



More Than Conquerors

David Berg

A Mountain Streams book

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Introduction

No one's life is without problems, even a Christian's. Some say *especially* a Christian's. But why is that? Why doesn't God solve all of our problems the instant we receive Jesus as our Savior? Why doesn't He make this life as painless and perfect as the Heaven He has promised us? Why hardships and suffering?

The short answer is that God knows we need them. Troubles cause us to turn to the Lord and depend on Him more, and through that we learn more about His love and loving ways. If we take them the way He wants us to, troubles help prepare us for the next life and equip us to better help others get through this one. Troubles strengthen us and teach us faith and trust.

All the faith we need to trust God through even the most trying times is at our disposal. Faith comes from studying and applying God's Word (Romans 10:17; James 1:22-25). And that's what the ten articles that make up *More Than Conquerors* are about—helping us understand how God is working out His plan, even through our problems and seeming failures.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... In all these things we are *more than conquerors* through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:35,37). That's the kind of faith that brings us through to victory every time—and it can be yours!

God's Chesspiece—You Can't, but He Can!

The Lord wants you to be yourself and not try to be somebody else or pretend to be something you're not. When I was teaching music, I used to point to a note on the musical scale and tell my students, "That's what I want you to be—B natural!"

God doesn't want you to try or pretend to be something you're not and couldn't possibly be. However, He teaches in His Word that almost anybody can be almost anything—if they have faith and it's according to His will. If you have faith, even faith no bigger than a tiny mustard seed, you could say to a mountain, "Move from here to there," and it would move. Nothing would be impossible (Matthew 17:20). So anybody can be somebody or somebody can be anybody, because with God nothing is impossible and all things are possible to those who believe (Luke 1:37; Mark 9:23).

A lot of Christians make idols of the great men and women of God of the past. They idolize the heroes of the Bible, the patriarchs and the prophets, the Christian saints and martyrs, and they exalt them to such heights that they make it almost impossible for others to believe they could ever do the same things. And sad to say, it seems that all too often people do that to excuse themselves.

They want to be able to say, "It's impossible to be like that today. That sort of thing is reserved for Bible times, or saints or patriarchs or prophets. Nobody else can be like that. Ordinary Christians aren't supposed to try to be like that. It's out of your range. You'd have to be perfect. It's impossible. Don't even try! That's reserved for the special, chosen, exalted ones—those holy ones who were specially made in Heaven, not the normal run of humanity. People today can't expect to do miracles or have other gifts of the Spirit like the apostles and great missionaries of the past had. The day of miracles is past!" It's to excuse their own sad spiritual state and lack of good works. They don't want to have to do those things themselves, or to have others expect that much of them.

And one of the biggest lies the Devil tells them is, "You can't be that way because you're sinful and make mistakes, and you cannot be both good and bad." Well, the Lord in His Word said, "There is none righteous, no, not one. ... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:10,23). And that includes whom?—Not only you and me, but the saints and the prophets and the apostles and the patriarchs, and everyone else except God Himself.

Now that changes the picture! That brings the apostles, prophets, and heroes of the Bible down to our level, and that means it's possible for us to become more like them. Regardless of our sins and mistakes and faults or whatever, we too can be used of the Lord.

If the Devil tells you that you'll never amount to anything for the Lord because you're so bad, don't listen to him. That isn't so!

Most Christians are taught that they can't go to Heaven unless they're saintly. But that is the most damnable sin of all: to think you can be good enough to deserve to go to Heaven or be saved! That is self-works, self-righteousness, hypocrisy—and it's a doctrine of devils!

God created man and put him on Earth in part to demonstrate His power in giving him salvation—to show that in spite of all our faults and shortcomings He can save us and make us useful. He can even use *you*. The fact that God can use you, bad as you are, gives the glory to Jesus when you do anything good or right.

I'll give all the glory to Jesus,
And tell of His love, His wonderful love.
I'll give all the glory to Jesus,
And tell of His wonderful love!

Even the great apostle Paul lamented, "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" He as good as said, "I stink! I'm a horrible mess!" But then the Lord encouraged him with the answer to his dilemma: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 7:24-25; 1 Corinthians 15:57).

Now, doesn't that give you some hope? When the Devil reminds you of your mistakes and faults and shortcomings, it helps to remind yourself that, yes, you're no good; yes, you're a sinner; yes, except for the love and mercy and grace and goodness of God, you'd never make it!

It takes a miracle of the grace of God! It *all* has to be a miracle! Your thoughts, your love for the Lord and others, your work for the Lord—all of it is a miracle of God's grace, "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). It's *God's* work. You just have to have the faith that *God* is going to do it *through* you.

For many years I was convinced that I was nothing and nobody and could never do anything! I was too sinful, too carnal, I didn't read the Bible enough and didn't pray enough. How could I ever hope to do anything for God?

Be honest. Isn't that the way you feel sometimes? I'm sure the Devil lies to you like that too. When he does, slap him in the face with Scriptures, like Jesus did when the Devil tempted Him in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11). "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

Where sin and human faults and failings abound, God's grace does more abound (Romans 5:20). That's what it's all about!

Why do you think the Lord lets you make mistakes? Why do you think God let Adam and Eve fall prey to temptation in the Garden?—To prove that they needed God, and to prove that *you* need God! You can't do it on your own! And what does that do?—It glorifies the Lord!

So do you get the point? This is what it's all about—that it's all for the glory of God. Of course you can't do it! Of course you can't save yourself! Of course you can't live a perfect Christian life! Of course you can't be good or do anything good of yourself! He said Himself, "Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). A lot of people have been taught the false doctrine that they're supposed to do most of it with just a little help from God, but I want to tell you right now, God does it all!

Isn't that a comforting thought? Isn't it wonderful to know that you can just trust the Lord and not worry about having to be perfect? Trust the Lord; He's going to do it!

You don't have to have faith to do things that the Lord isn't asking or expecting of you. You just have to have faith to be what He's made you to be and to do the job He has for you, whatever that may be. Don't try to be somebody you're not, but don't let the Devil lie to you that you can't be who God can make you, or do what God wants to do through you. God won't ask you to do anything more than He knows you can do, with His help.

Too many Christians have been taught two conflicting doctrines: first, that they can't be saintly and perfect, and second that they can't be saved unless they are. Both are the Devil's own doctrines! It's no wonder that a lot of Christians give up trying to be or do anything for the Lord!

But the wonderful truth of the matter is that you can do anything with Jesus' help. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). With His help you can do anything, go anywhere, and be anybody God wants you to be!

God has given us a free will, but to be successful for the Lord or even as happy as He would like to make us, we have to continually yield that will to Him. We have to find out from Him what His will for us is—what He knows is best for others and us—and then choose that.

Everybody has their place and job for the Lord, like the pieces on a chessboard. Chesspieces have no will of their own. When a player picks up a chesspiece and moves it to another square, the chesspiece doesn't protest; it yields and goes where it's sent, right? Well, you're in God's hands! Think of that whenever the Devil tempts you to worry about this or that. You're in the hands of the Master Player and He's going to put you wherever He wants you, so just trust the Lord.

You don't have to make all the decisions; you only have to be yielded. But you're a free moral agent and you can choose *not* to be yielded. When it comes right down to it, the only decision you have to make is to choose to do God's will, whatever it might be. Simply yield to His moves, and let Him do the thinking and the choosing. He can see the whole game, the whole chessboard, and all the pieces. You've got very limited vision and very limited power, but He sees and has it *all*.

Just be what God wants you to be. Don't worry about what you can be or can't be or will be or won't be, like I did for nearly 50 years! I spent over half my life worrying about what I would be, when all the time I was being exactly what God wanted me to be and learning all the things God wanted me to learn.

There have also been times when *I've* chosen to do this and do that, and God's had to change my mind or do something else in spite of me—and I always found out in the end that He knew best.

It's wonderful to let God decide, because He always has our best interests at heart and He knows what's best. He never fails. Even if He should let us get His instructions wrong or do something wrong, He's able to use even that to teach us some lesson and bring about some good if our hearts are right with Him (Romans 8:28).

So quit worrying about what God's going to do. You're in God's hands. "Trust in the Lord, and do good" (Psalm 37:3 KJV). "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and

He shall direct your paths” Proverbs 3:5-6). “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left” (Isaiah 30:21).

