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Why God, Why?

Helping Your Teen Through
Life's Toughest Times

by Dr. James C. Dobson



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Adapted from: *When God Doesn't Make Sense* by Dr. James C. Dobson
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Disease, divorce, school violence, rejection, natural disasters, war, or death; unfortunately, these tragedies and hardships can seep into our lives and the lives of our children all too quickly and unexpectedly—even when we're trying our best to serve God. Sometimes it just doesn't seem fair! Every parent has held his or her breath awaiting assurance of a son or daughter's safety and well-being. Most likely there have been times when you'd give everything to spare your children some of life's pains—or to lighten the load you carry. Realistically, none of us is immune. At some point, we all find ourselves asking life's most troubling question—the awesome "Why?"

The following is a discussion taken from Dr. James Dobson's books, *When God Doesn't Make Sense* and *Life on the Edge*, that deals with our inability to explain why bad things happen or to understand everything God is doing in our lives—especially when the storm clouds gather. As a Christian psychologist and family counselor, Dr. Dobson presents concepts that will help you maintain hope when pain and stress threaten to shake the foundations of your world—or your teen's.

It Just Doesn't Make Sense

Chuck Frye was a bright young man of seventeen, academically gifted and highly motivated. After graduating near the top of his class in high school, he went on to college where he continued to excel in his studies. Upon completion of his bachelor's of science degree, he applied for admittance to several medical schools.

The competition for acceptance in medical school was, and is, fierce. At the time, I was a professor at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, where only 106 students were admitted each year out of 6,000 applicants. That was typical of accredited medical programs in that era. Despite these long odds, Chuck was accepted at the University of Arizona School of Medicine, and began his formal training.



During that first term, Chuck was thinking about the call of God on his life. He began to feel that he should forego high-tech medicine in some lucrative setting in favor of service on a foreign field. This eventually became his definite plan for the future. Toward the end of that first year of training, however, Chuck was not feeling well. He began experiencing a strange and persistent fatigue. He made an appointment for an examination in May and was soon diagnosed with acute leukemia. By November Chuck Frye was dead.

How could Chuck's heartsick parents then, and how can we now, make sense of this incomprehensible act of God? This young man loved Jesus Christ with all his heart and sought only to do His will. Why was he taken in his prime despite many agonized prayers for his healing by godly family members and faithful friends? The Lord clearly said, "No" to them all. But why?

Thousands of young doctors complete their education every year and enter the medical profession, some for less-than-admirable reasons. A tiny minority plan to spend their professional lives with the down-and-outers of the world. But here was a marvelous exception. If permitted to live, Chuck could have treated thousands of poor and needy people who otherwise would have suf-

fered and died in utter hopelessness. Not only could he have ministered to their physical needs, but his ultimate desire was to share the gospel with those who had never heard this greatest of stories. Thus, his death simply made no sense.

Visualize with me the many desperately ill people Dr. Chuck Frye might have touched in his lifetime, some with cancer, some with tuberculosis, some with congenital disorders and some being children too young to even understand their pain. Why would divine Providence deny them his dedicated service? There is another dimension to the Frye story that completes the picture. Chuck became engaged to be married in March of that first year in medical school. His fiancée was named Karen Ernst, who was also a committed believer in Jesus Christ. She learned of Chuck's terminal illness six weeks after their engagement, but she chose to go through with their wedding plans. They became husband and wife less than four months before his tragic death. Karen then enrolled in medical school at the University of Arizona, and after graduation, became a medical missionary in Swaziland, South Africa. Dr. Karen Frye served there in a church-sponsored hospital until 1992. I'm sure she wonders—amidst so much suffering—why her brilliant young husband was not allowed to fulfill his mission as her medical colleague. And yes, I wonder, too.

The great theologians of the world can contemplate the dilemma posed by Chuck Frye's death for the next fifty years, but they are not likely to produce a satisfying explanation. God's purpose in this young man's demise is a mystery, and there it must remain. Why, after much prayer, was Chuck granted admittance to medical school if he could not live to complete his training? From whence came the missions call to which he responded? Why was so much talent invested in a young man who would not be able to use it? And why was life abbreviated in such a mature and promising student, while many drug addicts, alcoholics and evil-doers survive into old age as burdens on society? These troubling questions are much easier to pose than to answer. And . . . there are many others.

