

GOD WAITS AT THE END OF YOUR ROPE

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CHAPTER ONE: WHY GOD CARES FOR YOU

It is safe to say that everyone goes through bad times. Perhaps you have been laid off with no prospects of a new job. It could be the doctor's appointment when you learn that pain is a symptom of a disease. Or it might be a spouse who asks for a divorce. It could be failing to overcome an addiction or dealing with the consequences of bad decisions. During these times, the present is hard, the future looks impossible and life seems hopeless.

Whatever the problem, or how we chose to cope, eventually everyone reaches a point of being figuratively at the end of their rope - out of options with few choices. That is *precisely* the moment for which God is waiting. Eventually, everyone discovers that regardless of personal circumstances, he or she is unable to handle life's challenges on our own. God, who specializes in solving the difficult and impossible, is there in that very moment.

CARRIE'S STORY

Carrie^a grew up in a Christian home with parents who volunteered in her Sunday School classes, were actively involved in her life throughout high school and helped with her college expenses. Carrie ran into her first major problem at 23 when she was picked up by the police. Although the sentence was for six months, because of a substance abuse problem, she spent the next five years in and out of a series of half-way houses, jails and prisons. With only seven weeks to go to successfully complete probation, Carrie was placed back in prison again for violating the conditions of her probation.

Carrie reached the point this past week when she admitted her need for a spiritual change and started patterns of behavior that focused on her relationship with God and changes

^a Carrie's story is true, her name has been changed. This is true the other stories that follow.

she needed to make in her lifestyle. Having been close to Carrie throughout her journey, it was clear to me that she had reached the end of her rope and was finally looking to God for His help.

THE PRODIGAL SON'S STORY

Most people are familiar with the story of the prodigal son. The prodigal son chose to take a path of personal gratification with no regard for his long-term future. He finally came to his senses and decided to beg for his father's tolerance so he could receive the basic necessities that he knew his father provided his servants. Certainly, he reasoned, this would be better than sinking so low as to eat the slop of pigs, animals that the Jewish faith taught should not even be touched.

What the son did not know, was that the father had been waiting anxiously for his son's return. "But when he was still a long way off, His father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him."¹ Instead of banishing the prodigal son to the servants' quarters, the father welcomed him and immediately threw a party to celebrate his son's return. Instead of sneaking him back and hoping no one noticed, he invited everyone to his home to share his good fortune with them. No recriminations were made, no deals were cut. His father immediately forgave the prodigal's past mistakes and took him back as a full member of the family.

When the other son demanded an explanation of his father, we hear why the father reacted the way he did. "But we *had*^b to celebrate and rejoice for the brother of yours was dead and has begun to live and was lost and has been found"². In Jesus' parable of the lost coin, he

^b My emphasis

emphasized this principle by saying, “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”³.

HOW CAN GOD LOVE SOMEONE LIKE ME?

Although we may feel unworthy, or even uninterested in God, He will not give up on us. God describes in great detail in Psalms 139 a picture of his faithfulness. This is not a generic, feel-good Bible passage, it was written by God for *you* personally, and share in great detail how He feels about you. These verses show how much He cares through His plans and actions.

HE KNOWS YOU INTIMATELY

**O LORD, You have searched me and known me ...
And are intimately acquainted with all my ways⁴**

When I first read this passage, I thought that if God really knew everything about me, things that my closest friends and family did not know, that God would want nothing to do with me. Why would He? He would know that sometimes I fudge the truth, that my motives are not always the best and that I am angry at people, even when I am silent.

However, God’s response is spelled out in verse five, “You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me.” A speaker once illustrated this point during a sermon in our church when he gave everyone a quarter and told them to put the quarter in one hand, make a fist and then put the other hand on top. This is how God responds, knowing everything he knows about us. He protects us!

HE WILL NOT LET YOU ESCAPE FROM HIM

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there⁵

Carrie was always trying to escape from God. She told me that she could not imagine why anyone could love her since she did not love herself. Because of her past, she *knew* she did not deserve a chance at a relationship, a career, a family or a future. Yet, God continued to wait for her to reach the point where she would look around for Him.

