

# **Facing** *Life's* **Challenges**

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*Jeff* **Newman**

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# Introduction

**M**y wife and I visited a local art gallery simply to window shop. As we strolled through the various rooms, we quietly commented to each other on the various paintings and sculptures. In one room, two large paintings immediately caught our attention. Both paintings by the same artist captured beautiful but distinct landscapes. The artist painted the landscapes with such realism that the paintings seemed to call out to us to enter and explore the land more closely. We stood for some time taking in the details the artist made available to us, while at the same time imagining some of the details that were beyond our view.

I trust that this study will, in a similar way, provide for you an opportunity to contemplate God's work in painting the landscape of your life. I pray that you will be captured by the beautiful resources God has made available to you, resources that enable you to face life's challenges and grow. I also pray that our brief walk together will increase your faith in God and inspire you to explore the depths of His rich resources with increased energy and purpose—beyond the brief pages of this book and deeper into His Book.

God's artistry on the canvas of our lives includes a variety of landscapes. At times, those landscapes appear lush and inviting. At other times, they are stony and rugged, maybe even barren. Left to ourselves, we would desire God's work always to take place in the midst of inviting landscapes. As time goes by we discover that God's most breathtaking work takes place in the rough and stony places of our lives. When we look back on the rugged landscapes, we

see beauty. What at the time seemed like stumbling blocks hindering our progress, we now see as stepping-stones to growth as we begin to view the scene from God's vantage point.

God places stepping-stones in our landscapes of life to serve the glorious purpose of conforming us to the image of His Son. He desires that the challenges point us to Jesus. Our Savior's landscape was marked by difficulty, yet His final suffering on the cross led to an empty tomb, to a resurrection. As God's children, we believers share in Christ's sufferings. Our lives will be marked by difficulty, yet our submission to Christ in the midst of challenges always results in our growth in holiness. In the end, we will find that our journey through this life led us into Christ's presence, where we will stand with Him, alive forever—like Him, never to suffer again.

As you surveyed the contents page, I imagine that your attention was drawn to one or two of the topics we will study together. Resist the temptation to skip ahead; rather, follow the lessons in order. First, while each life-challenge has distinct features, the resources we have in Christ apply with equal strength to each challenge. Because of this, I trust that you will find yourself relating material from each lesson to the other lessons. Each lesson links to and builds on the others. Second, we do not walk the landscape of this life alone: Christ walks with us, and we walk with others. As you work your way through these lessons, God will use you to encourage others in their walk with Him. Whether you are studying in a group or by yourself, ask God to remind you of His faithful presence, and ask Him to use you to help another brother or sister in Christ transform stumbling blocks into stepping-stones. Fellow pilgrims often find strength on a shared path.

Finally, in a study of this size (or of any size, for that matter), we could never exhaust the riches of our sufficient resources in Christ. However, let us attempt together to get a lay of the land—to view the landscape in panorama—so we can return again and again to explore the details of God’s glory more closely. I trust that you will find the landscape of our study together both inspiring and inviting, helping you to see your life from God’s perspective and drawing you closer to Him.



Lesson 1

# Life's Challenges from Beginning to End

"Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue." —2 Peter 1:2, 3

**A**re you a history buff? Consider this: What do historians study? They study people. Historians record the interactions of people and their circumstances. The most memorable circumstances are often those that occur in the midst of life's challenges. But ultimately, historians study individual lives, considering both the events that influenced and the responses that governed each individual's life. The challenges met with integrity—and the challenges met with duplicity—reveal the person's character.

Even though most of us will never find our names in a history book, we are writing a biography—an autobiography. If we live with faith in Christ, seeking to follow Him, we will write a history of a growing love for and



submission to Him. If we fail to face life's challenges with love for Christ and faith in Him, our autobiographies will document our straying from God or possibly even forsaking Him.

1. Consider your life. If you were to write your autobiography, what events would you include? What would your responses to these events reveal about you?

Events

What My  
Responses Reveal

We write our autobiographies as we face life's challenges. These challenges become stepping-stones to growth in holiness, or they become stumbling blocks, depending on our responses to them. Early New Testament believers faced significant challenges to their new faith in Christ. The writers of New Testament Epistles appealed to these believers by

teaching them theology, that is, truth about God, coupled with truth about themselves and others. The writers then connected this theology to the challenges of life.