All We Can Ask Is “Why?”

The Lord has not yet revealed His reasons for permitting the plane crash that took the lives of my four friends in 1987. They were among the finest Christian gentlemen I have ever known. Hugo Schoellkopf was an entrepreneur and an extremely able member of the board of directors for Focus on the Family. George Clark was a bank president and a giant of a man. Dr. Trevor Mabery was a gifted surgeon who performed nearly half of his operations at no charge to his patients. He was a soft touch for anyone with a financial need. And Creath Davis was a minister and author who was loved by thousands. They were close friends who met regularly to study the Word and assure mutual accountability for what they were learning. I loved these four men. I had been with them the night before that last flight, when their twin-engine plane went down in the Absaroka mountain range in Wyoming. There were no survivors. Now, their precious wives and children are left to struggle on alone.

Why? What purpose was served by their tragic loss? Why were Hugo and Gail's two sons, the youngest of the children among the four families, deprived of the influence of their wise and compassionate father during their formative years? I don't know, although the Lord has given Gail sufficient wisdom and strength to carry on alone.

At the first mention of the "awesome why," I think also of our respected friends, Jerry and Mary White. Dr. White is president of the Navigators, a worldwide organization dedicated to knowing Christ and making Him known. The Whites are wonderful people who love the Lord and live by the dictates of Scripture. But they have already had their share of suffering. Their son Steve drove a taxi for several months while seeking a career in broadcasting. But he would never achieve his dream. Steve was murdered by a deranged passenger late one night in the usually quiet city of Colorado Springs.

The killer was a known felon and drug abuser who had a long history of criminal activity. When he was apprehended, the police learned that he had called for the cab with the intent of shooting whoever arrived to pick him up. Any number of drivers might have responded.

Steve White took the call. It was random brutality, beyond any rhyme or reason. And it occurred within a family that had honored and served God for years in full-time Christian service.



Further examples of inexplicable sorrows and difficulties could fill the shelves of the world's largest library, and every person on earth could contribute illustrations of his own. Wars, famines, diseases, natural disasters, school shootings, acts of terrorism and untimely deaths are never easy to rationalize. And large-scale miseries of this nature are sometimes even less troubling to the individual than the circumstances that confront each of us personally. Cancer, kidney failure, heart disease, sudden infant death syndrome, cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, divorce, rape, loneliness, rejection, failure, infertility, widowhood—these and a million other sources of human suffering produce inevitable questions that trouble the soul.

Why would God permit this to happen to me!? It is a question every believer—and many non-believers—have struggled to answer. For the benefit of those of you who are enduring a life-shaking storm or withering attack on your faith, it is important to recognize that you are not alone. Your pain and discouragement are not unique. You have not been singled out for sorrow. Most of us are destined, it seems, to bump our heads on the same ol’ rock. From ancient times, men and women have grieved over stressful circumstances that did not fit any pattern of logic or symmetry. It happens to all of us sooner or later. Millions have been there. And contrary to Christian teachings in some circles, being a follower of Jesus Christ is no foolproof insurance policy against these trials of life.

The Sovereignty of God

If you believe God is obligated to explain Himself to us, you ought to examine the Scripture. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 25:2, “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter . . .” Isaiah 45:15

states, “Truly you are a God who hides himself.” First Corinthians 2:11 says, “No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.” Deuteronomy 29:29 reads, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God” (NKJV). Ecclesiastes 11:5 proclaims, “As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother’s womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things.” Isaiah 55:8-9 teaches, “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.’”

Clearly, Scripture tells us we lack the capacity to grasp God’s infinite mind or the way He



intervenes in our lives. How arrogant of us to think otherwise. Trying to analyze His omnipotence is like an amoeba attempting to comprehend the behavior of man. Romans 11:33 (NKJV) indicates that God's judgments are "unsearchable" and His ways "past finding out"! Similar language is found in 1 Corinthians 2:16: "Who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" Unless the Lord chooses to explain Himself to us, which He does not often do, His motivation and purposes are beyond the reach of mortal man.

