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HOW TO HANDLE LIFE'S HURTS

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P R E F A C E

THERE'S NO WAY to avoid the hurts life brings our way. Some believers suffer more than others, but we all suffer. When Jesus saved us, He didn't hand us a contract exempting us from life's hurts. He promised that we would have tribulations. But He also promised to be with us all the time, through thick and thin, when health fails and income dries up, when friends misunderstand us and family members disappoint us, when the car breaks down, and when the house floods.

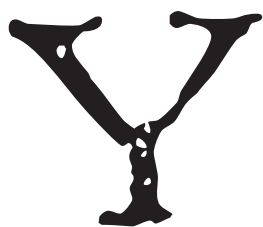
I have seen my share of hurts, but I have also received a generous helping of God's grace. I think I have learned to see God's goodness more clearly during those times I was flat on my back. I know I have seen God more clearly by observing Christians whose faith was pummeled by adversity but grew only stronger. I am thankful for their legacy.

Although many moderns seem to highly value "fun," it seems to me that God wants His children to develop a resilient faith. Trials and adversity never pack any fun when they come calling, but they bring plenty of opportunities for increased faith. If we view life's hurts as helps to develop a strong, practical faith, we will emerge from each one better for the experience.

It is my prayer that this book will help you handle life's hurts and find that God's grace is sufficient for you.

CHAPTER 1

DOES IT REALLY PAY TO SERVE GOD?



YOU PROBABLY haven't met anyone named Asaph. Parents aren't exactly rushing to pin that name on their newborns.

But when you and I read Psalm 73, written by Asaph, we identify with him immediately. We nod understandably and think, *Hey, I've been there*, or *Asaph, you're pointing at the stuff I'm trying to deal with right now!* You see, Asaph struggled big time to reconcile what he knew in his heart with what he saw with his eyes—and often we do too!

In his heart, Asaph knew that God is good to His redeemed people (v. 1). As a prophet and worship leader, he must have proclaimed this truth many times. He was aware

that Israel's history brimmed with accounts of God's gracious activity. From the call of Abraham, Israel's first father, to the times of Asaph, God had rescued His people from tyranny, empowered them for battle, given them a kingdom, and delivered them from idolatry. He had forgiven and restored them and spoken to them through His prophets. Indeed, Israel would have been obliterated had it not been for God's undeserved and inexplicable goodness.

We expect such a declaration of God's goodness to come from a prophet and worship leader. But how do we deal with his confession that he had almost made a shipwreck of his faith when he saw how well-heeled the wicked were (vv. 2, 3)? Our tendency is to gasp and stagger backwards. That a preacher should ever question God's fairness is about as unsettling as learning that your surgeon is an alcoholic. Surgeons are supposed to be clearheaded and steady-handed, and preachers are supposed to be flawless exhibitors of faith. They are supposed to have it all together, aren't they? No doubts. No questions. No discontent. No stumbling. No backsliding.

Of course, it is unreasonable to hold a preacher to a higher standard than we set for ourselves. The Bible doesn't make such a distinction, and in all candor, we must admit that we, too, question God's fairness. It's hard to maintain a Steady-Eddie kind of faith when we see our pagan neighbors grow rich and sassy while we try to keep the wolf from the door. Can we truly believe God is good to His children when bills bully our paycheck? when the house needs a new roof? when the plumbing fails? when all the appliances seem to conspire to break down in the same week? when the car turns over a hundred thousand miles but thirty months of payments

remain? when there's no way the teens can have separate bedrooms? when the doctor explains that the lab report confirms the presence of cancer?

So we understand Asaph's close encounter with spiritual disaster. We totter on the same brink when we take our eyes off God's providence and fix them on our pagan neighbors' prosperity. Like Asaph, we see them as healthy and strong (v. 4). They could easily be models for local fitness centers. Mr. and Mrs. Flat Abs! Why can't we be healthy like them? Why don't our muscles ripple like theirs? Why do we hear snap, crackle, and pop first thing in the morning and realize the sounds aren't coming from our cereal?