When a guide leads you down a path that’s new to you, he doesn’t tell you what you’re going to need to do before you get to the turn or the fork in the way. He waits till you get to the point where you need to know before he tells you what to do or where to go next—and that’s the way it is with the Lord. In most cases, you don’t need to know all the details of what you’re going to do tomorrow. Jesus said not to worry about tomorrow. You often have to plan ahead, but you’re not to *worry* about tomorrow. Just do what God knows you can do and what God asks you to do today, and be prepared to do the same tomorrow.

God made you a particular kind of chesspiece, and He’s given you powers accordingly. God is the player; you’re just the chesspiece. You’re His piece, and all you have to do is what God tells you to do. He doesn’t even expect you to do it yourself. He’ll reach down and take ahold of you and move you where He wants you to go. *You* can’t do it, anyway—but you can with His help! You can’t, but He can!

Who Deserves the Credit?

There is no worse pride than self-righteous religious pride. It causes some people to have no sympathy or compassion for anyone whom they perceive to be weaker in the faith or more sinful. The hypocritical religious people can be so proud of their own successes and righteousness that they look down on others and thank God that they are not like them—just like the Pharisee did in his prayer, when he wrongly commended himself for being more righteous than the tax collector who was praying next to him (Luke 18:9-14). People who are steeped in self-righteousness are the hardest, most unmerciful, and intolerant people that you could ever encounter.

King David was an example of just such a person before the Lord changed him. He apparently had a lot of the wrong kind of pride. All his life he had been a champion. As a teenager he single-handedly killed a bear and a lion that were attacking his sheep (1 Samuel 17:34-36). Then all Israel regarded him as a great hero for killing the giant Goliath. The people even praised David above King Saul, declaring that “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands” (1 Samuel 18:7). David received so much adulation that Saul lamented, “Now what more can he have but the kingdom?” (1 Samuel 18:8).

The Lord had to humble, disgrace, and abase David before he could become the truly broken and sympathetic person he needed to be in order to write the Psalms. There are many places in the Psalms where it is very clear that David was terribly discouraged, wondering if the Lord had given up on him and forsaken him. But then in each Psalm he cries out to the Lord for deliverance, and his faith is restored.

Some people actually use King David as their excuse for being bad. Others are encouraged by his mistakes and faults and think, “If King David could make it, *I* can make it. If God loved him and forgave and saved him, He can also forgive and save *me*.” So you can take him either as a good or a bad example. (Footnote: For the complete story of David’s life, read 1 Samuel chapter 16 through 1 Kings chapter 2.)

King David was one of the biggest sinners in the Bible. He plotted to have a man, Uriah, killed in battle so he could marry Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba. He cheated, he lied, he was unmerciful to the handicapped, and he did all kinds of other terrible things. However, a marvelous change occurred in him when the Lord exposed and humbled him.

David seemed to succeed in covering up his crimes and was quite a hypocrite, sitting on his throne, pretending to be perfect and upright while passing judgment on other people. But his wickedness and sins were unmasked when the prophet Nathan confronted him publicly. Nathan as good as said, “*You* are the wicked one, the sinner! How can you sit here on the throne judging other people’s problems when you’re the biggest sinner of all?” (2 Samuel 11-12).

And then the judgments of God began to fall. David’s first child with Bathsheba died. Later his favorite son, Absalom, usurped the throne and David was disgraced and had to flee in the night. He lost his kingdom and even his family. Everyone deserted him except Bathsheba, a few friends, and a small army (1 Samuel chapter 15). His enemies cursed and railed against him, and gloated over his apparent demise. It would be hard to suffer a more ignominious downfall than King David did!

So David is a dandy bad example, yet also a good example of a man who came through God’s humbling process a better man—“a man after God’s own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22).

Joseph is another person who was quite proud and self-righteous. His father loved him above his brothers and seemed to spoil him. Joseph knew that he was his father’s pet. His brothers knew it as well, and they hated him for it. And then he had those dreams about how his brothers were going to bow down to him. The Bible tells us that Joseph’s brothers hated him even more after that (Genesis 37:5). It sounds like Joseph was quite a spoiled teenager.

But look at what the Lord allowed Joseph to go through! When his father sent him to check on his brothers in the fields—being the youngest and his father’s favorite, apparently he didn’t have to work as hard as the others—they conspired to kill Joseph, to put an end to his dreams. “Look,” they said to each other, “this dreamer is coming! He thinks we’re going to bow down to him. We’ll show him!” And they probably would have killed him if his oldest brother, Reuben, hadn’t begged the others to spare Joseph’s life. Instead, they sold him to a group of traders that happened to pass by just then, and those merchants took him to Egypt where they sold him as a slave to the captain of Pharaoh’s guard, Potiphar (Genesis 37:19-36).

Joseph took such good care of his master’s affairs that he was promoted to be the chief steward of the household. Potiphar’s wife then tried to seduce him, and when Joseph refused her advances, she became furious and accused him of trying to rape her. So Potiphar had Joseph sent to prison, where he languished for years (Genesis

39:1-20). That must have been quite a humiliating experience for Joseph. He was probably very discouraged at times and wondered why the Lord allowed all these things to happen to him.

Then, once Joseph had nothing left but the Lord and he was humbled and broken, God began to bless him by giving him the interpretations of different dreams. That eventually got him an audience with Pharaoh, who wanted Joseph to explain his dreams. Joseph knew that it was only the Lord who could reveal what the dream signified, and told Pharaoh so. When Joseph interpreted the meaning of the dreams, Pharaoh freed him and made him ruler over all of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh (Genesis chapter 40 and 41).

Apparently the Lord can't trust people with an important responsibility or ministry or testimony—something that might cause them to become proud of themselves or their accomplishments—until they have been humbled and broken and know that it's only the *Lord's* doing. Then they will be sure to give God all the credit, and it won't go to their head. This is why Paul warned that a novice should not have any position of great responsibility or leadership in the church, “lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the Devil” (1 Timothy 3:6).

Satan is the perfect bad example of someone who is so proud and self-righteous that he never yields to God. He fell because he became so proud that he wasn't satisfied with just being Lucifer, the Light Bearer, God's right-hand man. He wanted to be *God*—and look what God has had to do to try to humble him! He has suffered the greatest humiliation of any character in history, cast down, demoted, vilified, cursed, and stripped of most of the power that he used to have in helping God run the universe—yet he still hasn't repented (Isaiah 14:12-17).

And by appealing to man's pride, the Devil has caused most of the human race to follow him and do the same thing so that they have made a mess out of the world, almost wrecking God's creation. The Devil has been trying to run the world for thousands of years, but he's failed every time, showing that he can't do it without God.

Sad to say, some people are like the Devil in that respect. In spite of all that the Lord does to try to get them to humble themselves and make them more dependent on Him, they are so self-righteous and so confident in themselves that they *never* give up trying to do things their way. They never humble themselves and admit that they cannot make it on their own, that they need God.

It's a lot like salvation. None of us are saved because of our supposed goodness. Paul said, "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). It's the *gift* of God!

If we could give ourselves even a little credit for salvation, then Jesus would not have done it all. He would have done most of it, but we would have saved ourselves a little bit and could therefore pat ourselves on the back and say, "Well, the Lord and I saved me." The Lord won't stand for that! He wants each of us to know that we can't save ourselves, no matter how good and perfect we think we are. *He* has got to do it.

That same principle is true of everything in our daily lives as Christians: We have to keep reminding ourselves and others that if we do anything good, it is the Lord who has done it. Without Him, we are nothing and can do nothing (John 15:4-5; 2 Corinthians 3:5; Galatians 6:3). If we don't, the Lord may allow something to happen to humble us and show how weak we are without Him. When we can't learn any other way, He knows how to put the pressure on as a reminder that we have to be utterly dependent on Him.

"There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10). The Lord wants to get the credit for all the good that He is doing through you. If you think in any way that you should get some credit and be able to brag about your accomplishments and great faith, He's apt to bring you down a few notches to humble you and cause you to look to the Lord alone!

The crux of the matter is that *everybody* is bad. Everybody deserves spankings and punishments, even though some people don't think so. We're all sinners; we've all fallen "short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5).

Contrary to what some people think, God does not really blame us for being sinners. However, once we have heard the Gospel, He does hold us accountable if we don't repent and call on Him to help and change us. We cannot do it ourselves. He wants to change us, but He usually waits until we come to the realization that we cannot truly change on our own, and that we need His supernatural love, power, and forgiveness. When we finally get to that point where we give up and "let go and let God," then He has a chance to step in and make wonderful changes in our lives!