What this means in practical terms is that many of our questions—especially those that begin with the word "why"—will have to remain unanswered for the time being.

The apostle Paul referred to the problem of unanswered questions when he wrote, "Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12). Paul was explaining that we will not have the total picture until we meet in eternity, and by implication, we must learn to accept that partial understanding.

God's Wonderful Plan

Unfortunately, many young believers—and some older ones, too—do not know that there will be times in every person's life when circumstances don't add up—when God doesn't appear to make sense. This aspect of the Christian faith is not well advertised. We tend to teach new Christians the portions of our theology that are attractive to a secular mind. For example, Campus Crusade for Christ (an evangelistic ministry I respect highly) has distributed millions of booklets called "The Four Spiritual Laws." The first



of those scriptural principles states, "God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life." That statement is certainly true. However, it implies that a believer will always comprehend the "wonderful plan" and that he or she will approve of it. That may not be true.

For some people, such as Joni Eareckson Tada, the “wonderful plan” means life in a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. For others it means early death, poverty, or the scorn of society. For the prophet Jeremiah, it meant being cast into a dark dungeon. For other Bible characters it meant execution. Even in the most terrible of circumstances, however, God’s plan is “wonderful” because anything in harmony with His will ultimately “works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Still, it is not difficult to understand how confusion can develop at this point, especially for those who are young. During the springtime of your years, when health is good and the hardships, failures and sorrows have not yet blown through your tranquil world, it is relatively easy to fit the pieces in place. You can honestly believe, with good evidence, that it will always be so. At that point, however, you can be extremely vulnerable to spiritual confusion.

Dr. Richard Selzer is a surgeon and a favorite author of mine. He writes the most beautiful and compassionate descriptions of his patients and the human dramas they confront. In his book *Letters to a Young Doctor*, he said that most young people seem to be protected for a time by an imaginary membrane that shields them from horror. They walk in it every day but are hardly aware of its presence.

As the immune system protects the human body from the unseen threat of harmful bacteria, so this mythical membrane guards them from life-threatening situations. Not every young person has this protection, of course, because children do die of cancer, congenital heart problems and other disorders. But most of them are shielded—and don’t realize it. Then, as the years roll by, one day it happens—perhaps even while they are still young. Without warning, the membrane tears, and horror seeps into a person’s life or into the life of a loved one. It is at this moment that an unexpected theological crisis presents itself.

No Greater Love

So what am I suggesting—that our heavenly Father is uncaring or unconcerned about His vulnerable sons and daughters, that He taunts us mere mortals as some sort of cruel, cosmic joke? It is almost blasphemous to write such nonsense. Every description given to us in Scripture depicts God as infinitely loving and kind, watching over His earthly children tenderly and guiding the steps of the faithful. He speaks of us as “His people, the sheep of His pasture” (Ps. 100:3). This great love led Him to send His only begotten Son as a sacrifice for our sin that we might escape the punishment we deserve. He did this because He “so loved the world” (John 3:16).

His heart is especially tender toward the suffering and defeated. He knows your name and has seen every tear you have shed. If you could fully comprehend how deeply you are loved, you

would never feel alone again. David included that thought in Psalm 103:11: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him.” The apostle Paul expressed it this way: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39). Isaiah conveyed this message to us directly from the heart of the Father: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isa. 41:10).

Another favorite passage of mine tells us that the Holy Spirit actually prays for you and me with such passion that human language is inadequate to describe it. That verse, Romans 8:26, says, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes with groans that words cannot express.” What comfort we can draw from that understanding! He is calling your name to the Father today, pleading your case and describing your need. No, the problem here is not with the love and mercy of God. Whatever conclusions you draw, please believe this: He is not the source of your pain!



