

A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO PERSONAL AFFLICTION AND ADVERSITY

General Problem of Evil and Suffering

- Affliction is a universal problem. We cannot go on a vacation from the abnormality of the universe, from the effects of the fall upon every area of life. Persecution and affliction are an expected part of the Christian life.
- An affliction can be physical, psychological, material, emotional, intellectual, or cultural. Those who have suffered both know that emotional pain is worse than physical pain.
- All Christians have moments when they want to ask, "Is God really there?" This problem affects us all deeply. Evil and suffering is not a contradiction but a mystery in Christianity, a puzzle. Typical questions that are raised.
- Alternatives. Especially finitism.
- Causation (the world is in an abnormal state) and cessation (danger of asking God to eliminate all evil; God will eliminate evil; 2 Peter 3:9--no more opportunity when Christ returns).
- Some purposes of evil: (1) Permits human freedom. (a) Some pain is a result of my choice (drugs--negative; running--positive). (b) Some pain is a result of others' choice (drunk driver, wars). Adam the ultimate example.
- Conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of the abuse of free will by His creatures at every moment. E.g., air refuses to obey me if I attempt to set up in it sound waves that carry lies or insults. Would void freedom of the will. (Lewis) [see Geisler, *Roots*, 75]
- Fixed laws, consequences unfolding by causal necessity, the whole natural order; the sole condition under which life is possible. Try to exclude the possibility of suffering which the order of nature and the existence of free wills involve, and you find that you have excluded life itself. (Lewis)
- Chess game where moves can be taken back. Arbitrary.
- (2) Prevents grater evils. (a) Warning of greater physical pain (chest pain or sore spot on foot as warnings). Leprosy the opposite. (b) Warning of greater moral pain (pleasures/conscience/pain). Warning of greater moral evil if you do

not heed it. If you respond you benefit. Illustration of bridge washed out ahead; person throws rocks at new car to warn the driver; he is furious until he finds out.

- (3) Promotes the greatest good. (a) Some evil is the condition for immediate moral perfecting (mercy, patience, forgiveness; cf. Joni). (b) Some evil is the condition for ultimate moral perfecting (preparing for the life to come). Best possible way to get to the best of possible worlds.

- Suffering is a more difficult problem than that of evil. This is an emotional problem more than an intellectual problem. No answer to this. (1) The question Why? is a natural response. The why of grief is healthy, because it gets angry at the evil. Can lead to growth. The why of despair is unhealthy, because it is directed at God. Leads to bitterness. (2) Knowing why doesn't really help. Cf. Job. Knowing an answer without the eternal perspective is worthless. We really couldn't understand. E.g., James 1:9-11 (rich vs. poor man) only makes sense if you see the distinction between the temporal and eternal perspectives. (3) Knowing why I don't know why does help. A person I can trust who has not told me. Willingness to trust Him without an answer. An emotional need is best met by relationships.

- Revelation 20-22; 1 Corinthians 13:12; John 16:22-24; 1 Corinthians 2:9/ We will be satisfied.

- Christianity is not the conclusion of a philosophical debate on the origins of the universe; it is a catastrophic historical event following on the long spiritual preparation of humanity.

- Jesus endured evil and suffering. He offered no simple solutions to the problem of pain, but proved that God is not aloof but caring. He is concerned about our pain and suffered with His creatures. Contrast with Allah of Islam. Christ is the suffering Savior who has gone through our trials. Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:14-16.

- Christ's love caused His suffering. Suffering does not contradict love. The path of redemptive love is the highest revelation of God's character and nature.

- Tibetan ruler illustration. God's justice and God's love.

Death

- The problem of needless deaths. Death is not "natural." It is never convenient. The question Why? is without an answer for our finite minds; we cannot ask God to give us a detailed answer. The cause-and-effect movement of history. Death as the effect of the fall. Satan's false promises that Eve would not die; the reality of separation on every level.