Our pagan neighbors do not appear to experience harsh trials and debilitating diseases (v. 5). Life seems to hand them roses but gives us thorns. Our neighbors glide unobstructed through life, whereas we bump into a blockbuster barrier at almost every turn. They laugh all the way to the bank, whereas we hardly have reason to visit a bank. Money talks in their hands, but about all it says to us is, "Good-bye."

Pride expands with every financial gain our pagan neighbors achieve. They show this pride as conspicuously as someone might wear an expensive necklace (v. 6). They presume that they have made themselves rich by being savvy and tenacious. It doesn't matter to them how many people they manipulated to reach their goal. They excuse their violent treatment of those poor souls who stood in their way. If they had to wreck others' lives and bankrupt others' fortunes in their selfish quest for financial freedom, so what? Violence fits them well (v. 6). They can be as bloodthirsty as the person who attends a bullfight and cheers for the bull.

How is it possible that these wicked scoundrels escape divine judgment? Asaph must have wondered. And we wonder too! Just look at them—full bellies and flabby jowls (v. 7). Eating occasionally at Burger Billy's may be considered a treat by many a godly family, but the pagan rich gorge nightly on exquisite cuisine served in elegant surroundings by a cadre of attentive waitstaff. Maitre d's and table attendants flutter around them like butterflies around daffodils.

The pagan rich have more than any heart could desire (v. 7). Of course, they fail to understand that the heart can never be satisfied with things. So they stack up this toy and that toy, thinking that, in the end, he who has the most toys wins.

These morally corrupt members of society's upper crust boast about how they oppress the weak (v. 8). Pulling off a sharp business deal at the expense of some unsuspecting person is an occasion to celebrate. One-upmanship and shady business practices make them feel pumped up with a sense of accomplishment. They blaspheme God and seem to take great delight in letting everyone know they have no need of Him (v. 9).

It's enough to make a saint sick!

Asaph must have wrestled long and hard in prayer and burned the midnight oil in search of a Scriptural answer to the question, Why do the wicked prosper? But a related issue cropped up to further muddy the water for Asaph. Verses 11 and 12 indicate that God's people were capitulating to the side of the wicked rich and drinking in the notion that God was oblivious to what was taking place on earth. They observed the wicked living in the lap of luxury, while they awoke every day to trials, trouble, and tribulation (v. 14). As far as they were

concerned, it didn't pay to serve God (v. 13). It made sense to abandon God's ways and indulge their sinful appetites.

Doug graduated from a highly respected Christian college and landed a teaching job in a high school. For a while he faithfully attended an evangelical church and taught the high school Sunday School class. But as time passed and Doug advanced in his teaching career, he became less spiritual and more secular. His church attendance lagged, and he resigned his Sunday School teaching responsibility. Career goals, non-Christian friends, and a materialistic mind-set replaced his desire to serve God. His enjoyment of Christian fellowship dulled, and his interest in spiritual growth plummeted.

Ultimately, Doug stopped attending church. He built an expensive house, immersed himself in worldly pleasures, and ridiculed those who honored God. He assumed the attitude that he could exclude God from his life and enjoy living far better without Him. As far as Doug was concerned, God was simply an impersonal being Who could care less how people live.

Many Israelites in Asaph's era had developed the attitude Doug reflected, and Asaph was deeply perplexed by it. He couldn't piece together the puzzle he saw: the wicked prospered, but the godly suffered. Neither could he buy into the reckless attitude shown by God's backslidden people. Doing so would have betrayed an entire generation of God's people (v. 15). God was good to Israel. Asaph couldn't reject that truth. Somebody had to draw a line in the sand!

If headache relievers existed in his day, Asaph must have downed bottles of them. He experienced a colossal headache as he tried to figure out why the wicked prospered and the godly

suffered (v. 16). And the headache just wouldn't go away.