Trust God Anyhow—Victory from Seeming Defeat

The Lord lets us go through tests sometimes. He can even make it appear as if He is being a little too hard on us, so that we're tempted to think, "How could God let us suffer like this? How can He let that sort of thing happen?" The Devil is always around to try to make you doubt and even criticize the Lord, like he did with Job.

God said about Job, "There is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil" (Job 1:8). But the Devil challenged God, "Well, You just let me work him over and we'll see!" So God allowed the Devil to put Job through many tests and afflictions. Job lost his family, his wealth, and his health—and that's when his sin came to the fore. The Devil had been right about that. Job's sin was self-righteousness, self-perfection. His sin was that he didn't think that he had any sin, and he couldn't understand why God was doing all this to him.

It wasn't until he hit rock bottom, sitting in a heap of ashes, scraping boils from his body with a piece of broken pottery, that he finally confessed he wasn't as righteous as he had thought he was—and then God delivered him! Job learned his lesson, the Devil gave up, and God gave Job a new family, restored his health, and made him even more prosperous than before.

Satan almost triumphed, but the Lord won a great victory out of what had looked like a terrible defeat in the making. When things couldn't have been going worse for Job and his future couldn't have looked darker, he declared, "Though [God] slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). That's one of the most glorious testimonies in the Bible of sustaining faith in the face of great suffering, defeat, and discouragement.

Someone once said, "God allows some things to happen to make you humble, other things to keep you humble, and yet others to make sure you're still humble." While some experiences may be painful at the time, they can be seen as God's "intolerable compliment"—an indication that He loves us (Hebrews 12:6).

One thing is certain: God knows what He's doing. So whenever we don't understand why He allows something to happen, we just have to wrap our questions in a little bundle of faith and tuck it away till some day He reveals why.

I've had some things happen to me that I couldn't understand, except that they kept me humble and eventually furthered the Lord's plan for my life.

We don't always know right away why God did or allowed certain things to happen, and in some cases we may not know till we get to Heaven. I have a whole lot of questions that I'm going to ask when I get there. We've just got to trust Him anyhow!

There are a lot of things that we don't understand now. Sometimes we're even ashamed that we don't understand, and we try to explain things to others that we don't understand completely ourselves. We think that we ought to know the answers, when sometimes the best thing we can do is be honest and say, "I don't know!"

One of the great questions of this life is why God allows seemingly bad things to happen to people, and specifically to *us*. We probably won't know the complete answer to that till we get to Heaven. We can see part of the answer and understand some of the reasons, but we won't fully comprehend till we get up there and see the whole picture. I think that's going to be part of our continuing education in the afterlife—learning why. Like Paul wrote: "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Corinthians 13:12 NIV).

All we know is God! We don't know all the whys and wherefores, but we do know that the Lord loves us and He knows best. And if we don't understand something now, we will later.

In the meantime, we've got to trust God no matter what, even if we don't understand why some things happen. Maybe that's why God lets some things happen in our lives that we don't understand, just to test our faith and see if we'll still trust Him anyhow!

The name of the game is faith and trust—faith to trust God. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him! Though I have had a tough time and I don't know why, yet will I trust Him! Though He let this or that happen, yet will I trust Him! Though He lets an affliction beset me or my loved ones, I've still got to trust Him."

God loves to see if you've got real faith and you're going to trust Him no matter what. That's the greatest victory of all, when you seem to be defeated and you still trust the Lord. That must please the Lord more than anything—that even when it looks like you are lost and defeated, you still trust Him, like Job. Faith in the face of disaster or agony, faith in the face of death!

Look at all the martyrs and saints in God's Hall of Fame in Hebrews, chapter 11! It says, "These all died in faith" (Hebrews 11:13). That's the greatest thing that could be said of them. They died without receiving all that God had promised them—some were even martyred—but they never lost faith; they never lost heart. They died trusting God.

That's a greater test than Job had to go through. He was *willing* to die when he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). He thought he was going to die, but he didn't. But the martyrs did! That's the ultimate test, if you can die trusting the Lord. Death is the final test of faith. If you die still trusting, that's the final victory! That's the greatest faith of all!

"O Death, where is your sting? O Hades [grave], where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). The sting of death is sin, and the victory of the grave is to keep you dead. But the marvel of true, godly righteousness is faith. Faith is the only righteousness, and it results in victory over the grave, resurrection!

God bless and keep you trusting even through death. You'll die as you lived, trusting God!

Your Best Protection

Dear One,

Greetings in Jesus' name. Thank you for writing and telling me so much about yourself.

I'm sorry to hear about all the troubles you've experienced, but I'm also very thankful that you love the Lord and are trying your best to serve Him. I'm sure that you are being a great help to others in your current ministry.

I pray that you will find a place of service where you can be content and feel fulfilled and satisfied with your tasks, however humble they may sometimes be. As the Psalmist declared, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10).

Thank you for explaining your recent struggles with negative thoughts, discouragement, and depression, as well as about the difficulties that sometimes arise in your interactions with others. Such problems can seem impossible to overcome—especially when you're in the midst of them—but *nothing* is too hard for the Lord.

The Lord has shown you much love and mercy and patience, but you need to realize that He's not the only one trying to get your attention or direct your thoughts. Not every thought that enters your mind is from the Lord, so you must learn to watch your thoughts and make sure you're on the Lord's channel. "Test the spirits" to make sure that what you're hearing in your mind or spirit is from the Lord (1 John 4:1).

If your thoughts are not according to God's Word or cause you to be discontent, bitter, dissatisfied, unhappy, or critical of others, they are not from the Lord but from the enemy of your soul, the Devil. You must call on Jesus for help and resist the Devil when he tempts you with these negative thoughts.

One of your best protections is to keep busy for God. Another is to fill your mind and heart with positive, encouraging, strengthening, and faith-building thoughts from His Word. Memorize Scriptures and quote them to yourself and even to the Enemy when he attacks you. Claim the promises of God constantly, and cling to His Word.

Some verses that have been a great blessing to me in times of distress, mental anguish, doubt, fear, and spiritual battle with the Enemy have been:

“God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:7).

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18).

“You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You” (Isaiah 26:3).

“When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him” (Isaiah 59:19).

“Resist the Devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

“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 that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:1-2).

Psalm 23 has also always been a great comfort to me in time of need—to know that the Lord would never leave nor forsake me nor leave me comfortless.

Also remember that there is great power in united prayer. Whenever you feel oppressed, distressed, or attacked by the Enemy, it helps greatly to have someone else pray with you. One can chase a thousand, but two can put ten thousand to flight (Deuteronomy 32:30). Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20), and, “If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in Heaven” (Matthew 18:19). So never be ashamed to ask for help or prayer when you need it. “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

I am always convicted by that part in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us" (Matthew 6:12), and what He said about forgiveness a few verses later: If we don't forgive others who wrong us, God can't forgive us (Matthew 6:15).

So we must ask Him in all humility to help us have mercy on others, knowing that we also must be forgiven for many sins. Remembering continually what sinners we are and how many mistakes we've made helps greatly to keep us humble, and that helps us to avoid a spirit of self-righteous pride that causes us to criticize and condemn others.

It helps to always remember we're *all* sinners and that we all make mistakes, and that we must forgive one another, even as God for Jesus' sake has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32). It is no longer *you* that live, but Christ that lives in you (Galatians 2:20), "for you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3).

When you feel so terribly discouraged or depressed, don't even *think* about taking your own life! *God* has already taken it! When you yielded your heart to Him and asked Him to take your life for His service, He did, and He's been trying to use it for His glory ever since—as much as you will let Him. So keep it that way: Your life is in His hands. You are His, and He loves you and is doing His best for you in trying to make you useful and happy in His service for others by bringing them the life and happiness you have found in Jesus.

Keep loving others, and they will love you. Keep serving Jesus and He'll serve you—well! Stay close to Him and He'll never fail you. He'll never forsake you. He'll never let you down. Even though He may not always answer your prayers just the way you'd like, keep trusting Him and He'll never fail.

Meanwhile, despise not "the day of small things" (Zechariah 4:10), or whatever humble tasks the Lord may call upon you to perform. The less responsibility you have, the less you will be held responsible for. And if you are faithful in the small things, the Lord will commit greater things to your care when you have proven that you can be trusted with them (Matthew 25:14-29, the parable of the talents).