- Weeping is natural for a Christian in the face of death, and its blow should not be glibly minimized. True hope changes sorrow, but does not obliterate it. This is an abnormal universe since the fall, but a time of restoration is coming. Christ faced the enemy of death and has conquered it for us. Hebrews 2:14-16; 2 Timothy 1:10; 2 Corinthians 5:8. The second death will have no power over those who have had a second birth. We are waiting for a complete restoration. John 11:25-26; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18; 1 Corinthians 15:51-55. Death does not kill the spirit, nor does it spoil the truth. One day death will be finished, and we will be in our new bodies to see and experience that day. We are not as those who have no hope.

Unbalanced Perspectives

- Problem of living on the basis of erroneous ideas picked up concerning affliction.

- Ours is an age that wants to neatly wrap everything in cellophane. We want answers, not process. We're trained to come to conclusions which, when captured, we can control. But it doesn't work in every area of life.

- Not everything we question is explainable to us when we are three years old. Psalm 131. Cf. theory of relativity.

- The problem of people who are like Job's comforters. Something wrong with your prayer life; sin in your life; you need more faith; you need a real experience. "If you sin, you will suffer" is not the same as "If you suffer, you have sinned."

- Growing Christians should expect to experience a variety of trials and tribulations. 1 Peter 4:12-17. But we should never say to someone in the midst of a tragedy, "Oh, you are being tried" as though we could know that God was doing something directly to that person or to that person's children. The whole abnormal, fallen world--abnormality of death, the separation from the body because of the fall, the cause and effect of history, the actions of human beings and the effects of choice, the carelessness and cruelty of human beings, as well as Satan's sphere of power--all these things are involved. We have no right to

analyze for other people just what has taken place in the whole complicated series of events.

- Growing frantic over hearing the same note repeated over and over on a stuck record. Nothing wrong with the note, but it is part of a whole. The danger of getting stuck on one note of one instrument and then trying to describe that as the whole symphony. We need a balanced view of the whole council of Scripture.

Biblical Examples

- In our own struggles we are not alone in history. We are surrounded by a veritable "cloud of witnesses" who can encourage us.

- Job was a person to the infinite, personal Living God; but he also mattered to Satan. God removed His hedge of protection, but it was not God who afflicted Job. Job didn't have the benefit of reading the Book of Job. Job never curses God in his outpouring of frustration and agony. His friends had one string to their violin, one tune to play, one theme: that the wicked always suffer in this life. A simplistic lack of balance, and we can be in danger of joining them. God does not chide Job for his sin but for having a lesser view of the greatness of God than he should have had. [We must read and reread His Word to keep ourselves in our place.] [Job's willingness to forgive and pray for his friends after his restoration rather than gloat over them. Opportunities to pray for people who have hurt us.] No promise that our afflictions, tribulations, illnesses, and losses will be made up to us in this life. What Job had in the latter part of his life is only a hint of what we will each have in heaven. We look forward to a time when our perspective will be balanced, after seeing "face to face" rather than "through a glass, darkly." We look forward to a time when the troubles we are going through now will seem like nothing when contrasted with what the Lord has prepared for us. Romans 8:18.

- Joseph as one who went through both extremes of affliction; the temptations of deprivation and of affluence. Proverbs 30:7-8.

- Paul's experiences of victory in the midst of unchanging circumstances (1 Cor. 4:9-14; 2 Cor. 11:22-31). As proof of his real ministry for the Lord, Paul points not to miracles he has been instrumental in bringing forth, nor to great sermons or answers to prayer, but to the stream of persecution and afflictions which he has suffered. He was not lifted out of these situations supernaturally; he did not live his life in a bubble protected from the agonies of the battle and the struggle, the ups and downs of feeling in the midst of such hardships. God means us to be

encouraged by Paul's experience and to understand that our mix of troubles, sorrows, and disappointments, our dark surprises and crushing telegrams is not some strange thing that has nothing to do with a Christian life. No one suddenly arrives at a pinnacle of faith where all difficulties are at an end. [Weariness, exhaustion, flu, headache, continued infirmities from torn cartilage, polio, broken limbs, arthritis; poor hearing, eyesight, teeth; unfair criticism of business associates, false reports, lost jobs; depressions and nervous breakdowns; exchange of a bright dream for a crushing disappointment; untimely death.]

- The cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 12 have been through the things spoken of in Hebrews 11. These include miracles and answered prayer which changed circumstances (11:5, 8, 12, 29-35) and faith in times of unchanged circumstances (11:36-40).