In this study, we will consider selected passages from two New Testament Epistles, Ephesians and Hebrews. The recipients of these books found themselves in the midst of historic challenges, events that called on them to grow in their faith in God. To make sense of our lives and respond to challenges with God's perspective, we, like the early Christians, must follow God's instructions. He allows (even brings) challenges to help us grow in personal holiness. As we submit ourselves to His work in us, He plots the details of our personal histories to remake us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

## **The Ephesians' Challenge**

An exceptional start does not guarantee a successful finish; such was the case with the Ephesians. A journey that began at great heights for them ended with a warning from God. The challenges of life wore at the Ephesians' faith. Instead of becoming opportunities for growth, their challenges became occasions for straying in their love for Christ.

2. Read Acts 19:1—20:1. In your own words, write a brief history of the coming of the gospel to Ephesus.

Did you note the remarkable effects that the gospel had on the people of Ephesus? As the new believers began with faith in Christ to face life and its challenges, they purged their lives of everything connected with the Diana worship of their past. The changes they made threatened the city's idolatrous worship and its related economy. As a result, those who rejected faith in Christ (chiefly Demetrius) incited a riot. In the midst of this chaos, God intervened and used the unregenerate leader of the city to calm the masses. After the riot, Paul rejoiced with the believers in Ephesus and went from there to continue to spread the gospel. He left behind a church with a fervent love for the Savior, but did it stay that way?

3. Read Revelation 2:1–7.

(a) What commendation did Christ give the church at Ephesus?

(b) What criticism did He make of the believers there?

Yes, you read it correctly. The believers who had demonstrated such devoted love for Christ just one generation earlier had walked away from their first love. Instead of facing the “stuff” of life—its blessings and burdens—with love for Christ, they turned away.

Had Paul heard of this turning when he wrote his letter to the Ephesians? It seems so. His concern comes through in the words he used to call the Ephesians to a zealous love for Christ. He wrote with an excited urgency as he detailed for the Ephesians the resources that belonged to them in Christ. These resources also belong to us as we live out our autobiographies before God.

## **God-given Resources for Life's Challenges**

### **Our Relationship with Christ**

4. Read Paul's prayers in Ephesians 1:15–23 and 3:13–21. What requests did Paul make for the Ephesians?

(a) Ephesians 1:15–23

(b) Ephesians 3:13–21

In the first three chapters of Ephesians, Paul reminded the believers of the glorious nature of their salvation and the wonderful privileges they had as a result of being in Christ. He called them to view their lives through the lens of the blessings of being in Christ: the hope of His calling and the

riches of the glory of His inheritance. Paul also encouraged them to live in the strength of the resurrection power they had in Christ. Because of their salvation and its resultant blessings, the Ephesians were to love God and express that love through their humble obedience.

5. Read the following passages and summarize what Paul said to the Ephesians about being in Christ. What blessings did they enjoy as a result of their salvation?

(a) Ephesians 1:6, 7

(b) Ephesians 1:11, 12

(c) Ephesians 1:13, 14

(d) Ephesians 2:4–7

(e) Ephesians 2:10

(f) Ephesians 2:19–22

(g) Ephesians 3:11, 12

6. How do these statements encourage you to live for Christ in the midst of life's challenges and tribulations?

The writer of the book of Hebrews, like Paul with the Ephesians, reminded his readers of the surpassing riches they possessed in Christ. He wrote to believing Jews scattered from their homeland by persecution, to believers who were considering giving up and returning to the familiarity and comforts of Judaism. The writer did not soften the realities of their challenges; neither did he diminish the resources available to them to meet those challenges—resources found in Christ.

7. Read Hebrews 12:1 and 2.
  - (a) On Whom did the writer instruct his readers to fix their attention?
  
  - (b) How did he describe the person who was to capture their gaze?
  
  - (c) How does this instruction and encouragement provide help and hope for you in the midst of life's challenges?

**Our Relationship with Fellow Believers**

8. Read Ephesians 4:11–16.

(a) What did Paul teach the Ephesians about the purpose of the church and their relationship with fellow believers?