"In everything give thanks" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Be thankful for your many blessings. In whatever state you find yourself, whether abounding or abasing, be content (Philippians 4:11-12). "Be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Hebrews 13:5). Continue to be faithful—full of faith and love in Jesus!

God bless and keep you and make you a blessing.

Your servant in the Lord,
David

But If Not

What to Do When God Doesn't Seem to Answer Your Prayers

A girl wrote me:

I started serving the Lord a couple of years ago for eight months, but then I stopped because my face became very spotty. It sounds so silly, but it was my biggest trial! I prayed that God would heal me, but for some reason He didn't. Then I started working for the Lord again about two months ago, and my face has become all spotty again. I have worked myself into such a state over it that it keeps me from hearing or obeying God like I know I should. Sometimes my face breaks out in big boils. I may have prayed myself out of faith, as I've cried out to God so many times!

I've gotten so low and depressed that I sometimes even felt like killing myself. But I know if you pray for me, God will heal me. I want to serve Him, I want to be free of this problem so I can get my eyes off myself and reach the world for Jesus, but I don't know how long I can go on like this. Please try to understand. Don't just say it's my pride, but have compassion on me. This is my last hope! I'll be waiting to hear from you and will know you have prayed when my face clears up.

*Much love,
Susan*

You poor girl! Won't you know I've prayed for you until your face clears up?— Just like you can't seem to believe God *loves* you unless He *heals* you. It is the Devil's business to give you such tests to try to convince you God doesn't love you and He doesn't answer prayer, but He *does*!

The very fact that this always happens when you start serving God proves that it's a test of the Enemy, that he's trying to discourage you from going on. The Lord is letting the Enemy do it in order to test your faith, and to see how much you really love the Lord and what price you're willing to pay to serve Him. Of course, it could also be partly your diet. When my wife was younger she had the same problem until she stopped eating sweets. Now her complexion is beautiful.

But this case sounds to me like a definite demonic reaction by the Devil against your trying to serve the Lord. In other words, the Devil doesn't like it when you're working for the Lord.

The Lord probably *is* dealing with you about your pride—the very thing you’re afraid of having exposed and don’t want to confess. At the root of *all* sin there is always pride, and the fact that you let this problem stand in the way of your serving God sounds like you’re putting *self* before the Lord’s *service*.

It’s a test and very humiliating, but if you really want to serve the Lord, you’ve got to do that regardless. When you prove you love the Lord and His service more than your face, the Lord will probably heal you. You’re making your service for God and your faith contingent on God doing that *first*, when actually it works the other way around.

Faith and obedience come first, then God answers prayer. So many people have told me, “If God will heal me, *then* I’ll serve Him, *then* I’ll believe.” Anyone with that kind of attitude is simply putting self first, trying to make a deal with God. “If God will serve me first, then I’ll serve Him. You work for me first, God, then I’ll work for You.” Well, He just doesn’t work that way!

He still has the same old formula: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and [then] all these things shall be added to you” (Matthew 6:33). The blessings don’t precede obedience. This is such a common mistake that people make. You don’t say, “Lord, You bless me, *then* I’ll obey.” God tests you first to see if you’ll obey, and then He can bless you.

It’s a real test too, but it often ends in murmuring. People hold it against God because He won’t heal them. “If He’d do it, then I’d serve Him, but He doesn’t love me. He doesn’t care, because He won’t *heal* me!” A lot of times I also feel like quitting because things aren’t going right, but I *don’t* quit. I just keep on plugging along, and eventually the Lord works things out.

It’s kind of a “me first” attitude: “You heal me first, then I’ll believe You, then I’ll obey.” It’s just like the religious leaders, the scribes and Pharisees, told Jesus: “Perform a miracle for us, *then* we’ll believe!”—But He’d already *done* all kinds of miracles, and they still didn’t believe! So He said, “Even if I would raise somebody from the dead, you still wouldn’t believe, because you don’t believe what all the other prophets and I have already said!” (Luke 16:27-31). But then Jesus *did* raise somebody from the dead—Lazarus—and that’s what made the religious leaders decide they had to kill Him! (John 11:37-53).

This business of hinging your faith on the answer instead of on the Word is like a works religion. It’s like saying, “*Show* me! I’ll believe it when I *see* it. Seeing is believing.” But that’s not the way faith works. With faith, believing is seeing!

Faith works on blind obedience, no matter whether you ever get the answer or not. You can't make your service for God conditional to the answer. Even if your face was one big boil, you ought to serve Him *regardless!* Who knows? It might encourage some poor people who have *worse* problems than you to go ahead and serve the Lord. If they see that you're willing to serve the Lord and not be ashamed, regardless of your handicaps, it might encourage them to do the same.

Look at the Old Testament character Job: He lost everything—his family, his fortune, and finally his health. He was covered with boils from head to toe, but he still said it didn't matter. Even if God *killed* him, he'd still keep on trusting Him (Job 13:15).

You just cannot make your obedience contingent on your terms and the way you think God ought to answer, and providing everything goes all right. You can't only be God's fair-weather friend. You have to keep on serving the Lord even when everything goes all wrong. If you're only going to be willing to believe and obey the Lord as long as everything goes all right, you won't be believing or obeying very much, because a *lot* of things go wrong when you're serving the Lord. "*Many are the afflictions of the righteous*" (Psalm 34:19).

If every time you have an affliction you quit serving God, you'll be a perpetual quitter! Of course, sometimes others may make you feel bad if you're not healed. They blame it on you, just like Job's three counselors did. All of them said, "There must be something wrong with *you*, Job!" Well, in Job's case it did turn out that something *was* wrong with him: He had a lot of self-righteous pride. He was proud of his faith, proud he was so good, and proud he had served God all his life. So God had to let the Devil knock him flat to prove he was nothing without the Lord.

Sometimes you're ashamed because others are ashamed of you, and they don't even want to have you around because they think you'll reflect badly on them. But Jesus had all kinds of handicapped people following Him, and He healed all that He could. There are plenty of examples in the Bible of people who kept following Him no matter what, and eventually they got healed—even when it seemed like He was *ignoring* them, like the blind beggar (Mark 10:46-52) and the woman with the sick daughter (Matthew 15:21-28). But who knows if *everyone* who came to Jesus got healed? The ones who quit before they got healed, of course *never* got healed!

God wants to test your faith and willingness to obey before He's going to heal you. He wants to see if you'll believe and obey Him even if you think you may *never* get healed. What's your healing got to do with faith and obedience? Nothing! But

your faith and obedience have a *lot* to do with your healing! Whether you get healed or not should have nothing to do with whether you believe and serve the Lord or not.

You've got to believe and obey the Lord even if He never heals you. The apostle Paul had "a thorn in [his] flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7) until the day of his death, to keep him humble. He couldn't even be trusted with full health because that probably would have made him too full of pride, because the Lord had honored him in so many other ways. But Paul's thorn in the flesh didn't keep him from serving God. And as long as it is possible for *you* to keep on serving God, you've got to keep on serving Him regardless of whether He ever sees fit to heal you or not. You may be a whole lot more useful to the Lord with a face full of boils, or a whole lot more humble and believing with a whole body covered with boils like Job was, than if the Lord would heal you.

A lot of people just want to *use* God. I've known people whom God healed too easily, and then they just took off and went their own way. They were really lying to God: They'd sworn up and down that if He'd just heal them, then they'd serve Him. Then the minute He did, they just took off and forgot all about it! In the Old Testament, Israel used to do that all the time. They'd promise, "O God, if You'll just *save* us, we'll serve You forever!"—And as soon as He did save them, they forgot their oaths and were more unbelieving, murmuring, and disobedient than ever.

I've never gotten healed that way. Some of the times when I was nearest to death, I told the Lord, "Well, Lord, I'd *like* to be healed so I could serve You *better*, but I'm not going to stop serving You if You *don't* heal me." And just like Job, there have been times when I told the Lord, "Well, if You heal me, fine, but even if I end up dying, I'll still believe and love You anyway. It's my duty to believe and love and serve You no matter what, and I'm not going to quit just because things get tough and it looks like You have deserted me."