Changing and Unchanging Circumstances

- There are two kinds of victory which can be won by the people of God. The first kind are those which take place in the midst of unchanging circumstances./ The individual matters to God; none of us can have a duplicate of any other Christian's life. It is not possible for anyone else to win our victories for us in any area. The victory for God against Satan is when--one by one--God's people continue to love Him and trust Him in the midst of unchanging circumstances. In spite of similarity of troubles, illnesses, pains, difficulties, afflictions, persecutions, and sufferings--no two people have exactly the same combinations of circumstances to be lived through. Satan may say to God, "If a woman had her first son born dead, and then her husband dies three weeks later, she would become bitter." God answers, "Look at ____." "Ah, but if a young man lost his wife and child during the first year in the mission field, that man would stop trusting You." And the reply would come: "There is Mr. ____ who went through exactly that in 1906 in Africa and still loved Me." [Kids on drugs, etc.]

- Christ was sufficient for every kind of victory. No individual does this perfectly, but there will be no type of affliction that someone has not lived through with victory supplied on the basis of the shedding of the blood of Christ./ Nothing shall separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:35-39), and it will be demonstrated that nothing will separate the love of God's children from Him (none of us does this perfectly, but we do it in different difficulties).

- A fantastic diversity of overcomings throughout history, and each of us plays a unique and critical role. Our actions and attitudes matter to God. Our perspective of what is important and unimportant is all out of balance, as will be seen on the day when believer's rewards are given out. We cannot know what

will turn out to be the most important opportunity we are ever going to have to honestly love God and truly trust Him in a way which will bring Him joy and defeat Satan. It is not a question of doing the biggest or most humble thing we can think of doing. No one is shut out of having an outstanding moment in his or her life which can be recorded as a victory in the "museum of heaven."

- The second kind of victory involves those things that God changed. There is no circumstance that God cannot overcome; everything in the first rectangle has its counterpart in the second. God is able to reply to any kind of prayer. Another section of the museum. Both are needed. Jeremiah 32:26-27; 33:1-3; Matthew 17:20; nothing is impossible for Him. But not every prayer of God's giants of faith was answered. He has not promised that we will have lives of ease and perfection.

- Both kinds of victory depend on prayer. Two-way communication with God is essential; there can be no closeness to the Lord without it. E.g., reflecting on the truth of Isaiah 40:28-31; 41:10. Prayer that God's beautiful attributes would be made known to others touched by the ripples of our lives. Turn away from that form of bitterness and unbelief which is mingled with the "What's the use of praying?" kind of attitude.

- Each of us gets a second chance every day, if we would just open our eyes to the possibilities. Each of us is a unique story. Our stories turn out differently than our original scripts.

Trusting God

- We have an eternity ahead to increase our knowledge and understanding. What we need now is just enough to live by. Enough to love and trust God when there is pressure being brought upon us to not trust Him.

- Life is not tidy and predictable. Suffering, in fact, is guaranteed for anyone who takes on the task of living.

- The difference between knowing the words of Scripture and experiencing their meaning. Difference between head and heart. Difference between believing that the words are right and knowing that they are true.

- Lack of faith is not remembering what God has done for you in the past. (Augustine)

- We think we know about Jesus, but we forget spiritual truth and must learn it over again.

- We all long for certainty and security, the fulfillment of our many questions, but the life of faith implies living the questions, wandering through our fears and hopes, and somehow shuffling our way with tenacity and courage toward Bethlehem. Life is not so much meant to be understood as it is to be lived out; it is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be participated in fully. (Hansel)

- Funeral home illustration; loss of two year old child; electric socket. I don't know what it is like to lose a child, but I do know Someone who does. Provides hope for life after death on both sides of the grave.

- The divine architect of the universe never builds a staircase that leads to nowhere.

- Tendency to disregard or to place a low value on answers to prayer which accompany a time of affliction, and to kick or step on the very definite evidences that the Lord is providing some form of help in response to our cries or whispers to Him. Danger of being like children who scream for one particular thing and push away or tear up other things being gently given them by a loving parent.

