

God in the Difficult Times  
September 17, 2006

Today we continue our preaching series on experiencing God in the moments of life, as we reflect on God's presence in difficult times. There are two passages of Scripture I wish to share with you, both of which are in the sermon outline. If you brought your Bible or if the sermon outline is helpful, I invite you to follow along. The first text is taken from Psalm 40, verses 1-3. The Psalmist said:

“I waited patiently for the LORD; He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.”

Next, I'll read from Paul's letter to the church at Rome; Romans, the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, verses 1-5. This is what Paul wrote:

“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, there are times when we find ourselves mired in misery, wondering why. It is in those difficult, heartbreaking times - in our moments of deepest need – that You reveal yourself most poignantly. So Lord, create within us the faith to see and to recognize Your loving presence in our lives. In Christ, Amen.

The greatest witness of our faith is the testimony of people who have endured the difficult times and experienced God's grace. Steve Smith is with us here today to share very briefly his encounter with God in one of the difficult moments of life. Steve, welcome.

Steve Smith: Thank you for inviting me. I do appreciate being here so early in the morning to share my God moment, which occurred quite recently. On September 5, our little girl was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes. To give you a little bit more background, my wife and I teach the 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> grade Sunday School class during the 11 o'clock service. Throughout the month of August, our main scripture focus was Deuteronomy 31:6, which says, “Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid, for the Lord your God goes with you; He will not fail or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed.” We thought we were teaching this in order to prepare the children to go back to school. Every one of our kids was heading into a new grade or a new school, and so we reasoned that we were teaching that verse in order to help *them* be strong and courageous in *their* difficult times. Little did we know that 3 weeks later, this scripture verse would come into play in my wife's and my life, as well.

We took Chloe in for a routine check up and the doctor said, “You know, we need to get a blood test done.” The doctor called us at home after receiving the results and

said, “You need to get to the hospital now. You need to go to the emergency room.” Chloe’s blood sugar level was 731. For those who are not familiar with diabetes, a normal person’s is 125 or below. Following instructions, we rushed her to the hospital, where we were essentially bumped to the front of the line in the emergency room, bypassing all the people who were there waiting to be seen. The whole time, my wife and I were praying for strength and guidance, never imagining that the Sunday School skits about Amos and the helper angel were going to come into play. In those skits, Amos was afraid to go out and deliver the word of God to the people in Jerusalem who were sinning against God, and the helper angel was afraid to go out and help the little kids get back to school. (I had played both parts, and those of you who know me, know that playing an angel was a real stretch!) (Interrupted by laughter)

Anyway, my God moment, rather than being a thunderous clap, was more of a whisper, training me to be strong for my family: for my wife, Robin; for my little girl, Chloe; and for my son, Carter. I was still very frightened at the whole prospect of this new diagnosis when they lay Chloe down on the gurney in the ER. While they were preparing to place the IV in her arm, she stared up at me with fear in her eyes, looking to me for strength, and I said, “Everything is going to be OK”, even though I wasn’t so sure it was. She didn’t peep, cry, or squirm, which truly amazed me. I prayed in that moment, “I really need strength to get my little girl through this.” As she got down from the gurney and climbed into a chair, the reason for our three week study with the first through fourth graders suddenly became clear. Robin and I looked at each other and I said, “Chloe, who gives us strength?” She jumped out of the chair she was sitting in and said, “Jesus!” It was just so precious, and really brought home the fact that Jesus *was* with us. I knew that He was there, not only in that moment; but that He would be with me to make me strong, so that I could be that pillar - that rock – upon which my wife and children could lean. Thank you very much for allowing me to share this experience.

Jim Preisig: Thank you, Steve. It was Frederick Nietzsche, the German philosopher, who said, “To those human beings who are of any concern to me, I wish suffering, desolation, sickness, ill-treatment, and dignity.” We read that and it sounds ludicrous! Why would we wish suffering, desolation, sickness, and illness upon those we love? But remember, it is in the moments when our lives are pushed to the point of pain that we often experience God most momentously. Allow me to draw an analogy for you. Picture this: You are in Colorado’s Rocky Mountains, and you have a choice: you can be helicoptered to the summit or you can climb the distance yourself. If you choose to take the helicopter, you will arrive to a gorgeous, breathtaking view. If you climb to the top, you know that you will be bloodied and bruised along the way, and that it will be an agonizing journey to the summit. Now ask yourselves, upon reaching the apex of the mountain, which moment is going to be most glorious - stepping out of the helicopter which has done literally all the work for you; or climbing, testing your strength, and discovering the incredible joy of persevering in faith until you have accomplished your goal?