Like God tested the Hebrews in the wilderness with Moses, God may be testing your faith to see if you're going to believe and obey Him no matter what. The minute *they* had a little test, the older generation quit believing and quit obeying, and so they died and never made it to the Promised Land. They remind me of a lot of weak Christians today—self-righteous people who try to tell God what to do and are always saying, "Well, if God is so *good*, then why does He let us suffer like this? If God would be better to us, then we'd serve Him." The fact of the matter is,

the minute He *is* a little better to them, then they go their own ways and forget all about Him. They can't be trusted with whatever it is they're asking from Him.

I had a student at my Bible school once with a similar skin affliction, and she had two children and no husband on top of that. She was always asking, "Why? Why? Why has God done this to me? Why does God let me suffer like this? I thought maybe when I came to your school for missionaries, God would heal me, but I'm *still* suffering! Why?"

When people start asking God why in that spirit, it is pure self-righteousness. The answer the Lord gave me for her was the same one He gave Job: "Are you going to discredit My justice and condemn Me so that you can say you are right?" (Job 40:8 *TLB*).

People with that self-righteous attitude are saying, "Well, God, if I were You, I'd do things better than You're doing them. I'd be more righteous. I'd heal me!" Just like a song that was popular many years ago: "If I Were King!" It goes on to say that if *I* were king, I wouldn't allow all these bad things that go on in the world to continue. In other words, "I'm more righteous than God! God isn't good, or He wouldn't let all these bad things happen!"

But that's because they don't understand what God's doing or why He's doing it, and they'll *never* understand until they have faith to trust Him that He knows best, just as children must trust their parents. Even though children may not understand why they must do this or that, they just have to "do it because Daddy says so." They have to believe and obey whether they like it or not, because Daddy knows best. In the long run, they'll probably find out Daddy was right, and if they didn't obey, they'll probably find out the *hard* way. It's just that simple!

God tests our faith to see if it's real gold faith—to see if we'll still believe and obey Him no matter what happens. He says that the *trying* of your faith—the testing of it—is "more precious than gold" (1 Peter 1:7). Gold will go through the fire and come out even purer gold, if it is *real* gold!

But just as real faith is compared to gold in the Bible, so fair-weather faith can be compared to paper money, which has no value of its own. Try putting that "paper money" faith through the fire and see what happens! That so-called faith is not worth a thing the minute it's tested.

That's a good illustration of why the world's paper financial system is collapsing. It is based on paper money instead of God's good gold. Put paper and gold through

the fire, and see which one comes out the best! You'll find that real gold will come out even finer gold, because the fire burns all the dross and impurities away. But that paper money that claims to be valuable isn't worth the paper it is printed on when the real test comes. The minute it feels the slightest flame, it goes up in smoke and you've got nothing left but a few ashes!

That's the exact difference between real faith and supposed faith: Real faith can stand the test and go through the fire and still come out better than ever before, like gold. But something that *looks* like faith, like the paper money, the minute it goes through the fire, it's gone!

People who live within God's Gates of Faith can survive anything, even death! They can say, like Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15). They'll enjoy God's Golden City forever after, while those who merely pretend to have faith in God are going to see their "accomplishments" go up in smoke, because their lives and service for the Lord are like wood, hay, and stubble that can't stand the test of the fires of God's afflictions and trials of faith (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

If you've got real faith, you'll keep on going for God even if it kills you—and it *will* kill you, in a sense. Serving God means death to self and pride and all that self-righteousness as you "die daily" to reach others with His love (1 Corinthians 15:31).

I've often felt like quitting because I'm so stupid and make so many blunders and have so many besetting sins. Sometimes I don't see how God can possibly love me or put up with me—but He does, so I keep on going! I refuse to quit because I believe God. Therefore I know I *have* to obey Him, and I don't dare quit!

What if God quit every time we Christians gave Him a lot of trouble? Then we'd *all* be in a big mess! The Bible says that we Christians are the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). What if God quit every time we, His face, break out in a bunch of ugly spots and pimples and boils and acne and whatnot? We're the only face He's got, and He's got to keep going no matter how ugly we are or how badly His Body behaves sometimes, in spite of what He tells it to do!

He's got to keep on going even if we get ourselves all tangled up and in a big mess. He's got to keep on trying to pull us through and teach every part of His Body to function properly and operate gracefully with good coordination, instead of all jerky and twisted and grotesque like the spiritually handicapped people we so often are.

He's got to keep on trying to teach us how to talk, even if we seem to be tongue-tied. He's got to keep on yelling loud enough so we'll listen, even when we've got our fingers in our ears trying *not* to! He's got to keep on trying to make us see and follow the truth, even when we're so spiritually sleepy we'd rather shut our eyes and drift off into the Devil's dreamland. And He's got to try to make us bear spiritual fruit, little spiritual babes, new Christians—even a few sick and misshapen ones, rather than none at all. That's the kind of Body God has to put up with. So why should *you* be griping about a few little afflictions? Look at the mess God's Body is in! Only the love, grace, and mercy of God can ever pull us through.

“But if not,” we believers have still got to keep going and believing and obeying. Like the three captive Hebrew children who Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonian empire, had thrown into the fiery furnace: They said, “Our God is able to deliver us, but even if He *doesn't*, we're still not going to bow down to your heathen idol!” And it looked like their end, because into the furnace they went. The furnace was so hot that even their executioners died! But because of their faith and obedience, God was with them there, too, and they came out without even the smell of smoke on them (Daniel 3:17-27).

Or like Job, whom the Lord let the Devil nearly destroy by killing his family and his finances, and almost even killing him. But he still didn't say uncle to the Devil—not even when his wife told him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:8-10). Job just kept on believing and obeying, with boils from head to toe, sitting on a heap of ashes and wearily scraping away the pus and the scabs and the sores with a piece of broken pottery, saying, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him!” Can *you* say that? I hope you don't have to get in such a mess as Job, but if you do, don't quit, whatever you do!

Keep going for God! Keep believing and obeying no matter what happens! Maybe you'll come out without even the smell of smoke on you, like those three Hebrew children—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Maybe you'll end up with an even bigger family and be richer and healthier and happier and wiser than ever, like Job, if you will just hang on a little longer like he did and not give up!

John Paul Jones, a sea captain in the fledgling Continental Navy during the American Revolution, was another person who refused to give up. In one engagement with an enemy ship, his own ship was severely damaged by enemy fire and was sinking. Half of his men had been killed. Many others had been wounded, including Jones. When the enemy captain called for Jones to surrender,

Jones screamed back, “Surrender? Hell no! I have not yet begun to fight!” He refused to surrender and kept on fighting—and he eventually won the battle.

Maybe you haven’t even begun to fight the ol’ Devil yet. Maybe you haven’t yet “resisted unto blood” like Jesus did (Hebrews 12:4 KJV). But even though it killed Him, only three days later He rose in triumph from the tomb! Even death itself couldn’t hold Him down!

In medical science they refer to what is called the “threshold of pain.” How much pain can people stand? Some people’s threshold is pretty low. How much of a test can *you* stand before you quit?

If you will proclaim Him and His love to others—even if it kills you, like it did the martyrs—He says He’ll honor you before God and all the holy angels (Luke 12:8). Which will you be?—A doubter, disobeyer, and denier?—Or a believer, obeyer, and broadcaster of the truth?

If you go back from your service to God, you’ll make God sick. But if you go on even if you’re sick, you’ll make God happy in the end! Some Christians are always talking about “sudden death, sudden glory!” That’s the way they want to go—no pain, no suffering, no dying daily. But even if your service for the Lord means dying to yourself to help others, it’ll bring you eternal glory!

So which will it be for you? Are you a fighter or a deserter? Are you going to quit just because of a few little trials and problems and afflictions, or are you going to keep on going with God, no matter what? What greater witness can you give than to both live and die to yourself for Jesus?

God loves you! Remember that no matter *what* happens! He *wants* to heal and help you if He can trust you to obey Him. “But if not”—if He doesn’t heal or help you yet—keep on going for God. Will you? Please try!

Falling Upward

Life is one big learning experience, and for those who know and love Jesus, He is our Teacher. More than anything else, He wants to teach each of us all we need to know about Him, His love and salvation, and how we can be of greatest service to Him and others.

God knows that none of us can accomplish any real good if we depend on our own supposed strength and wisdom. In fact, Jesus said, “Without Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). But the Bible also says that we “can do all things through Christ” (Philippians 4:13). That’s the key right there! We need to learn to yield to the Lord so He can do those good things through us!