- The need to thank the Lord for the things He has done in the midst of making a request in a painful situation.

- God will never lead you where His grace cannot keep you. 1 Corinthians 10:13.

- There are some 365 "fear nots" in the Bible. One is in Isaiah 43:2,4,5. "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. And when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. Since you are precious and honored in my sight and because I love you....Do not be afraid, for I am with you." We must accept and go through our difficulties in order to find the kind of peace, joy, endurance, steadfastness, and hope that God wants for us in our journey to become more like His Son. (Hansel)

- Satan tries to get us to trust in the false promise of a thing rather than God, and often connects it with something true. He did this in his temptations of Jesus, offering Him a shortcut to having attractive things. He chooses the affliction he attacks us with (e.g., financial problems) and then he tempts us to get out of it by bowing to another god or putting our trust in some formula or person rather than trusting God. Temptation to get rid of the affliction in the wrong way. The

blood of the Lamb is the only way in which we as human beings can overcome Satan's wiles (Rev. 12:11; Eph. 6:11).

- Christ makes possible a victory over the penalty, power, and presence of sin. In the present, there is a day-by-day, moment-by-moment victory we can find in Him. A willingness to tell Him, "I love You and trust You" and asking for an increase in that love and trust; a willingness to say, "Not my will but Thine be done in the middle of this pain."

- "Give me strength, Lord, for living this hard moment to Your glory. May I honestly be willing to pay the price that is my part of the whole, because Christ died to make it possible to go on after this particular devastation."

- We are all cracked, earthen vessels (2 Cor. 4:7). But the pearl of great price, the priceless treasure of Christ, is in us (2 Cor. 4:5). Our earthiness makes evident that the power is coming from a Source that cannot be our own bodily and physical perfection.

Need

- We want not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven--a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves," and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said as the end of each day, "a good time was had by all." (Lewis)

- Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness. (Lewis)

- Artist making the great picture of his life (Read Lewis, 42,44).

- We were made not primarily that we may love God but that God may love us. To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God. What we would here and now call our "happiness" is not the end God chiefly has in view. (Lewis, 48)

- God intends to give us what we need, not what we now think we want. Once more, we are embarrassed by the intolerable compliment, by too much love, not too little. (Lewis)

- God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. (Lewis)

- Everyone has noticed how hard it is to turn our thoughts to God when everything is going well with us. We "have all we want" is a terrible saying when "all" does not include God. We find God an interruption. We regard Him as a paratrooper regards his parachute; it's there for emergencies but he hopes he'll never have to use it. (Lewis)

- While what we call "our own life" remains agreeable we will not surrender it to Him. What then can God do in our interests but make "our own life" less agreeable to us, and take away the plausible sources of false happiness? (Lewis)

- If God would not have us till we came to Him from the purest and best motives, who could be saved? (Lewis)

- The fervency of prayer is greatest when the need is most urgent. It is in times of affliction that the heights of reality are experienced in the sheer length of time spent talking to God and the earnestness with which one talks. It is when the need is sharply vivid that one searches one's own lazy use of time and becomes conscious of needing to ask forgiveness for not being verbal enough to the Lord about thankfulness, or frequent enough in true adoration and praise.

- The terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. When God takes away my toys, I am at first overwhelmed. Then, slowly and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world and my only real treasure is Christ. And perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed, and for a day or two become a creature consciously dependent on God and drawing its strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys. Thus the terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. God has had me for but forty-eight hours and then only by dint of taking everything else away from me. Let Him but sheathe that sword for a moment and I behave like a puppy when the hated bath is over--I shake myself as dry as I can and race off to reacquire my comfortable dirtiness, if not in the nearest manure heap, at least in the nearest flower bed. And that is why tribulations cannot cease until God either sees us remade or sees that our remaking is now hopeless. (Lewis)

- The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but pleasure and merriment He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and oppose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bath or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey

with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home. (Lewis)

- One of the greatest tragedies of our modern civilization is that you and I can live a trivial life and get away with it. One of the great advantages of pain and suffering is that it forces us to break through our superficial crusts to discover life on a deeper and more meaningful level. (Hansel)

