **I have any being**." These statements are commands, and they are deeply personal. If I want a relationship with my God, then I must praise Him in song. It's hard to have silence when a song is playing. Crack a song book, turn on acapella singing through a playlist or on YouTube, and praise your God. Dear sisters, I would never say the tears will dry up and fade away if you just "whistle a happy tune!" But the sadness and tears and devastation of loneliness will fade and become more manageable in that moment of time through the awesome power of His Word and the messages of His love and care in songs.

Before he discusses why God is worthy of our praises, the writer states another command, "Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." The rulers of our country and mankind are just like me. They think like I do, they breathe and live like I do, and they die. They can do nothing special to save me in my time of despair. Why would I place my hope in someone who is not able to save me? Too often during our weakest times, we tend to turn to others instead of the One who truly understands because He created us. When our despair tries to overtake our minds and pull us into a black abyss, we need to reach out to our God. He is mighty, knowledgeable, and sees everything we are going through in our lives. The Psalmist continues, "the Lord raiseth them that are bowed down: the Lord loveth the righteous: The Lord preserveth the strangers; he relieveth the fatherless and widow: but the way of the wicked he turneth upside down. The Lord shall reign for ever, even thy God, O Zion, unto all generations." Therefore, "Praise ye the Lord" (Psalm 146:8-10). Through the gift of praise to our God in song, the silence fades away, and is replaced with a melody sweet and pure.

The Hebrews' writer defined hope in chapter 6:19 when he compared hope to an anchor of the soul and is, "both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil." Picture an anchor compared to the size of the ship. Even though it is significantly smaller, its strength and purpose is to keep a ship stationary during a storm, and it has been successful for centuries. The storms of life that were attacking these Hebrew Christians were from the Devil. They had "the inclination to abandon Christ and

return to the Mosaic law and the Levitical priesthood. The purpose of the book of Hebrews is to establish Christ's preeminence and His replacement of the Mosaic law and turn His audience back to faith in Him and Him alone." Earlier in chapter 6, the writer reminded these Christians that because God is faithful to keep His promises, they could have tremendous comfort. They had found refuge from sin in the blood of Christ and laid hold of *hope*. Why turn back to something imperfect that could not save them? Surely that would be considered *hopeless*! The *hope* found in the Old Testament was the promise of the coming Son. The writer is telling them to hold onto the anchor of God's promise in the New Covenant, which gave them freedom from sin. What a tremendous comfort. God gave them *hope* which is "an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" if they only stayed in Him. That is true for us today. Hope is an anchor for our soul, both steadfast and sure. The anchor for our souls is the Word of God. When life is too quiet, turn to His Word. There are so many passages that will help our souls hope and sing again.

The very hairs are numbered on your heads (Luke 12:7); you are not alone. He will hear your cry and answer (Psalm 27:5). Your pain and hurt are so deep, and yet, He knows your anguish (Psalm 130:1-5). The Lord hears the cries of His people (Psalm 34:17-19), and He will strengthen your heart (Psalm 31:24). In your pain, do you feel so weak that you cannot stand? God will give you strength to face each day and each moment (Psalm 18:2). Imagine if Psalm 46 truly happened in your life, "Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the

mountains shake with the swelling thereof" (Psalm 46:2-3). This is hyperbole. It is not talking about the end of times. Can you fathom a world in which everything was destroyed and gone? While the earth and the oceans all raged in extreme chaos and created such great fear and trembling in our lives, there is One that is there even in the echoing silence as the shaking stops, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

Again, the Psalmist reminds us why we should hope in God in chapter 42, "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God: when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my meat day and night, while they continually say unto me, Where is thy God? When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday. Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? **hope thou in God:** for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance. O my God, my soul is cast down within me: therefore will I remember thee from the land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar. Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts: all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. Yet the Lord will command his lovingkindness in the day time, and in the night his song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life. I will say unto God my rock, Why hast thou forgotten me? why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a sword in my bones, mine enemies reproach me; while they say daily unto me, Where is thy God? Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and

why art thou disquieted within me? **hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God.**

### **MY RELATIONSHIP WITH MY BRETHREN**

Someone has said there are over 1000 passages dealing with brethren in the Bible. Each of us has said or thought something like this in our lives, "I don't know how people face this \_\_\_\_\_ (death of a loved one, illness, tragedy of some kind) without God and the church." Consider a few of the "one another" passages in the New Testament and their simple truths. My relationship with my brethren involves:

- Service - John 13:14 "If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet."
- Love - John 15:12 "This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you."
- Preference - Romans 12:10 "Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honor preferring one another."
- Accepting - Romans 15:7 "Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God"

What is the church but God's physical hands and mouth to uplift and strengthen the downtrodden. When you are feeling alone, do not turn away from His family. Run towards them. Do not be afraid to let this family know of your fears, your loneliness, and your despair in this quiet

time of your life. They will hold you and sustain you on earth if you let them. One day, you will be strong enough to lift a fallen sister because you have walked this lonely, quiet corridor.

After forty years of marriage, BJ and I are deeply blessed and truly thankful for each day we have each other. Too many are not granted the years with which we have been blessed. Whichever one of us precedes the other in death, it is our prayer that the one left behind stay strong and never lose faith. Trust in God who is worthy of your trust. Walk beside the brethren, who dearly love you and want to strengthen you through this quiet time in your life.

To the brethren who are endeavoring to be there for the broken hearted, many widows say they love to hear stories and memories of their loved ones. Don't be afraid to talk about them or ask about them. It helps keep their memory alive and they often feel joy with the retelling. When the service is over, and the dishes have all been returned, it is often at this moment that grief truly sets in because the quiet becomes unbearable. Continuously surround these sweet ones in your midst. One day, you may walk beside them and understand the quiet hour like never before. You will be what the Psalmist speaks of in this verse to the one who "had fainted, unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27:13-14). Only through your love and kindness, can the Lord be seen in this way in the land of the living. When all else fails, and the silence surrounds you to the point hopelessness, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you" (1 Peter 5:7).



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