Of course, learning to be more dependent on the Lord is not something that we can learn overnight. It takes time and experience, and often that involves some difficulties and seeming defeats. The list is almost endless of people in the Bible whom God had to humble and bring down to the depths before He could use them. They needed to learn that it wasn’t in them, and to give God the credit for anything good they accomplished.

Look at Joseph: Of Jacob’s 12 sons, he was his father’s favorite. His older brothers finally became so jealous of him that they nearly killed him, threw him into a pit, and then sold him into slavery. But that’s what the Lord used to humble him. Joseph had to be made a slave and later be condemned as a criminal before God could exalt him to the second most powerful man in Egypt and use him to save His people from famine (Genesis chapters 37, 39-41).

And look at Moses: For 40 years he was groomed as a prince in the very courts of Pharaoh. The Bible says he was “educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22, NIV), but God couldn’t yet use him to lead His people to freedom, for he was too full of the ways of the world. Moses had to be humbled first, so God allowed him to become a fugitive from Pharaoh and spend 40 years in the wilderness doing nothing but tending sheep, before he was finally ready for God to use him for the task He had designed him for (Exodus chapters 2-3).

And consider King David, the greatest king that Israel ever had: When he fell in love with Bathsheba, purposely had her husband killed in battle, and then tried to lie and cover up the entire crime, God had to completely expose him, humble him, and severely judge him. And later his own traitorous son, Absalom, drove David from the throne for a time (2 Samuel chapters 11-12, 15). Was David’s fall really a

fall downward? Or was it a fall upward? God's way up is sometimes down—usually, in fact. It's just the opposite of what we think! David was humbled, and the whole kingdom was humbled, and they were all reminded that it was only the Lord who made them great. From that squeezing and twisting of David's life came forth the sweet honey of the Psalms, and the fragrance of his praises to the Lord for His mercy.

Or consider the great apostle Paul: He was an up-and-coming Jewish activist, then named Saul, who had taken it upon himself to put an end to the fast-growing sect of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. As he journeyed by horseback to Damascus, where he intended to capture, imprison, and execute as many Christians as he could find, God had to knock him off of his horse and blind him with the brilliant light of His presence. Trembling, helpless, and blind, Saul had to be led by the hand into the city, and was so astonished by what had happened to him that he was unable to eat or drink for three days. A disciple of the Lord then came and prayed for Saul, and Saul regained his sight, was converted, and became the apostle Paul. God had to break him and make him a new man before He was able to use him to help many (Acts chapter 9).

So even if you don't always understand why you're going through tests, trials, hardships, and breakings, remember that God has a purpose and He knows what He's doing! God gets some of His greatest victories out of seeming defeats—victories of yieldedness, brokenness, humility, and utter dependence on Him. So take heart from these examples from the Bible, and don't be discouraged when everything seems to go wrong and your hopes are disappointed.

All who have ever been of any real use to the Lord had to first be broken, humbled, and brought virtually to the end of themselves. Otherwise, they would have been too proud and self-confident in their own fleshly talents and natural abilities, and would have taken the glory to themselves. This is why God chooses to use weak and foolish things: so no one can boast in His presence (1 Corinthians 1:25-29).

God does not always see things as we see them, for His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). He doesn't judge or reward us according to our success or failure, but according to our motives and faithfulness. In Heaven one day, He'll say to those who are true to Him, "Well done, My good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21). He won't say "My successful servant," but "My faithful servant."

So above all, stay faithful to Jesus! And remember, your seeming defeats can become great victories for the Lord if you will humble yourself and learn the lessons He is trying to teach you through them, like these men in the Bible did. “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition” (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Beauty for Ashes

We used to sing a little song about the Lord:

He gives me joy in place of sorrow,
He gives me love that casts out fear,
He gives me sunshine for my shadow,
And beauty for ashes dear.

In order to bring forth the sweetness, there has to be some suffering. To bring about the beauty of the flame, something must go to ashes.

Blessings come from suffering—“beauty for ashes” (Isaiah 61:3). This is borne out so well in Hebrews 12, verse 11, which says: “Now no chastening seems joyful for the present, but painful: nevertheless afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”

It’s like a giant hand taking a honeycomb and squeezing it—and out comes the honey. Or it’s like when Moses smote the rock: The rock received a blow, but out came the water (Exodus 17:1-7). The heart of stone has to be broken before the water [of God’s Spirit] can flow out to refresh the people. It’s like a beautiful flower that’s pressed and crushed, but out comes the perfume. Or like the beautiful music that comes from the throat of the bird, almost as though it’s in pain, yet it comes forth with song. Even though the bird’s song may be sad, it’s so sweet. The groans are not murmurs, but songs of praise and thanksgiving to God—a sad, sweet song! As the great poet Shelley once said, “Our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts!”

Praise is the voice of faith!

We could never appreciate the light unless we had once been in darkness. We couldn’t appreciate health unless we had been sick. We can’t appreciate joy until we’ve known sorrow. We can’t appreciate God’s mercy until we’ve known the Devil’s justice.

(Prayer:) Lord, help us not to fight Your crushing, Your bruising, Your smiting. Help us not to quench that beautiful song, even if it’s sad, to thank You in spite of the sorrow. Help us to be willing to be smitten and crushed under Your hand, to be squeezed and to be bruised, to be in agony of spirit, that we may give forth Your

sweetness, Your fragrance, Your beauty, Your song, Your refreshing waters. Out of what seems like defeat, come some of Your greatest victories!

“[God] comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

The Benefits of Backsliding

God's Way Up Is Down!

Someone asked me, “If you backslide”—meaning you revert to your old wrongful ways and attitudes after you’ve received Jesus as your Savior—“can you ever get back to the Lord as close as you were before?”

“Yes,” I answered, “and many times even closer!” Another question followed.

“After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and knew evil for the first time, they were afraid of God and hid when they heard His voice in the Garden of Eden. Hadn’t they lost the simple, trusting relationship with Him that they once had?”

I replied, “Perhaps, but they were wiser, humbler, and more believing. They had more faith, because now they knew that God was right!”

Defeat teaches us a lot. We lose the innocence we had before the “apple,” but we often gain lessons that are actually much more valuable.

It was a long road back for King David after he was exposed for plotting the death of Uriah, but it taught him a lot: compassion, humility, and gentleness (2 Samuel 12:1-24; Psalm 51).

Backsliding is a hard school. Consider the patriarch Jacob, in the “school” of his uncle, Laban: Jacob was really crooked until he had to work under someone even *more* crooked than he was! That experience helped break and transform him. Before, he was Jacob the Deceiver (Genesis 27:19,35); afterwards, he was Israel, a Prince of God and Man (Genesis 32:28).

Jacob’s brother, Esau, is another example. Like the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), Esau lost his birthright, but gained many other valuable lessons as a result.

God gets some of His greatest victories out of seeming defeat. When a sinful woman came to Jesus, weeping and anointing His feet with fragrant oil, He forgave her for her sins and told the onlookers, “Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much” (Luke 7:47). King David sinned a lot, but God still called him a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). David was far more righteous *after* he became a great sinner than he was when he was so high and mighty and self-righteous.

You can never be too bad for Jesus, only too good! “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:12). The Prodigal was closer to the father when he was wallowing in the mire than he was before he left home, because it was in the mire that he began to appreciate home for the first time.

Some of the greatest heroes in the Bible were people that made terrible mistakes and realized that they were sinners who needed God. Some Bible teachers have said that Joseph was one of the very few key figures in the Bible about whom there are no recorded mistakes, but when I was little boy, I can remember thinking what a stupid, proud, spoiled brat Joseph was to tell his brothers about his dreams. If he hadn’t bragged about his visions and told his brothers that he was so superior to them, they wouldn’t have beaten him and sold him into slavery—but that’s what the Lord used to humble him. Joseph had to become a slave and a prisoner before the Lord could exalt him and make him the savior of his people.

It’s a funny thing how, when people lose their innocence, they don’t *feel* that they are as close to the Lord as before. That’s because they don’t understand what God’s righteousness is. Their idea of righteousness is so different from God’s. When people feel so righteous and good, it’s often because they’re *self*-righteous. They’re not closer to God, but closer to themselves! It’s a mistaken concept that some Christians have, that we can attain some kind of sinless self-perfection.