- Most of my life my energy and strength has been based on talent, effort, pushing and striving. I spent much if not most of my Christian life thinking about what I could do for Jesus, rather than what he could do in me. (Hansel)

- Barriers to grace: (1) Getting caught up with doing, to the exclusion of the being element of our faith. (2) Our insistence on self-sufficiency. (3) Our avoidance of pain, which inadvertently closes the door to the life in grace that we are seeking at the deepest levels. A clenched fist cannot receive. Folded arms cannot embrace. We can't possess grace, but paradoxically, it possesses us. When we begin to let go, to release our brakes, we can taste its transcendence, even though we can't own it and, oftentimes, cannot fully understand it. (Hansel)

- Problem of drifting back into complacency.

The Refining Process

- Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-8. Patience is interwoven with our moment-by-moment, year-to-year growing. Without a rich background of understanding of the gentleness, compassion, kindness, goodness, and love of our Heavenly Father, the seed fertilized by tribulation will not begin to send down roots and put up shoots of the plant of patience. But before the fertilizer is added, the soil preparation needs to be a day-by-day digging into the Word of God. This preparation involves having as part of our whole being a growing understanding of the love of God and of His marvelous kindness (cf. Psalms 46:1-3; 9:9-11; 107:13-15,43; Jer. 9:24). We need to be trusting Him in an increasing manner, so that our reactions and actions are slowly changing through the months and years. Ephesians 3:16-19.

- Anytime we pray for someone else's sin or fault or hindrance, we should first pray for eyes to see our own sin or fault or hindrance. He who knows us inside out is not waiting for us to be perfect before we can intercede for anyone else, but He does require us to be aware of our own need to be cleansed, as we come with our requests for others. This is especially true when we pray for those closest to us. We do not pray from a pinnacle of perfection. Matthew 7:1-5.

- The refining process of skimming off some of the impurities which are spoiling the reflection of God's face (Zech. 13:9; Mal. 3:2-3). The silver is not pure, not considered ready for use until the silversmith himself can see his face reflected in the liquid silver. The places in which we are fooling ourselves can be in the practical areas of not being hospitable, not caring for other people before ourselves, not visiting the sick, not sharing our material things. Forms of neglect that can hinder inward growth. There is never a time when it is "convenient" to care for someone else.

- We are being prepared for something ahead, but the complete scope and the richness of what it is all about are beyond us. We are given hints, but only hints. 1 Corinthians 2:9-10. He is not only preparing something for us, He is preparing us for something.

- The believer's judgment in 1 Corinthians 3; the building materials of the things we have done inwardly and outwardly. Every day we are building with some kind of material, and it is going to matter to us as well as mattering to God. Today is the day, not tomorrow but always today, to discover what it means to find a practical area in which to ask that the "melting heat" will not be wasted. Don't miss the moments when the Master Silversmith bends over us to skim something off that is hindering us before it becomes past history.

Discipline and Unjust Suffering

- The chastening or disciplining of the Lord is needed by each of us at times. Hebrews 12:4-13. First search your actions and thoughts and ask the Lord to help you find anything which needs confession to Him. 1 Corinthians 11:31-32; judging ourselves so that we won't need to be disciplined by the Lord. If there is nothing specific, there are other sources of affliction and other results that can come forth from suffering and troubles.

- Unjust suffering for the cause of Christ. 1 Peter 2:19-20.

- Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted; 2 Timothy 3:12. This can take many forms including the loss of promotion, nasty remarks and scorn, snubbing of friends, unfair news reports or criticisms, etc.

Comparison and Contentment

- We are not to compare ourselves with anyone else, but rather only with what the Word of God tells us we should be.
- We cannot compare our own pattern to someone else's to discover whether or not we are in the Lord's will. God deals with us as individuals.
- Learning the secret of contentment. Philippians 4:11-12; Hebrews 13:5. Making the most of the immediate moment.
- We are a nation of people consumed by having. By now we should have learned that unrestricted satisfaction of all desires is not conducive to well-being. We know this to be true for our children, and yet sometimes we fail to recognize its truth in our own lives. Greed and peace preclude each other. We have forgotten that God created us as beings, not as doings. Our goal should be to be much, not have much. (Hansel)
- Whatever we have (health, energy, food, shelter, things, peace), we should recognize that they have been given to us. We have received these gifts for the purpose of being good stewards in our unique context.
- Nursing a grudge.