I would suggest to you that the scripture passages I shared with you today are really complementary. First, in Psalm 40, we have a hymn of praise that talks about God’s power to lift us up from the depths of despair. Then we come to Romans, chapter 5, and find something amazing. There is the note of praise as found in the Psalm, but there is more than that; there is an invitation, a promise, a process, which assures us that

in life we encounter God in dramatic ways, particularly in times of pain. This is how Paul described it. He said suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Let's test that out and apply it to our lives, seeking the meaning and the promise implicit in the process Paul sketches for us. Consider with me and allow me to show you Paul's message. Suffering leads to endurance, endurance leads to character, and character leads to hope; but we must begin with a new perspective on suffering. If we are honest, we must confess that when we are mired in the moments of pain and sorrow, our perspective is limited, and we lose sight of the larger picture – we can only see the valley. For you see, life is a series of peaks and valleys. We've all experienced that. When we think back upon those peak moments, we realize that in those times, our perspective was most complete, and our view was most profound. But what can we see when we're down in the valley? The valley view is the most constrained, and yet the temptation is to make dramatic choices at those times, which are often wrong, because we lack the perspective to truly see all of the options God creates for us.

Remember back to when Charlie Grimm was the manager of the Chicago Cubs? (Any Cubs fans here today? Hazel, I'm so glad you are here!) Let me tell you about the Chicago Cubbies. They were in the bottom of the standings, having a miserable season. They couldn't get a hit to save their lives, and Charlie Grimm was getting chewed up in the sports pages routinely, because the Cubs were playing so poorly. And so he sent scouts out looking for something, someone, to save the season. One of the Cubs' scouts was in Nebraska and went to a high school game, where he witnessed a true no hitter. He called up Charlie Grimm, the manager, and he said, "You will not believe this kid I've found! He's standing right here beside me. He pitched a true no hitter - 27 batters, and the best they could do was have one guy hit a foul ball. Should I sign this pitcher?" And Charlie Grimm, without a hint of hesitation, said, "No, sign the kid who got the foul ball!"

You see, that's what happens to our perspective when we're in the valley. When we are mired in the moments of misery, we can not imagine that God is really trying to bless us. Let me draw a very human analogy. My wife and I are parents of two teenage children. Pray for us! It occurred to me this week as I was preparing for this sermon, that we could make our children's lives immeasurably easier. Have you thought about that? We *could* make their lives easier, but that is not our purpose. Think about it. First of all, we could buy each of our children an automobile, because they are convinced that we are the only family in Lee's Summit that does not buy their teenagers an automobile. We could buy them a car, right? We could make it very easy. We could pay for the car and pay for their insurance and within a year, it would undoubtedly be wrecked. Or, we could have them endure the pain and agony of raising the money and earning the salary to buy the car and pay for the insurance. My suspicion - let me test this out on you - is that they will treat that car far differently if they have earned it, as opposed to having been given it.

Or consider homework. I could make their lives so much easier if I sat down and did their homework every night, couldn't I? And, when they deal with a difficult teacher, I could go and sit beside them in class. It would be so much easier to take your dad along, don't you think? (OK, it might be a little embarrassing!) Or, when they deal with the tough kids - the bullies - I could go and even take some of my friends who are bigger

than I am. We *could* make things so easy for our children. But here is the question: if we did so, would we be raising up young men and women of faith and courage? Or would we be raising up very weak dependents; young adults without the stamina to stand up for themselves in life?

Now, if we can agree on the truth of that premise from a human perspective, imagine it from the divine perspective. Don't you suppose there are instances in which God allows us to suffer through life? I know this violates some of the current preaching out there. In fact, have you seen the new "TIME" magazine? There is a picture on the cover of a Rolls Royce with a cross on it, with the words, in bold print, "**DOES GOD WANT YOU TO BE RICH?**" And the article within contains a quote from Joyce Meyer, a television preacher and author from St. Louis, who says, "Who would want to get in on something where you're miserable, poor, broke and ugly and you just have to muddle through until you get to heaven?" Well, let's be honest. Sometimes life *is* miserable and ugly! It's ironic - she's holding up a Bible that looks like it is crocodile skin or ostrich; I can't tell for sure, but it is some exotic material. And she's saying life shouldn't be ugly and miserable. The irony is that everyone God used to a mighty purpose in scripture suffered.

Think this through with me. Is it in God's interest to make our lives easy? Or do you suppose it is God's will to so forge our lives that we become people of true strength? Athletes learn this well. It is only when they push themselves beyond what they believe to be the limit of their skills, ability, and endurance that they truly reach and discover their strength. I suggest to you that there are many hidden, embedded blessings in our moments of sorrow and pain. We discover our true friends, we discover our own amazing strength and abilities, and we come to know God. For the simple truth is, when life is easy, we rarely turn to the Almighty.