The world equates goodness with godliness—by which they mean self-righteous perfection. Sinfulness they equate with devilishness. But the Lord said the sinner was closer to God than the supposedly sinless, self-righteous perfectionist (Matthew 21:31). The drunks, harlots, and drug addicts who know they need help are often closer to God, for God’s way up is down. God’s idea of righteousness is the pitiful, hopeless, lost, humble, loving, sinful sinners who know they need God. It is *those* He came to save! He came not to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners (Matthew 9:10-13).

The Devil’s idea of righteousness is totally the opposite of God’s. The Devil’s idea of righteousness is the self-righteous, holier-than-thou hypocrite—the supposedly sinless perfectionist.

It’s just not true that people are closer to God before they make mistakes or sin. It’s a lie that Adam and Eve were closer to God when they were living in the Garden. They weren’t driven *from* the presence of the Lord; they were driven *into* the presence of God, to know Him in a way they’d never known Him before! They

were driven out of the Garden into a position where they *had* to get closer to the Lord in order to survive and be saved.

God's idea of goodness is godliness—a sinner who knows he *needs* God and depends on Him for salvation. Just the opposite of the Devil's, self-righteous, hypocritical crowd like the Pharisees, who thought they could save themselves by their own goodness (Matthew 23:23). So sometimes backsliding can actually be *good* for us, to wake us up to what hopeless, helpless sinners we are without the Lord, because then there's hope we'll turn to God for help—whereas the self-righteous think they don't need His help, and don't turn to the Lord.

Remember, it's good to be honest with yourself and others and the Lord. When you tell people about your mistakes, blunders, and sins, it reminds you and them that you're no picture of purity and innocence. It really helps keep you humble. You no longer *feel* quite as angelic, but you're a lot more saintly according to God's idea of saintliness.

While there is life, there is hope. Isaiah says, “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7). Your extremity is God's opportunity!

God gets some of His greatest victories out of seeming defeats! God's way up is down—down to the defeat of self and self-righteousness, and up to the victory of the cross and death to self in service to others!

The Secret of Spiritual Strength

How Not to Backslide!

The Bible instructs us to “no longer walk as [unbelievers] walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God” (Ephesians 4:17-18). How can we become alienated from the life of God?

We become separated from the Lord when we become separated from the Word, because Jesus is the Word. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 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 1:1,14).

So it is the Word—whether or not we live in the Word—that determines whether we’re close to the Lord or alienated from the Lord. When we neglect the Word, we neglect the Lord.

This is what’s wrong with many Christians. They rarely read their Bibles or delve into the Word. They might have a little daily devotions or something, but most of them hardly even have that. They depend on Sunday church services to give them all the Word they need for the week. Well, it’s Word for the *weak*, all right, and usually pretty weak Word! It certainly isn’t enough to last them all week. That’s like expecting one meal to last them all week. They don’t treat their bodies like that; they feed them well, three times a day. Food for the soul is important. You’ve got to feed yourself spiritually or your soul is going to suffer!

You have “been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the Word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Peter 1:23). “Desire the pure milk of the Word, that you may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2). Without the Word, we will not only stop growing spiritually, but eventually we will wither away spiritually.

What is the life-giving flow that gives life from God?—It’s the Word! Just like we have to eat food in order to have physical strength, we have to eat of the Word to have spiritual strength. That’s what gives us spiritual life and nourishment and strength and health. When someone gets cut off from the Word, it’s like cutting off their food and stopping the flow of nourishment.

A lot of Christians never mature. They stay spiritual babes and never get very deep spiritually, and many of them go back on the Lord, or “backslide.” They stop

trying to please or follow the Lord, and sometimes stop believing in Him altogether. Backsliders “follow afar off,” like Peter did, to the point where they could even deny Him, like Peter did (John 18:25; Matthew 26:58).

I had been asking the Lord, “What’s the process that backsliders follow that in the end completely estranges them from You?” And parts of that verse came to me right away: “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God.” Now that doesn’t mean they lose their salvation—that’s impossible—but they become separated from fellowship with the Lord. How? They neglect the Word.

It’s when people get separated from the Word that they go back on the Lord. When they lose faith in the Word or are separated from it, that’s when they become “alienated from the life of God.”

What is the life of God? Jesus said, “It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). Think of that! They are spirit and they are life. His words are real things! These are things that can’t be seen or touched, but without them everything would be totally dead spiritually—and without the Word, people become completely dead spiritually.

Science still doesn’t understand the essence of life. Minutes or hours after a person is dead, they’re still all there physically, materially, but something’s gone that science can’t isolate or measure. They’ve weighed bodies right after they died and there was no difference in weight, but something was missing—some spark, some energy. The spirit was gone, which gave that body life. The life of God is in His Word.

Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6) and, “I have come that they might have life” (John 10:10). The Word came that we might have life. How do we get the life? Through the Word—Jesus! His words, both the recorded Word and the words He speaks directly to us, are life!

People backslide because they get away from the Word. If they were living in the Word, they wouldn’t fall away. They couldn’t fall away, because they’d be full of the life of God, the Word.

That’s why we should memorize and study and get so full of the Word that we can’t get away from it. Jesus is the Word, He is spirit and life, and we have to have a good dose of Him every day.

What starts people on the road back? What is it that causes their love for the Lord to cool off? Well, what feeds a fire? It's the fuel. And what's the fuel? It's the Word, right? It's the Word that feeds our flame. And when people run out of fuel, like the five foolish virgins ran out of oil (Matthew 25:1-13), the fire goes out, the light goes out, and they wind up in darkness, alienated from the life of God. Their fire dies because they haven't fed it with the fuel, the Word, which is Jesus.

It's dangerous to neglect the Word! The minute people start crowding the Word out of their lives, they're getting too busy! Or the minute they lose confidence in the Word because it offends them or they don't like it, they're in danger. Without the Word you'll be totally defeated at the first attack of your spiritual enemy, the Devil.

You wonder how backsliders could possibly go back on the Lord. It's because they weren't really followers of the Word. They didn't build their spiritual house on the Word; they had the wrong foundation. In fact, they didn't even have a foundation—just sand! And when the storm came, their house fell because it wasn't built on the Rock (Matthew 7:24-27). And who's the Rock?—Jesus, the solid Rock foundation of the Word! He's the Word, and if they don't build their lives on the Word, they've got no foundation. Their lives are not built on the Rock, so they fall.

I'll bet you would find by their own confession that those who have turned away from the Lord were weak in the Word, didn't really live in the Word, and were not real students of the Word, and so they lost any interest they may have had in doing what the Word says (James 1:22-25). And I'll bet you'll find the strongest Christians today are those who really know the Word. They're strong because they really have faith in the Word and they live in the Word.

So that's the secret—the Word! The secret of power and victory and overcoming and fruitfulness and fire and life and warmth and light and Christian leadership—everything—is the Word! And the lack of it is the secret of backsliding and failure and coldness and darkness and weakness and dying spiritually without the Word.

There's nothing wrong with worshipping the Word. The Word is Jesus! He says He has exalted His Word even above His name (Psalm 138:2).

So there it is! That's why people backslide. It's all because they neglect the Word. Neglecting the Word is almost as bad as rejecting the Word, because if anyone doesn't love it, they don't believe it. You believe in the Word as much as you read it and live in it and practice it and obey it.

Backsliders don't, so they get weak spiritually and lose the life of God, the life-giving flow. They don't drink it, eat it, live in it, or get strengthened by it, so they become dark in their understanding—and then they often become filled with the lies of the Devil. Because they have rejected the Word, the Lord allows the Devil to send them lies in its place, and they believe the lies instead of the Word (2 Thessalonians 2:10-11). They're going to believe one or the other. They're either going to be filled with the Word and God's truth, or they're going to be filled with the lies of the Devil and darkness!

Backsliders, by their poor examples, are often a witness against the Lord, even if they claim to still believe in Him. They're often not following and obeying His Word, no matter how much they claim to remember it. The Word tells us, "Be doers of the Word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). We've got to not only read it and hear it and agree with it in theory, but we've got to obey it. We've got to do it to prove our allegiance and our loyalty and our faith in it.

Some people probably think, "Well, it's hard to believe that just a little thing like neglecting the Word could cause me to backslide." But that's the problem: They count that as a little thing instead of one of the most important areas of their Christian life.

So that's the secret! It's the secret of victory or defeat! It's the secret of success or failure! It all depends on how you treat the Word and how you live in it, or try to live without it.