Circumstances and Joy

- Most people spend their entire lives indefinitely preparing to live. (Tournier)
The danger of putting off joy until my circumstances improve.
- The wrong attitude that we will be joyful as soon as circumstances improve. Joy is radically different from happiness. Joy does not depend on circumstances. In fact, it was cited most frequently in Scripture as being in spite of circumstances. E.g., Habakkuk 3:17-19. Happiness is circumstantial. If I pay off my car, I'm happy. If I get a new shirt, I'm happy. If my friends say nice things, I'm happy. The problem with happiness is that it is based on circumstances, and circumstances tend to shift. Joy, on the other hand, is something which defies circumstances and occurs in spite of difficult situations. Whereas happiness is a feeling, joy is an attitude. (Hansel)
- I cannot choose to be strong, but I can choose to be joyful. And when I am willing to do that, strength will follow. (Hansel)
- One of the most common and naive sentences in the English language is perhaps the following: "If I can just get through this problem, then everything

will be all right." We don't really get through life by solving problems in a final way but by responding more adequately as we move along. Much of the Bible was born in difficulty. Sometimes it seems that when God is about to make preeminent use of a man, He puts him through the fire.

- "He who binds to himself a joy/ Does the winged life destroy;/ But he who kisses the joy as it flies/ Lives in eternity's sunrise." (William Blake) People miss joy because they have preconceived images of what joy is supposed to be and because they try to cling to those experiences, to keep and preserve them. (Hansel)

- Missing the miracle of being alive. Like flies crawling across the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, we're unable to see the beauty and grandeur at our feet. The sacredness of each unrepeatable moment. Each day has its own distinctness and its own inexhaustibility, yet few realize it. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Emily, who died in childbirth, asks for the privilege of going back to see life one last time. Although the other ghosts discourage her, she insists and ends up going back to her twelfth birthday. There she views her own life through the thin veil that separates life and death. She is painfully startled to realize that people don't recognize how short and sacred life is. She pleads her case but no one can hear her--except us. What Emily notices most are the simple things--the smell of coffee, the feel of a starched dress, the simple delicate taste of a morning meal, a touch, a look, an ever swift passing moment of tenderness. (Hansel)

- "As soon as the kids are grown, you'll see me shine." "As soon as I get a better job, I'll be more productive." "As soon as I lose weight, then I'll be truly joyful." "As soon as the car gets fixed, as soon as the bills get paid, as soon as, as soon as, as soon as." (Hansel)

- There are fathers waiting until other obligations are less demanding to become acquainted with their sons. There are mothers who sincerely intend to be more attentive to their daughters. There are husbands and wives who are going to be more understanding. But time does not draw people closer. When in the world are we going to begin to live as if we understood that this is life? This is our time, our day, and it is passing. What are we waiting for? (Richard L. Evans)

- St. Thomas Aquinas told of a man who heard about a very special ox and determined to have it for his own. He traveled all over the world. He spent his entire fortune. He gave his whole life to the search for this ox. At last, just moments before he dies, he realized he had been riding it all the time. God has already given us all that we are looking for. (Hansel)

Aborting Affliction

- Real victory is only possible in the face of a real battle. We are too easily turned toward thinking of what we can "get" in the way of happiness by being a Christian.
- The twentieth century stampede for personal peace, rights and pleasures; leads to the attitude of aborting relationships, lives of the unborn and old, one's own life; aborting the affliction of doing something they felt was too hard, too dull, too exacting, too demanding, tied them down too much, or was too dangerous. Christians settling for veneer in their lives rather than solid wood; wanting to be happy and fulfilled.
- Consider Stephen's victory when Satan was trying to make him cry out against God. The work which Stephen did in his death had greater effect upon history than simply a longer life.
- Paul experienced sufficient grace to go on in the midst of an unchanging circumstance; his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-9). Jesus at Gethsemane also accepted a negative answer. Temptation to push aside the affliction instead of willingly accepting God's answer and His subsequent grace to go on. Would have been disastrous if Jesus had answered His taunters and proved who He was by coming down from the cross.