We just found out that Carrie is now in isolation for 30 days. God obviously wants Carrie's total attention, without the distractions of the outside influences. He is there waiting to talk to her, to let her know she is deeply loved and that He is with her, even in solitary confinement.

How about you? Do you feel undeserving of a relationship with God? Do past decisions and current failures make you feel like running away from God? Well I have good news and bad news, God is there no matter where you go or what you do. He will never let you go!

HE MADE YOU EXACTLY AS YOU ARE

**For You formed my inward parts; You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made⁶**

Many of Carrie's problems come from her lack of self esteem and insecurity. Although she is smart, attractive and talented, she continually makes decisions based on her current circumstances instead of what is best for her in the future. In the right environment, she excels, in the wrong environment, she fails.

God is not surprised by this at all. In fact, He specifically designed her with all of her strengths and weaknesses. Her problems are not a result of her personality traits, but of not allowing God to use her personality and circumstances in the way He sees fit.

Remember that God specifically created you just the way you are, for a specific purpose. He designed you to make a difference in the world around you using your specific gifts, talents and personality. God chose you. Allow Him to show you His best, instead of settling for your best.

HE THINKS ABOUT YOU CONSTANTLY

**How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand⁷**

Having been married for over 31 years, I often think about my wife during the day. However, with the pressures of work and other priorities, I can go hours without a thought of what is happening with her. God, however, is perfect. He thinks of you and your situation constantly. Just like the number of grains of sand on a beach, God's thoughts about you and what you are going through right now are impossible to count. He knows everything about your life and thinks of ways to comfort, guide, encourage, support, provide for and love you.

CHAPTER TWO: THE PURPOSE FOR TRIALS

This was turning into the week when everything went wrong. The monthly conference call with the owner was rescheduled for tomorrow instead of 10 days from today. The car developed an unexpected coolant problem that couldn't be fixed for two days and the other car was already being used. Several emergencies came up that had to be resolved immediately. Problems surfaced with the vacation later in the month. And so on, and so on. It seemed like anything that could go wrong was going wrong, and it was only Wednesday! How could God allow these things into my life? I was trying to serve Him and needed His help in smoothing the way, not permitting problems to get in the way.

Although we often look at the difficulties of life as road blocks, God has a different perspective – an eternal one! He uses everything that happens to us as a way to build spiritual character and make a difference in our lives and those around us. Romans 8:28 tells us that, “God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” How do we begin to believe this and then show through our attitudes and actions we really trust that He knows what He is doing?

SEAN'S STORY

The Sean I ran into a couple of years ago was completely different from the junior who was in my high school youth group. He had gone through a divorce and was now a single parent of three small children. Life had not turned out as he expected and he was angry at God. He was unhappy with many things in his life and didn't think they could ever change. He had begged God to show Himself and was convinced that any attempt at a relationship with God

was a waste of time. Sean told me that he was ready to give up spiritually and was going to give God “one more chance” to show He was there.

Fast forward two years to present day and I see a man who has been taking his kids to church (and they love it). In the past year, he started searching for ways to minister to others. And, he has gotten reacquainted with a college girlfriend who has agreed to marry him. In less than two years, Sean went from hopeless, to extremely happy about his life and future. I asked Sean this week what had caused the change and he said he finally stopped trying to make everything happen and just left things up to God. He was at the end of his resources and needed God to take control.

JOB’S STORY

Most people have heard of Job, the Old Testament patriarch who experienced trials and then endured the judgment and advice of his friends. This is a wonderful story in which God gives us a glimpse of how things look behind the curtains in heaven. And, through this simple story a powerful truth is shared of how God and Satan use the same difficulties in our lives.

Job is described as a man who “was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil”⁸ He was very wealthy with seven sons and three daughters. Job’s life takes a different turn when Satan had an audience with God and they began to discuss Job. God was understandable proud of Job and said to Satan, “there is no one like him on the earth”⁹.

Satan responded with two questions and two statements, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your

face."¹⁰ Satan identifies his objective for mankind, to cause us to blame God for our problems, instead of having faith in God.