One of the most breathtaking concepts in all of Scripture is the revelation that God knows each of us personally and that we are in His mind both day and night. There is simply no way to comprehend the full implications of this love by the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is all-powerful and all-knowing, majestic and holy, from everlasting to everlasting. Why would He care about us—about our needs, our welfare, our fears? We have been discussing situations in which God doesn't make sense. His concern for us mere mortals is the most inexplicable of all.

Job also had difficulty understanding why the Creator would be interested in human beings. He asked, “What is man that You make so much of him, that You give him so much attention, that

You examine him every morning?" (Job 7:17-18). David contemplated the same question when he wrote, "What is man that You are mindful of him, the son of man that You care for him?" (Ps. 8:4). And again in Psalm 139, we read, "O Lord, You have searched me and You know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; You perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue You know it completely, O Lord" (vv. 1-4). What an incredible concept!

Not only is the Lord "mindful" of each one of us, but He describes Himself throughout Scripture as our Father. In Luke 11:13 we read, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Psalm 103:13 says, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." But on the other hand, He is likened to a mother in Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you."

A Father's Love

Being a parent of two children, both now grown, I can identify with these parental analogies. They help me begin to comprehend how God feels about us. If necessary, Shirley and I would give our lives for Danae and Ryan in a heartbeat. We pray for them every day, and they are never very far from our thoughts. And how vulnerable we are to their pain! I'm sure you parents can easily relate. Can it be that God actually loves His human family infinitely more than we, "being evil," can express to our own flesh and blood? That's what the Bible teaches.



An incident occurred during our son's early childhood that illustrated for me this profound love of the heavenly Father. Ryan had a terrible ear infection when he was three years old that kept him (and us) awake most of the night. Shirley bundled up the toddler the next morning and took him to see the pediatrician. This doctor was an older man with very little patience for squirming kids. He wasn't overly fond of parents, either.

After examining Ryan, the doctor told Shirley that the infection had

adhered itself to the eardrum and could only be treated by pulling the scab loose with a wicked little instrument. He warned that the procedure would hurt and instructed Shirley to hold her son tightly on the table. Not only did this news alarm her, but enough of it was understood by Ryan to send him into orbit. (It didn't take much to do that in those days.)

Shirley did the best she could. She put Ryan on the examining table and attempted to hold him down. But he would have none of it. When the doctor inserted the pick-like instrument in his ear, the child broke loose and screamed to high heaven. The pediatrician then became angry at Shirley and told her if she couldn't follow instructions she'd have to go get her husband. I was in the neighborhood and quickly came to the examining room. After hearing what was needed, I swallowed hard and wrapped my 200-pound, six-foot-two-inch frame around the toddler. It was one of the toughest moments in my career as a parent.

What made it so emotional was the long mirror Ryan was facing as he lay on the examining table. This made it possible for him to look directly at me as he screamed for mercy. I really believe I was in greater agony in that moment than my terrified little boy. It was too much. I turned him loose—and got a beefed-up version of the same bawling-out Shirley had received a few minutes earlier. Finally, however, the grouchy pediatrician and I finished the task.

I reflected later on what I was feeling when Ryan was going through so much suffering. What hurt me was the look on his face. Though he was screaming and couldn't speak, he was "talking" to me with those big blue eyes. He was saying, "Daddy! Why are you doing this to me? I thought you loved me. I never thought you would do anything like this! How could you? Please, please! Stop hurting me!"

It was impossible to explain to Ryan that his suffering was necessary for his own good—that I was trying help him—that it was love that required me to hold him on the table. How could I tell him of my compassion in that moment? I would gladly have taken his place on the table, if possible. But in his immature mind, I was a traitor who had callously abandoned him.

Then I realized there must be times when God also feels our intense pain and suffers along with us. Wouldn't that be characteristic of a Father whose love is infinite? How He must hurt when we say in confusion, "How could You do this terrible thing, Lord? Why me? I thought I could trust You! I thought You were my friend!" How can He make us understand, with our human limitations, that our agony is necessary—that it does have a purpose—that there are answers to the tragedies of life? I wonder if He anticipates the day when He can make us understand what was occurring in our time of trial. I wonder if He broods over our sorrows.