I think I understand what Asaph was experiencing. Often I have wondered why the heavy hammer of trials struck me but missed those I deemed ungodly. I found myself asking, Does it really pay to serve God? Even though I knew Romans 8:28 by heart, I tossed and turned at night and awoke with one of those can't-shake it-loose headaches. All things seemed to be working together for bad, not good.

One particularly painful time began three months after my family and I had moved into a house just west of Denver. Situated on the side of a hill, the house sat below other houses in various stages of construction. A reservoir lay about a mile above the housing development.

Our house was small, but the basement was finished and offered additional living space: a master bedroom, a bathroom, and a family room. An unfinished laundry area comprised the rest of the basement. My wife and I claimed the basement bedroom. Our two daughters and son claimed the three small upstairs bedrooms.

Memorial Day morning I stepped out of bed into the coldest Rocky Mountain water you can imagine. It was about an inch deep and covered the entire basement floor. "We have a problem, Gloria," I groaned to my wife. She bolted out of bed and quickly agreed with my astute observation. It was indeed a problem—a BIG problem.

And it didn't go away.

At first, we rented a water vacuum. The water level rose. Next, we installed a sump pump. The water level rose. We moved belongings upstairs, and dragged the carpet outdoors to dry. The water level rose, and the carpet soured.

We called the fire department. Perhaps firefighters would pump out the basement. They wouldn't. The water level rose. We prayed and prayed and prayed. The water level rose.

We hired a waterproofer. His employees trenched the inside perimeter of the basement, laid gravel and drainage tile there, and cemented over the gravel. But water bubbled up alongside the construction line—and everywhere else from under the floor.

The waterproofer trenched gridiron fashion across the rest of the floor and laid gravel and drainage tile where he trenched. He also removed the bathroom plumbing to let the water flow down the drains and into the sewer lines. The water level continued to rise.

When water entered the house through the fireplace, the waterproofer gave up and called his employees off the job.

We called other waterproofers. They refused to accept the job of solving the flooding problem. They acknowledged that we had already employed the services of the most experienced waterproofer in the Denver area. If he couldn't solve the problem, they reasoned, they weren't going to try.

Not only was our house sinking, but my faith was sinking too. Why was God letting this calamity happen to us? Did He really care about us? Didn't He know what kind of mess we were in? These and a hundred other questions pounded inside my head like a jackhammer.

To make misery even more miserable during this ordeal, many of my fellow employees joked about the situation. They asked how I liked my indoor swimming pool and suggested that I sell some of the water to the city.

However, one employee, a former missionary to Nigeria,

took a different approach. He sloshed through the water with me and helped move furniture to higher ground. One evening he and I sat outdoors on the front steps, watching pumped water gush from the basement onto the front lawn (a very green front lawn). He said, “Jim, I know things look grim right now, but you still have your family.” His words, dismissed then with little thought, would return later with great impact.

After three months of chasing down every possible means to solve our water problem but finding no solution, my wife and I offered the house to the waterproofer if he would assume the mortgage payments. He agreed, believing he could salvage the house by investing his own time and effort in the project.

Three months after stepping out of bed and into cold water, I led my family out of our watery residence and into the cramped quarters of three rooms at the back of a church I had been serving as a part-time pastor. We had lost our down payment and whatever equity we had accumulated, but we still had one another.

In time I learned what lay behind the words of the employee-friend who had tried to encourage me that evening on the front steps. He and his wife had buried a three-year-old twin son in Nigeria. This information made losing my house seem insignificant compared with his loss. My trial helped me affirm experientially what I had always acknowledged intellectually: The best things in life aren't things! In that instance, at least, I was able to see life from God's perspective.

Asaph learned to see life from God's perspective when he entered the sanctuary (v. 17). There, alone with God, he

understood what will ultimately happen to the wicked and what constitutes true wealth.