Backsliders "forsake all" too: They forsake the Word, the Lord, the life, the light, and the Father's house.—They forsake it all! They forsake all in the wrong direction. They forsake all that the Lord had for them, and they go back to the beggarly, filthy elements of this world (Luke 9:62; 2 Peter 2:21-22; Galatians 4:9).

This is what's wrong with many Christians—they've neglected the Word. They're starved for the Word. They get a few little crumbs on Sunday and starve themselves the rest of the week. They've gotten weaker and weaker until they're defeated by the world. They've put their money into bags that have holes in them, labored for that which is not meat, and stored their crops in barns that others will inherit (Haggai 1:6; John 6:27; Luke 12:15-12).

(Prayer:) Jesus, please help us stay close to You and Your Word, or get back to the Word if we've strayed. Sometimes You let us go down a hard road until we realize that we've gotten out of Your will and away from You, out of fellowship, alienated

from Your life, darkened in our minds, and hardened in our hearts. If we've gone down that road, help us to turn and repent, to have a change of heart and mind, and to really come back to You and Your Word. Amen.

God bless and keep you in His Word!

Keep On Believing

I had a meaningful dream, in which my wife Maria and I were walking hand in hand out on a deserted highway that ran through desolate semidesert, sort of like western Texas and parts of Arizona in the U.S. We seemed to be somewhat lost and searching for our destination.

Then suddenly we came upon a beautiful little white roadway that led off to the left and down a slight slope. There, just about a hundred meters away, was a beautiful ornamental gate that was a building in itself.

Through the gate and beyond the building we could see for the first time some beautiful greenery and a wide expanse of golf course greens and fairways. Immediately I realized that we were at the gate of a golf course or country club.

So we walked on through the archway and across a deserted parking lot that led onto the golf course. Then we saw a beautiful roadway with tall trees on each side, leading off into the distance toward a beautiful little country town only a couple of miles away.

It was almost as though in passing through the gate of the country club we had entered another world entirely, and we were very happy and relieved and thanked the Lord. But by this time I was very tired, because we'd apparently already walked a long way. Even just two more miles seemed like an awfully long way to go.

Then I looked around and saw a bus turn in from the same highway that we had been walking on and drive down the little white road and through the arch. Our hearts leaped with joy and I exclaimed, "Thank God, a bus! Now we won't have to walk all the way into town!"

We started to walk quickly toward the road along which it would drive, but apparently we hadn't acted soon enough! We had stood there too long, looking to see what the sign on the front of the bus said, and now the bus was picking up speed sooner than we had expected. Suddenly it disappeared from sight, down a slight grade, and our hearts sank because we realized we hadn't acted soon enough; it was getting away from us!

"You didn't have enough faith," a voice seemed to say. We had missed it because we had hesitated. As the old saying goes, "He who hesitates is lost." I was just so

disappointed and so sad and upset about missing that bus that I was ready to sink down onto the grass in tears!

But suddenly I heard other voices that sounded like my father's and mother's, just the way they used to sing these two beautiful choruses together. It was just beautiful!

Keep on believing, God answers prayer!
Keep on believing, He's still up there.
Troubles and sorrows will soon disappear;
Nothing can harm you when Jesus is near!

Keep on believing, the storm will pass!
Look for the rainbow, 'twill come at last!
Trust in His promise, 'twas written for you;
Keep on believing and praise your way through!

And the other little chorus begins with the same words:

Keep on believing, Jesus is here.
Keep on believing, there's nothing to fear.
Keep on believing, this is the way:
Faith in the night as well as the day.

Sometimes we can see the will of God and we can see His hand ready to help us, and yet we don't catch on soon enough, we're not prayerful enough, we don't have enough faith—and that's what the first voice said to us when we missed the bus: "You didn't have enough faith!"

It seemed that the bus represented God's highest will—the fastest and easiest way to get to our destination, in the power of His Spirit rather than the energy of our flesh. If we'd had more faith we could have run and called out for help and jumped on the bus of God's will and it would have whisked us away to our destination of that heavenly-looking little country town in the distance.

This dream seemed to be teaching us a lesson, that even once we have left the desert wastes of sin and our past lives and passed through the beautiful open gate of salvation, Jesus, we can still miss God's highest will.

We can miss those golden opportunities of service for the Lord by not having the faith we should have to act quickly in times of opportunity He gives us. Our

examining the bus sign to make sure it was going to our destination was akin to doubt. Out there where buses were so few and far between, we should have been willing to run to catch *any* bus that came along. Sometimes when we see any opportunity at all, we had better seize it.

If you feel you have somehow missed God's will, His best for you, lift an ear to those heavenly voices that are singing to encourage you that all hope is not gone. Maybe you missed the first opportunity by not acting as quickly as you should have, but maybe you haven't missed the *last* one. God will be merciful to you and send along another "bus" so that you can get back on the road, headed His direction to your heavenly destination in His service.

So listen to those beautiful little songs and remember that God is still on the throne and prayer changes things. Believe God! Have more faith! Perhaps you simply need to spend more time in the Word of God to encourage your faith. "Faith comes by hearing ... the Word of God" (Romans 10:17).

Ask God to forgive you for your sins and shortcomings and lack of faith, and ask Him for another chance. I'm sure He'll send you another bus of opportunity to pick you up and lift your spirits and encourage you and inspire you and thrill you and strengthen you and heal you and carry you along in the power of His Spirit to the glorious victory of your heavenly destination.

So keep on believing! Don't ever give up! And never forget the words of these little choruses. Keep holding on to His promises. And whatever you do, keep on going for Jesus!

Afterword

How can you know beyond doubt that Jesus Christ really is the Son of God, the way to salvation? The answer is simple: Try Him! Simply humble yourself and sincerely ask Him to reveal Himself to you. Ask Him to come into your heart, forgive you for all your sins, and fill your life with His love, peace, and joy.

Jesus is real and He loves you—so much so that He suffered for your sins and died in your place so that you wouldn't have to, if you'll just receive Him and His forgiveness and His free gift of eternal life. But He can't save you unless you want Him to. His love is allpowerful, but He won't force His way into your life.

Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20). He gently knocks at the door of your heart. He doesn't break it down or force His way in. He stands there meekly, lovingly, patiently, waiting for you to open your life and ask Him in.

Will you receive Him? If so, He will be your closest friend and companion, who will be with you always! He came for love and lived in love and died for love, that we might live and love forever!

You can receive Jesus into your heart right now by sincerely praying this simple prayer:

Dear Jesus, please forgive me for all the wrongs I've done. I believe that You are the Son of God and that You died for me. I open the door to my heart and invite You to come in. Please come in, Jesus, and give me eternal life. Then help me to share Your love and truth with others. Amen.

God has promised to answer your prayer, so you are now His child. And He has said that He will *never* leave you nor forsake you! He loves you that much!

About the Author (<http://www.davidberg.org>)

David Berg (1919-1994) dared to be different.—So different that his back-to-the-basics approach to Christianity started a worldwide missionary movement.

Berg's parents were both active Christian pastors and evangelists, and his early years were spent traveling with them in evangelistic work. In 1941 he nearly died of pneumonia, shortly after being drafted into the U.S. Army. After determining to rededicate his life to Christian service, he experienced a miraculous healing.

For most of the next 27 years he worked as a pastor and in various evangelistic endeavors until, in 1968, he received God's call to take the Gospel to the hippies of southern California. There he and his then teen-aged children began a ministry to the youth that grew and eventually became known as *The Family*. Today, members of *The Family* engage in missionary and humanitarian work in over 100 countries worldwide.

Berg called on his followers to devote their full time to spreading the message of Christ's love and salvation as far and wide as possible, unfettered by convention or tradition, and to teach others to do the same.

Berg also decried the de-Christianization and decay in moral values of Western society. He viewed the trend towards a New World Order as setting the stage for the rise of the Antichrist, a godless world dictator whom the Bible predicts will rule the world in the last days before Christ's return.

Berg's lively, down-to-earth and sometimes unconventional approach to heavenly matters makes his writings a unique contribution to Christian literature. He once said of his writings that his aim was to leave his readers feeling either "mad, sad or glad." Without a doubt, he succeeded in doing just that.

What makes a winner?

God's idea of what makes a winner is quite different from most people's. From His perspective, the real winners are rarely those who seem to have it all, but rather those with faith enough to keep loving and holding on to Him when everything seems to be going wrong.

More than Conquerors

A collection of ten articles by David Brandt Berg, inspires that kind of faith!

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