Some readers might doubt that an omnipotent God with no weaknesses and no needs is vulnerable to this kind of vicarious suffering. No one can be certain. We do know that Jesus experienced

the broad range of human emotions and that He told Philip, "Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Remember that Jesus was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" when Mary wept over Lazarus. He also wept as He looked over the city of Jerusalem and spoke of the sorrow that would soon come upon the Jewish people. It seems logical to assume, therefore, that God the Father is passionately concerned about His human "family" and shares our grief in those unspeakable moments "when sorrows like sea billows roll." I believe He does.

Brace Yourself, and Be Prepared

The reason I have chosen to address this topic is to help brace you and your teens for those difficult times that will invade your lives sooner or later. It is inevitable. Perhaps the storm has already unleashed. In my work with families who are going through these hardships, from sickness and death to marital conflict and financial distress, I have found it common for those in crisis to feel great frustration with God. This is particularly true when things happen that seem illogical and inconsistent with what had been taught or understood. Then if the Lord does not rescue them from the circumstances in which they are embroiled, their frustration quickly deteriorates into anger and a sense of abandonment. Finally, disillusionment sets in, and their spirits begin to wither.

This can even occur in very young children who are vulnerable to feelings of rejection from God. I'm reminded of a boy named Chris whose face had been burned in a fire. He sent this note to his psychotherapist:

Dear Dr. Gardner,

Some big person, it was a boy about 13, he called me a turtle. And I know he said this because of my plastic surgery. And I think God hates me because of my lip. And when I die, he'll probably send me to hell.

Love, Chris.

Chris naturally concluded that his deformity was evidence of God's rejection. It is a logical deduction in the eyes of a child: "If God is all powerful and He knows everything, then why would He let such a terrible thing happen to me? He must hate me." Unfortunately, Chris is not alone. Many others come to believe the same satanic lie. In fact, the majority of us will someday, at some time feel a similar alienation from God. Why? Because those who live long enough will eventually be confronted by happenings they will not understand. That is the human condition. It's the state of our fallen world.

The great danger for people who have experienced this kind of disillusionment is that Satan will use their pain to make them feel victimized by God. What a deadly trap that is! When a person

begins to conclude that he or she is disliked or hated by the Almighty, demoralization is not far behind.

Trials Are Nothing New

If you or your teens have begun to slide into that kind of despair, it is extremely important to take a new look at Scripture and recognize that you are not unique in the trials you face. All of the biblical writers, including the giants of the faith, went through similar hardships. Look at the experience of Joseph, one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament.

His entire life was in shambles. He was hated by his brothers who considered killing him before agreeing instead to sell him as a slave. While in Egypt, he was imprisoned, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife of attempted rape, and threatened with execution. There is no indication that God explained to Joseph what He was doing through those many years of heartache or how the pieces



would eventually fit together. He had no way of knowing that he would eventually enjoy a triumphal reunion with his family. He was expected, as you and I are, to live out his life one day at a time in something less than complete understanding. What pleased God was Joseph's faithfulness when nothing made sense.

Let's examine the New Testament disciples and other early Christian leaders. Jesus said there was no greater man born of woman than John the Baptist, but this honored Christian pioneer soon found himself in Herod's stinking dungeon. There an evil woman named Herodias had him beheaded because he had condemned her immoral conduct. There is no record in Scripture that an angel visited John's cell to explain the meaning of his persecution. This great, godly man who was the designated forerunner to Jesus went through the same confusing experiences as we. It is comforting to know that John responded in a very human way. He sent a secret message to Jesus from his prison cell, asking, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matt. 11:2). Have you ever felt like asking that question?

Look at the martyrdom of Stephen, who was stoned to death for proclaiming the name of Christ, and the disciple James, of whom the twelfth chapter of Acts devotes only one verse: "He [King

Herod Agrippa] had James, the brother of John, put to death with a sword" (Acts 12:2). Tradition tells us that ten of the twelve disciples were eventually executed (excluding Judas, who committed suicide and John, who was exiled). We also believe that Paul, who was persecuted, stoned, and flogged, was later beheaded in a Roman prison. The second half of the eleventh chapter of Hebrews describes some of those who suffered for the name of Christ:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world is not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised (vv. 35-39).