Choice

- Affliction forces a choice. Either let others or circumstances determine your future or be transformed into the image of Christ by difficult and trying circumstances.
- In the middle of World War II, some men on the front lines scrounged up an old beaten-up phonograph and a record of Caruso. That evening as they sat around the tent listening to the scratchy, worn record, there were two distinct groups of listeners. Some heard only the scratches on the record. Others, who listened more deeply, heard the master's voice.
- I can either hurt with self-pity or hurt and praise God. It's my choice. I can choose to do what I can with the limitations I've got. Seek to establish the lordship of Christ in the situations I face.
- Pain and suffering produce a fork in the road. It is not possible to remain unchanged. To let others or circumstances dictate your future is to have chosen.

To allow the pain to corrode your spirit is to have chosen. And to be transformed into the image of Christ by these difficult and trying circumstances is to have chosen. (Hansel)

- Adversity is a test of character; it can either destroy or build up, depending on our chosen response. Pain can either make us better or bitter. (Hansel)

- Self-pity deprives us of energy. It is a great waste of time and emotions, yet we must be aware of our vulnerability to it. We need people who will listen to us compassionately, but then firmly and gently encourage us out of such dreadful behavior. One definition of a coward is simply someone who makes a lot of excuses. Most of us have enough excuses to last a lifetime. The sooner we let go of them and get on with living, the better off we are. (Hansel)

- In the 1952 Olympics a young Hungarian boy looked down his pistol barrel and split the bull's-eye again and again--he just couldn't miss. With that perfect right hand and eye coordination, he won a gold medal. Six months later he lost his right arm. But in Melbourne four years later he came back and split the bull's-eye again and again, winning his second gold medal with his left hand. He chose not to be limited by his limitations. (Hansel)

- Nothing robs one's strength and vitality so much as self-absorption. There is no greater waste of time than self-pity, preoccupation with self; it fragments and dissipates that which you want to be about. (Hansel)

- Once we truly know that life is difficult--once we truly understand and accept it--then life is no longer difficult. Because once it has been accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters. Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult. Instead they moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life should be easy. (Scott Peck)

- Norman Cousins's *Anatomy of an Illness*--his miraculous cure from a fatal collagen disease through high doses of laughter and vitamin C. Negative attitudes such as worry can produce negative physical effects, such as ulcers. Cousins simply surmised that the opposite might also be true--that positive emotions, such as laughter and joy, would produce positive chemical reactions in the body. A cheerful heart is truly good medicine (Prov. 17:22).

- Humor/Actual statements made on insurance forms by people who had been in car accidents, and slips in church bulletins. (Hansel, 84-85)

- Those in physical pain need to slow down, to focus more on being than doing, and adjust to a more limited energy span. When we're suffering, whether from chronic pain or deep sorrow, we must remember to focus more on what we can do than what we cannot, more on the privilege of being alive than on the deprivation of energy. (Hansel)

- G. W. Target story of the two men in the same small room of a hospital. (Hansel, 57-59)

- Pain and suffering can either be a prison or a prism. The tests of life are not to break us but to make us. (Hansel) Read Hebrews 10:35,38.

Acceptance

- Kubler-Ross stages in relation to death and dying. The first stage is denial--not believing that it's really happening. The second stage is bargaining, trying to equivocate with God to make deals. The third stage is anger, the rage that comes from within based upon frustration which cannot be satiated. The fourth stage is depression, a symptom of both prolonged anger turned inward and guilt. The final stage is acceptance, realizing that what is, is--and is going to be.