Nothing enlightens the soul and cheers the heart quite like quality time with the Lord. As we meditate upon His Word and roll our burdens onto His strong shoulders, His peace soothes and smooths our hurts. There is wise counsel in the simple poem:

We mutter and sputter.
We fume and we spurt.
We mumble and grumble.
Our feelings get hurt.
We can't understand things.
Our vision grows dim,
When all that we need
Is a moment with Him.

—Author Unknown

Asaph took that moment, and it supplied the missing piece of the puzzle.

The wicked may seem to have it made now, Asaph learned, but God had taken note of their impudent, arrogant, bully tactics. He marked their contemptuous disregard for morality and civility. He would write “The End” to their life stories with one fell swoop of His hand of judgment. He had destined them for a sudden, unexpected, swift slide into Hell (vv. 17–19). The wicked had struck fear into their victims’ hearts, but at the Judgment, God will fling the wicked rich into an eternity of terrors (v. 19). He may appear to be no threat to the wicked rich now, but someday they will face His fierce, though just, sentencing (v. 20). And they will not be able to withstand the blast of His wrath.

This revelation of future judgment convicted Asaph of his shortsightedness. Why had he entertained even the slightest notion that God's scales were unbalanced? As he looked back on his doubting, he confessed that he had exercised no more spiritual sense than an animal (v. 22).

The Pennsylvania Dutch observe, "We get too soon old and too late smart." For me, at least, learning God's lessons comes slowly. The older I get the more often I find myself reviewing life's trials and wondering why it took me so long to see God's presence, purpose, and provision in them.

Time spent alone with God gave Asaph a new perspective on life. He saw that others might have gold for a while, but He had God forever (v. 23). God would be alongside him through thick and thin, holding His right hand as a loving parent holds a young child's hand to guide and protect him (v. 23). Then, at the end of life's road, God would welcome Asaph to his eternal Home (v. 24).

Believers who live in expensive homes may see them as only temporary residences, simply real estate they hold, not real estate that holds them. They wisely anticipate an eternal Home in Heaven. Other believers may be content to live in modest circumstances, knowing that the Carpenter of Nazareth is preparing a mansion in Heaven for them (John 14:2, 3). Both groups of believers have fastened their faith on the God of Asaph's revelation!

The best thing about Heaven, though, is not *what* is waiting for us but *Who* is waiting for us. Asaph would treasure the King of Heaven as the chief joy of Heaven and the only Companion he desired on the road to that celestial place (v. 25).

The wicked rich might enjoy good health in this life, but

they will suffer pain, thirst, and torment in eternity. On the other hand, believers may experience disability or illness now, but God supplies spiritual strength for every challenge (v. 26). With Him at the center of our lives, we can sing doxologies, not dirges.

The wicked and all their converts will perish far from God (v. 27), but those who trust in Asaph's God will take great delight in drawing close to Him (v. 28). They will trust Him and proclaim His works to others (v. 28).

From the school of suffering, God graduates scholars of rare wisdom and faith. They have learned to draw close to Him. The closer they draw to Him, the better they learn to know and trust Him. And the better they learn to know and trust Him, the better they are able to proclaim Him. No one should attempt to speak for God without first drawing near to Him and trusting Him. Secondhand knowledge of God is about as inviting as hand-me-down underwear!

When we think it doesn't pay to serve God, it's time to go to school again with Asaph.

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

1. Is it possible to reach a point in the Christian life when your faith cannot falter? Why or why not?
2. Why do you think bad things happen to good people?
3. How has God shown His goodness to you?
4. What circumstances are testing your faith right now?
What is your strongest hope in those circumstances?
5. Who do you believe have more troubles, Christians or non-Christians? Explain.

6. How might envy destroy your relationship with the Lord?
7. How might a poor person be more materialistic than a rich person? Explain.
8. What does Romans 8:28 guarantee? What does it not guarantee?
9. How have fellow Christians helped you get through a severe trial with your faith intact?
10. What are you looking forward to most in Heaven? How does that expectation help you to overcome present adversities?