Read that last verse again. Note that these saints lived in anticipation of a promise that had not been fulfilled by the time of their deaths. A full explanation never came. They had only their faith to hold them steady in their time of persecution. The *Life Application Bible* commentary says of this chapter, "These verses summarize the lives of other great men and women of faith. Some experienced outstanding victories, even over the threat of death. But others were severely mistreated, tortured and even killed. Having a steadfast faith in God does not guarantee a happy, carefree life. On the contrary, our faith almost guarantees us some form of abuse from the world. While we are on earth, we may never see the purpose of our suffering. But we know that God will keep his promises to us." *That* is precisely the point.

Few of us are called upon to lay down our lives like those heroes of the early church, but modern-day examples do exist. The death of Cassie Bernall hits close to home. As many of you know, her life was taken when fellow students attacked their Littleton, Colorado, high school with the intent to kill its students and destroy its buildings. The assailants held Cassie at gunpoint and questioned, "Do you believe in God?" Facing certain death, Cassie answered a resounding "Yes. I believe in God." Those were her last words on this earth.

Why was this teen—with the potential for years of fruitful ministry ahead—allowed to be a victim of brutal school violence? If permitted to live, Cassie could have touched and influenced the lives of many. In fact, her death impacted countless people as news of her bold testimony swept across the nation. Was this why Cassie was allowed to die? As in Stephen's martyrdom we will never know the answers to these questions on this side of heaven.

Reverend Bill Hybels shared an experience in his book *Too Busy Not to Pray*, that also speaks dramatically to this issue:

A couple of years ago, a member of my church's vocal team and I were invited by a Christian leader named Yesu to go to southern India. There we joined a team of people from various parts of the U.S. We were told that God would use us to reach Muslims and Hindus and nonreligious people for Christ. We all felt called by God to go, but none of us knew what to expect.

When we arrived, Yesu met us and invited us to his home. Over the course of the next few days, he told us about his ministry.

Yesu's father, a dynamic leader and speaker, had started the mission in a Hindu-dominated area. One day a Hindu leader came to Yesu's father and asked for prayer. Eager to pray with him, hoping he would lead him to Christ, he took him into a private room, knelt down with him, closed his eyes and began to pray. While he was praying, the Hindu man reached into his robe, pulled out a knife and stabbed him repeatedly.

Yesu, hearing his father's screams, ran to help him. He held him in his arms as blood poured out onto the floor of the hut. Three days later, his father died. On his deathbed he said to his son, "Please tell that man that he is forgiven. Care for your mother and carry on this ministry. Do whatever it takes to win people to Christ."

What inspiring and humbling stories! They make me feel ashamed for complaining about the petty problems and frustrations I have encountered through the years. Someday, the Lord may require a similar sacrifice of me in the cause of Christ. If so, I pray I will have the courage to accept whatever His will is for me. Untold multitudes have dedicated their lives to His service in this manner.

So tell me, where did we get the notion that the Christian life is a piece of cake? Where is the evidence for the "name it, claim it" theology that promises God will skip along in front of us with His great cosmic broom, sweeping aside each trial and every troubling uncertainty? To the contrary, Jesus told His disciples that they should anticipate suffering. He said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Paul wrote, "In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within" (2 Cor. 7:4-5). Peter left no doubt about difficulties in this Christian life when he wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:12-13). Note in each of these references the coexistence of both joy and pain.

This is the consistent, unequivocal expectation we have been given by the biblical writers, and yet we seem determined to rewrite the text. That makes us sitting ducks for satanic mischief.

My concern is that many believers apparently feel God owes them smooth sailing or at least a full explanation (and perhaps an apology) for the hardships they encounter. We must never forget that He, after all, is God. He is majestic and holy and sovereign. He is accountable to no one. He is not an errand boy who chases the assignments we dole out. He is not a genie who pops out of the bottle to satisfy our whims. He is not our servant—we are His. And our reason for existence is to glorify and honor Him.