- Acceptance means that I accept the process. It means to stop avoiding and start leaning into my particular situation. Despite our inability to control circumstances, we are given the gift of being free to respond to our situation in our own way, creatively or destructively. Acceptance means that I allow the process to transform me into the image of God's Son. It means that I'm willing to let go of who I think I ought to be, and become who God wants me to be. The more we fight our pain and sorrow, the more tense we become and the more the pain is amplified. Many of us try to get out of pain as fast as we can, so we can be more "useful" to God. Yet God reminds us again and again throughout Scripture that his greatest treasure fills earthen vessels, in order to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. Read 2 Corinthians 4:7; 12:9-10. In unchanging circumstances, the Lord's healing is the healing of the need to be healed. The realization that this is the process that will lead to our highest good. The process is not fun, but the assets outweigh the liabilities. But if we knew in advance what would be involved, we probably would not have had the courage to sign up for the course. (Hansel)

- To render back the will which we have so long claimed for our own, is in itself, wherever and however it is done, a grievous pain. (Lewis)

• Human will becomes truly creative and truly our own when it is wholly God's and this is one of the many senses in which he who loses his soul shall find it. (Lewis)

Serving and Comforting Others

• Seeking first His kingdom (Matt. 6:33) and losing our lives for His sake (Matt. 10:38-39); seed falling to the ground and dying (John 12:23-26).

• The way we manifest our love for the Lord is in the setting of loving each other and preferring other people's good, rather than fighting for our own rights. Romans 15:1-4; Galatians 6:1-5.

• We cannot wait until we have attained a place of sufficiency before we turn from our own needs to help another.

• Matthew 25:34-36./ Serving others in pain and in need. We have no other opportunity of visiting Christ when He is sick. Going to a prison and visiting the people who are there is the only way we can visit the Lord in prison. "Have I sent the Lord a card or a letter or a bunch of flowers in His sickness this week?" "Have I failed to care for the Lord in some person's need when offered that opportunity?" As long as we are in earthen vessels the opportunity is still with us. When we are all transformed, the opportunity will be at an end.

• Suffering or affliction or trouble of some kind needs to precede the giving or receiving of comfort. We cannot experience what it is like to be comforted if we have never had any sadness, sorrow, etc. in which comfort is needed. Second, we have to recognize our need for comfort before we will let ourselves be comforted. Finally, we cannot know how to comfort anyone if we have never been comforted ourselves in some way. 2 Corinthians 1:3-11. We need to run to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, not away from Him. Produces an identification with the sufferings of others and even with Christ. The comfort we are given through Christ overflows into other people's lives. Sensitivity to pray for others, especially when they come to mind.

• We live in a society that looks only on the surfaces. But pain, if allowed, produces an identification with the suffering of others, and even with Christ, that we could not experience in any other way. (Hansel)

• No one who has not known loneliness can comfort anyone else who is lonely; etc. Jesus endured loneliness and the separation from all comfort so that we would never be separated from the comfort of God.

Evangelism

- Affliction and evangelism. God's deliverance of His children out of impossible situations has been a means of evangelism. Cf. Daniel. But God also used affliction as a means of spreading the gospel. People have also come to believe because of the way Christians behaved during or after some terrible loss or affliction. And people often come to believe in the middle of an affliction.

Guidance

- Guidance is often given in the midst of difficulties. Isaiah 30:20-21. But trouble will come if we rush for help away from God; Isaiah 30:1-3. Contrast between Isaiah 50:10 and 11. Must be careful in the midst of affliction not to be fooled by false guidance and false comfort.

- Provision of insight (personal motives, problem areas exposed).

Hope

- Lazarus was raised, but he died again. Any answer to prayer that we have in the physical realm is only temporal, and our situation can change very suddenly again. The same is true in the material realm. We will be perfect, but not yet. Romans 8:22-23; 2 Corinthians 5:1-2.

- Anticipation. Romans 8:17-25. Revelation 7:16-17.

- These problems will pass and I will go on. There is an end to pain.

- Living in hope; living each day in such a way that it would be the same if Jesus were to come tomorrow; using one's own imagination, creative abilities, energy.

- All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will have attained it, or else, that it was within your reach and you have lost it forever. (Lewis)

- Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to. (Lewis)

- Few Christians recognize how radical their posture in the world truly is. Their past is absolutely forgiven and their future is absolutely certain, so that, more than any other body of people on the face of the earth, they are free to live in the present tense. (Hansel)

Areas of Life

- money/ God's day-to-day provision. Each day has enough troubles of its own. Matthew 6:34.

- marriage/ In marriage, a series of tiny steps in giving up my rights, my fulfillment, my life, my happiness, and giving to the other.

- Need for encouragement.

- Need for times of privacy and stillness. Word and prayer.