God responds to Satan by doing the opposite of what most of us would do, He allows Satan to try to prove his theory at the expense of someone God has described as unique on the earth. "Then the LORD said to Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him."¹¹

After Job lost his children and everything he owned he said, "'Naked I came from my mother's womb, And naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.'" Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God."¹²

When Satan next came into God's presence, he admitted his plan did not work, but, said that if Job were personally afflicted that would certainly cause him to curse God to His face. God responded by giving Satan permission persecute Job up to the point of taking his life. When Job had boils all over his body and was in excruciating pain, Job's wife told him to curse God and die. Job responded with, "'Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?" In all this Job did not sin with his lips."¹³

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO US TODAY?

We can take comfort in the fact that regardless of whatever comes our way in life, God is never surprised by it. As the eternal optimist, God uses everything at His disposal to work in our lives and, despite our weaknesses, uses us to make a difference in those around us.

Because He is in charge of history and the laws of the universe, we can rest assured that He is at work in our lives.

SATAN CANNOT HARM YOU WITHOUT GOD'S PERMISSION

Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail¹⁴

At Jesus' final Passover, Jesus said that Satan was *demanding* permission of God to attack Simon. Interestingly enough, the request was not denied, instead Jesus told Simon that he had prayed for him and that his faith would not fail. Jesus knew the outcome of this testing and changed Simon's name to Peter to signify that he would become the rock of the church of Jerusalem.

It is a great comfort to know that God is always aware of Satan's attacks. Satan twice asked permission of God to persecute Job and both times God allowed it, but placed limits on Satan. God knew the end result, but still allow Satan to attack Job.

Job's response to God's interaction with him was a deeper understanding of God. Job said after his trials, "I know that You can do all things, And that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted. 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' "Therefore I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." 'Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.' "*I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You^c*; Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes."¹⁵

Remember that God permits trials in your life, knowing that the result of your trusting Him is more spiritual character that will ultimately impact others for eternity.

GOD USES THE BAD AS WELL AS THE GOOD TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good¹⁶

^c My emphasis

If anyone had a right to hold a grudge, it was Joseph. Taunted mercilessly as a child by his brothers (eleven of them, no less), he was kidnapped and thrown in a pit with the intent of killing him. He was sold into slavery instead, taken far from home and then punished by his captors, even though he did not deserve it. Later in life, after God had used him to save the known world from starvation, his brothers came to ask for food, not knowing who he was. Instead of being angry or punishing them, Joseph told them that despite their evil intentions, God used them to start in motion His plan to use him to provide food for the world during a worldwide famine.

Does it feel as if you are in the pit like Joseph, waiting for a series of bad things to happen? Are you unable to understand why *you* must deal with your impossible situation and choose the best of all bad choices? Perhaps you, like Joseph and Job, are being unfairly attacked, when you have done all the right things, had good motives and tried to help others. Do you feel hopeless and wonder if God even hears your prayers at all?

I spoke with a friend last night who said he had been praying for over a year that God would give some kind of sign that He is there and cares. He said it felt like there was no one at the other end of the phone line. He felt completely hopeless and said that if a relationship with God required anything from him, it was destined to fail since he was a zero and anything multiplied by zero equals zero.

If you feel that way, fortunately, God knows exactly how you feel and has given someone to help in whatever situation you find yourself.

GOD GIVES US THE POWER TO MAKE IT THROUGH LIFE'S DIFFICULTIES

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves¹⁷

If you look closely at the men who Jesus chose to be his disciples, you would have to ask *why* they were selected. Most of them had few, if any, redeeming qualities when he asked them to follow him. Throughout Jesus' ministry, they proved many times they did not truly have faith in him. Even in the upper room, the night before he was crucified, they were clueless. Knowing this, why did Jesus choose these men?

Jesus chose the disciples and invested his life in them for the same reason he chooses us and works in our lives, because of *His character* and the *potential* that he sees in us. So to slightly change my friend's example, we can be confident God is in our lives because our zero plus God's infinite grace and character always equals infinity.