Even so, sometimes He performs mighty miracles on our behalf. Sometimes He chooses to explain His actions in our lives. Sometimes His presence is as real as if we had encountered Him face to face. But at other times when nothing makes sense—when what we are going through is “not fair”—when we feel all alone in God’s waiting room—He simply says, “Trust Me!”

Does this mean we are destined to be depressed and victimized by the circumstances of our lives? Certainly not. Paul said we are “more than conquerors.” He wrote in Philippians 4:4-7, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

Clearly, what we have in Scripture is a paradox. On the one hand we are told to expect suffering and hardship that could even cost us our lives. On the other hand, we are encouraged to be joyful, thankful and “of good cheer.” How do those contradictory ideas link together? How can we be triumphant and under intense pressure at the same time? How can we be secure when surrounded by insecurity? That is a mystery, which, according to Paul, “transcends all understanding.”

For those of you out there today who have already been through hard times and are desperate for a word of encouragement, let me assure you that you can trust this Lord of heaven and earth. Remember that Scripture warns us to “lean not on your own understanding” (Prov. 3:5).

Note that we are not prohibited from trying to understand. I’ve spent decades attempting to get a handle on some of the imponderables of life. But we are specifically told not to lean on our ability to make the pieces fit. “Leaning” refers to the panicky demand for answers—throwing faith to the wind if a satisfactory response cannot be produced. It is pressing God to explain Himself—or else! That is where everything starts to unravel.

If we can comprehend even a tiny portion of the Lord's majesty and the depth of His love for us, we can deal with those times when He defies human logic and sensibilities. Indeed, that is what we must do. Expect confusing experiences to occur along the way, and don't be dismayed when they arrive. Welcome them as friends—as opportunities for your faith to grow. Hold fast to your faith, without which it is impossible to please Him. “Lean into the pain” when your time to suffer comes around. Never yield to feelings of self-pity or victimization, which are Satan's most effective tools against us. Instead, store away your questions for a lengthy conversation in eternity, and then press on toward the mark.

The Lord is very near, and He has promised that your temptation will not be greater than you can bear. I'll leave you with these wonderful words from Psalm 34:17-19: “The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.”

How Can I Help My Kids?

These ideas lay the foundation for finding hope and maintaining faith through life's most difficult trials. Trusting Jesus' unflinching love even when you have questions is the best thing you can do. Yet sometimes it can be even more difficult to watch your son or daughter struggle through dark moments. Only God can give real peace in the midst of the death of a friend or loved one, the aftermath of a natural or man-inspired disaster, the destruction of your home, a debilitating illness or a broken relationship. But it can still be hard to grasp. Thankfully, as a parent you can play a key role in coming alongside and encouraging your teen to develop a faith that will stand against life's harshest blows. Here are some practical steps to assist that process.

- **Give your teen the freedom to feel.** Anyone who has experienced the grieving process, whether following a death or the loss of a relationship, can testify that it's normal to experience a broad range of emotions. Teens' already-fluctuating feelings can be especially susceptible. They might have good days and bad days—or literally up and down hours. They may feel anger, doubt, fear, frustration, sorrow, hope or any other imaginable emotion. Create an environment in your home in which your son or daughter feels comfortable to share what's on his or her mind. That doesn't mean you condone disrespectful behavior toward you or other family members. Instead, allow your teen to be honest even with negative emotions, and point him or her toward positive steps of dealing with them.
- **Practice the fine art of listening—nonjudgmentally.** In the midst of emotional turmoil, your teen may express some thoughts or doubts that make you cringe. Remember the source of his or her feelings. Don't respond out of fear that your child is forsaking faith in God. Keep in mind that questioning can be an important part of a young person's internaliz-

ing the Christian faith that they've been taught for years—in other words, turning it from “What others have taught me” to “What I believe.” This can especially be true in the face of crisis.

Encourage questions rather than attempting to give answers, and avoid condemning his or her confusion. After all, Scripture demonstrates that God receives our struggles and doubts without reprimand—see Job and Psalms for starters. You may find that the more your teen experiences your willingness to listen, the more he or she will be willing to share.