The second truth is that, just as suffering leads to endurance, endurance leads to character. I must confess to you I'm skeptical of people who have never been tested by life. Do you understand what I mean? There are no child prodigies in life when it comes to what really matters. There are no child prodigies in terms of theology or ministry, because it is only in living life and experiencing all that life entails that our true character is forged and revealed. It is only when we are tested like steel that our strength is revealed. Do you know who my football hero was when I was growing up? I'll give you a hint: it was, of course, a Green Bay Packer. For most boys my age it was Bart Starr, the quarterback, but he was not my hero. My hero was Ray Nitschke. Do you remember Ray Nitschke? He only stood 6'3", and weighed 235 pounds at his heaviest, but he played with such incredible intensity, passion, and character! Do you know anything about Ray Nitschke's story? His mother died when he was 3, and he lost his dad when he was 13. After being orphaned at 13, his older brother raised him in the bad neighborhoods of Chicago, on the wrong side of the tracks. He could have pursued the petty crime that was so prevalent in that day, in that place, but he did not. Instead, he aspired for more. He played quarterback for his high school team and led them to the division championship. He then attended the University of Illinois, where he started out as a quarterback, went on to play fullback, but was eventually discovered to have incredible giftedness at the middle linebacker position on the defensive side. He was a third round draft choice of the Green Bay Packers. His first season was 1958, and he played for 15 years. Can you imagine surviving 15 years in the NFL when you are involved in almost every defensive

play? Vince Lombardi built his incredible, storied defense with Ray Nitschke as the anchor. Bart Starr once said, "Ray Nitschke is really a Jekyll and Hyde." On the field, he was absolutely intense and passionate; off the field, you could not meet a finer gentleman - a kinder, more loving soul. Ray Nitschke was my hero.

I played middle linebacker when I was in high school; poorly, I might add, but Nitschke was my inspiration, because he continued to play even when he was hurting, even when other people his age had retired. And why, you might ask? I believe that it wasn't just the love of the game; rather, I'm convinced that it was his love for the people with whom he had the privilege to share it. I further contend that his *true* character was revealed in the early '70s, during his last years on the field. Isn't that true in life? A person's mettle is only discovered when tested. You only know what a person is truly like when everything is stripped away in the midst of adversity. Then, you come to truly know the heart of a woman or man. Endurance leads to and reveals character.

Finally, character leads to hope. Here is how it works. Only when we reach the end of our rope do we discover that God is standing with His arms extended, ready to catch us up in His love. Did you see the Tom Hanks movie, "Castaway"? Did you like that? I really didn't. I mean I usually like Tom Hanks' stuff - I really do - but I kinda felt like I was a castaway in the theatre and I couldn't get off the island. (Interrupted by laughter) And do you know what struck me as incredibly inauthentic (and it had to be the Hollywood perspective); what really did not ring true in that movie? Here he was, stranded on the island after that tragedy, almost going mad; struggling with all the adversity, the shattered hopes and dreams, and the setbacks; and not once in that entire movie did he ever pray! Did you notice? Not once! And that is inauthentic, because we are wired in such a way that when we come to the end of our strength, we intuitively reach out to the One who is greater, stronger, and most loving - God.

I recently spoke to Wayne McMeins about some of the significant events of his life. He is one of the last living survivors of Iwo Jima, and he described the experience to me in very graphic detail. He said that the shrapnel and the bullets were so peppering the beaches when he landed on the amphibious carrier, that it was like rain all around him. And I know it's cliché, but he actually said, "Jim, you know there were no atheists on that beach head. Everybody was praying." What I suggest to you is that in those moments when we feel like life itself hangs in the balance, when we are at the point of breaking - that is when we are most keenly aware of the presence of God. Think about it. Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego did not encounter God until they got in the furnace. It is when life is most intolerable, when the pain is almost unendurable, that we encounter God - and that is the promise.

The psalmist said it this way, "I waited patiently for the LORD; He inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pits." The women of Honor and Praise began our service today by singing of the One who lifts us up when we find ourselves at the depths of life. Bruce Baker lost his high-tech business and his wife in rapid succession. His wife was 36 years old when she was diagnosed with cancer, and he tried to pour himself into building a high-tech company while caring for her and their three children. He went bankrupt, his business closed, his wife died, and he was left with three children, absolutely despaired. He probably would have considered taking his own life, if not for the children who needed his care. He describes himself as being at the absolute rock bottom, beyond what he felt he could possibly endure. In the darkness, in

the bleakness of life, he encountered Jesus, and discovered the strength, the grace, and the love that sustained him. His story is remarkable. In that moment, through the despair, he felt God's loving embrace, and it lifted him up. He was able to focus on caring for his three young children, and began to look for a job. He was hired by Microsoft to head up the division which eventually devised the operating system for smart phones and pocket PCs. In time, he met a lovely woman, who not only loved him, but loved his children, and they married. He still desperately misses the wife who died, but he describes so eloquently that it was love which sustained him through the most painful experience of his life. He retired from Microsoft and went back to school to become a pastor, because he discovered that his purpose in life was to share with ordinary people the extraordinary promise of God's love in the most painful moments of life. For this is the truth: it is in the difficult days that we discover God. And though you would never wish those days on your worst enemy, in retrospect you realize that truly, God is the One who lifts us up. That is the promise that is yours in Christ. Amen?

Pray with me, please: Lord, thank You for the wisdom and testimony of the saints in every age who have come to the point beyond their own strength, discovering Yours. Lord, when the tough times come - and it's not a question of if, it's only a question of when - prepare our hearts that we might see and recognize You in our times of despair and difficulty. For Lord, You have promised to be there. In Christ, Amen.