In the scripture at the beginning of this section, Paul tells us that God intentionally chose to put divinity in our weak bodies ("earthen vessels") so that we will have to trust God instead of ourselves. In the verses that follow¹⁸ Paul shares how it feels to go through difficulties with God's help.

Are you afflicted by things outside your control? God promises you will not be crushed.

Are you perplexed as to why you are experiencing these problems now? God promises to help you avoid despair.

Are you persecuted for your faith or misunderstood when your intentions are only pure ones? God promises not to forsake you.

Are you struck down by life and the unfairness of it all? God promises you will make it through and not be destroyed.

God has committed His infinite resources and character to you. Even though we may reach the point of total despair like Job, God assures us there *is* a reason and that no matter what happens, He is actively involved in our lives.

After the disciples received the Holy Spirit, they were transformed from men who were faithless and fearful to men who shared the Gospel with the world with absolutely no concern for their personal safety or reputation. They experienced first-hand Jesus' promise that they would "receive power"¹⁹ after the Holy Spirit came upon them.

Is it possible today to experience that same confidence, despite the storms of life that swirl all around us? Jesus answers that question with an emphatic, yes! He promised that he would give us a helper to be with us forever²⁰.

Our responsibility is to simply trust God. Does having faith in God's plan and the Holy Spirit's intervention seem impossible because of the size of the problems? We can pray like the father who asked Jesus to heal his demon possessed son, "I do believe; help my unbelief."²¹

The Holy Spirit will take our prayer and bring it personally into the presence of God. How can anyone doubt that God will not act on our behalf with such a strong advocate?

GOD PROMISES TO USE TRIALS TO DEVELOP SPIRITUAL CHARACTER

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.²²

God ultimate objective for one who has become a Christian is spiritual maturity. Like physical conditioning, spiritual conditioning requires time and consistency. As we go through life, we are *forced* to trust God for finances, health, patience, understanding, purpose and so on and so on. The testing of our faith helps us develop the traits that God knows we need to be transformed into a mature Christian.

Peter shares the building blocks of spiritual character in 2 Peter 1:5-8. They start with faith and include moral excellence, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, brotherly kindness and love.

The temptation, of course, is to focus on *our role* in the spiritual development process. Instead of worrying about what we need to do and feeling woefully inadequate, we must believe that God will continue to be faithful. We must simply believe that God is using things in our lives to develop our character in a way that would not be possible without the difficulties.

GOD CAN GIVE US JOY DESPITE OUR CIRCUMSTANCES

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy²³

I have often wondered how it is possible to have joy when going through major difficulties. Is the trick to ignore our feelings and will ourselves to be joyful?

The author of Hebrews suggests using Jesus as our example, “who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame”²⁴. Peter said that while Jesus was “being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously”²⁵.

The secret to experiencing joy seems to be trusting God for everything during our trials while looking forward to the eternal difference we will make.

As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4: 17-18, “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

As you experience difficulties, some of which seem almost too much to bear, trust in God's infinite grace and look beyond the pain to eternity when God will look at you and say, "well done".

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- ¹ Luke 15:20b NASB
 - ² Luke 15:32
 - ³ Luke 15:10
 - ⁴ Psalms 139:1a & 3b
 - ⁵ Psalms 139:7 & 8
 - ⁶ Psalms 139:13 & 14
 - ⁷ Psalms 139:17 & 18b
 - ⁸ Job 1:1b
 - ⁹ Job 1:8b
 - ¹⁰ Job 1:9-11
 - ¹¹ Job 1:12
 - ¹² Job 1:21 & 22
 - ¹³ Job 2:7-10
 - ¹⁴ Luke 22:31 & 32
 - ¹⁵ Job 42:4-6
 - ¹⁶ Gen. 50:20
 - ¹⁷ 2 Cor. 4:7
 - ¹⁸ 2 Cor. 4:8-11
 - ¹⁹ Acts 1:8
 - ²⁰ John 14:16 & 17
 - ²¹ Matt. 9:23 & 24
 - ²² James 1:2 & 3
 - ²³ Jude 24
 - ²⁴ Heb 12:2
 - ²⁵ 2 Peter 2:23