- **Be honest—even when you don't know something.** It's OK if you don't have the answers to every question. Answer what you can, but tell your teen if you don't know. In



fact, it's possible that you may be facing the same crisis or hardship and experiencing the same questions as your teen. Use it as a time of mutual support and growth. Avoid leaning too heavily on your child or unloading all of your deepest doubts, fears, or anger—instead seek assistance and support from peers, clergy or counselors. Don't be afraid to let your son or daughter know that you're struggling, too. Resist the urge to give pat “Sunday school” answers—condescension often triggers defensiveness and anger. Give your teen what credit you can for being sincere and mature in seeking God's Truth, and open dialogue that will foster true healing and faith building.

- **Point your teen to the ultimate source of healing and comfort.** Seek the Lord together. Those questions you can't answer? Search Scripture with your son or daughter. Use reference tools such as a Bible dictionary, concordance or commentary. Pray together, and let your teen hear you lift him or her up to the Father. Though we are often most concerned with an immediate answer, God is interested in the process of how we respond to a difficult period. Modeling these active steps of trusting Him can provide valuable teaching ground.

- **Read. Pray. Fast.** Commit yourself to personal prayer and Bible study as well. After checking with a doctor, fast for a meal or a day specifically on behalf of your teen. Maintaining your own faith and spiritual growth will help equip you to instruct and support your teen in the ways of Truth. Such discipline can be contagious as well. After all, values most often aren't taught; they're caught. Remember that God desires to work in the lives of both you and your teen. Trust His ability to deal directly with their heart and to accomplish His eternal purposes in them.
- **Don't underestimate the power of worship.** Praising God allows us to shift our focus off our own circumstances and place it on our all-powerful Heavenly Father. The apostle Paul directs us in Philippians to give thanks *in* all things (Phil. 4:6). Music can be a great tool to calm the spirit, fix the mind on Christ and foster thankfulness for all of God's blessings. Some churches have specific musical praise services, and most youth groups participate in singing praise songs and choruses. Attend such services with your teen or buy some recordings to provide encouragement anytime. Christian bookstores have shelves stocked with worship tapes and CDs.
- **Encourage healthy activities.** Sometimes facing trials can seem all-consuming. Participating in positive events can help your teen maintain a balanced perspective beyond the pain. It can also provide important interaction with friends and lead to other sources of support. Beware of the extremes of isolation, on the one hand, and avoidance of the issue by becoming too busy, on the other—try to help your son or daughter strike the balance between the two. Point your young person to your church youth group for fun, uplifting activities and Christian friends who know the power of an encouraging word. You may even want to speak with the youth pastor to let him know what your son or daughter is going through. He can make a special effort to bolster his spirit or connect her with a small Bible study or fellowship group. Your schedule may be busy, but assuring transportation to such functions can be a valuable investment.
- **If necessary, seek a Christian counselor.** Just as our teens are facing extreme challenges in today's culture, so can they face extreme hurts and hardships. Some pain can be so deep, it needs very specific help. Christian counselors are professionally trained to recognize and treat difficult emotional distresses from a biblical perspective. Not only can they assist your son or daughter in overcoming the obstacles, they can offer you a greater understanding of what he or she is dealing with and a reassurance of the healing process. Is your teen acting out in negative or aggressive ways? Are you noticing patterns of withdrawal or prolonged variations from his or her normal personality? Has he or she lost interest in normal activities or relationships? If you'd like to speak with a qualified, licensed Christian counselor about

your young person's situation—or about your own—you can call us at (719)531-3400. Just ask to speak with our Counseling Department. Our staff may even be able to refer you to a counselor in your area if extended treatment is needed.

- **Have patience.** Give it some time. Just as broken bones don't mend immediately, neither do wounded spirits. Remember that there will be ups and downs—especially for your teen. Continue to practice the steps listed here, and look for additional ways to encourage your son or daughter. Take advantage of booklets like this and other helpful resources. Most of all, remember that you and your teen can never escape God's love. Even when you don't understand His ways, God will never let you or your loved ones down!