(b) How did their relationship with fellow believers help them face life's struggles?

In Christ, God joined the Ephesian believers to Christ's Body, the universal church, and gave them the privileges and responsibilities of being united as a local church. Their pastor sought to equip them to face life's challenges and grow to maturity. Paul encouraged the Ephesian believers to serve alongside their pastor as they became equipped. When they followed this pattern, they would grow in their relationship with Christ and contribute to the spiritual growth of their brothers and sisters in Christ. As a result, none of them would crumble as they faced the storms of life or the deceptive treachery of the enemies of the gospel. Instead, they would grow in Christlikeness, looking to Christ and encouraging each other.

9. Read Hebrews 3:12 and 13 and 10:24 and 25. What instruction is given concerning believers' relationships with one another?

(a) Hebrews 3:12, 13

(b) Hebrews 10:24, 25

God has given believers to one another so we can help each other face the challenges of life with trust in Christ. We need each other to strengthen each other's faith. We need each other to help each other see areas of spiritual blindness. Left to ourselves in times of trouble, we will struggle to view our lives and circumstances from God's perspective. Left to ourselves, we will give our energies to our own desires, rather than to living by love and good works, which reflect a desire to glorify God and become more like His Son.

This reality calls us to live in humility with our brothers and sisters in Christ—always ready to receive admonition and always ready to give encouragement and admonition with patient compassion and humble confidence in Christ. God has given us to each other in Christ. In Him, we are never alone.

10. (a) Describe a time when God used a brother or sister in Christ to encourage and/or admonish you in the midst of one of life's challenges.



- (b) How can you help your brothers and sisters in times of challenge?

### **Our Armor Provided by God**

11. Read Ephesians 6:10–20. In the first column of the table below, list the armor that God has provided for His children. (Use the second column to answer question 12.)

<b>The Item of God's Armor</b>	<b>How should this piece of God's armor protect you as you face life's challenges?</b> (Do not complete this column until question 12.)

Paul instructed the Ephesians to take up the whole armor of God as they journeyed toward Christlikeness. He commanded them to encircle themselves with the belt of personal integrity in their living before Christ. He called them to put on the breastplate of righteousness. Based on their growth in righteousness, God would protect their hearts from the evil one. The sandals of God's peace would provide the Ephesians with sure footing for the journey. With the shield of faith, they could put out the flaming arrows of temptations and accusations from the wicked one. Protected by the helmet of salvation, the Ephesians would be reminded of their present safety and future deliverance in Christ. Finally, with the Word of God, they would overcome the enemy and continue their advance toward Christlikeness. In all of this, Paul desired that the Ephesians would stay in constant communion with God through perseverant, watchful prayer.

Life this side of Glory looks more like a battlefield than a playground, so we must come dressed for war, not recreation. Like the Ephesians, we must take up our armor from God. He has provided everything we need to face the battles of life with faith in Him.

12. Return to the table in question 11. Complete the last column, answering the question, How should this piece of God's armor provide protection for you?

## Reflecting on Our Resources

Paul reminded the Ephesians of their relationships with Christ and each other. God gave them salvation through His Son, not only so they could have assurance of a home in the heavenly places, but so they could grow in their faith in and love for God on earth. God gave them one another so they could live in a community of believers, giving and receiving encouragement and admonition. This encouragement and admonition resulted in a growing love for God and one another, a love expressed in service to God and to others. In addition, Paul reminded the Ephesians that God provided for them a full complement of battle gear so they could face life's struggles and win. Remember, these resources also belong to believers today as we travel through this life.

13. Consider Hebrews 4:11–16.

(a) How did the writer describe the Sword of the Spirit, the Word of God?

(b) How did the writer describe Christ?

- (c) In verses 11 and 16 what did the writer call on the readers to do?
  
- (d) Compare this passage with Christ's instruction to the Ephesians in Revelation 2:5. What parallels do you see?

Sometimes the challenges along our journey of faith come with great intensity. We find ourselves weary and worn with no relief in sight. At other times, the routines of life simply wear away at us, seeking to erode our faith. In all of these times, we can rejoice that God knows us and that His living, energizing Word reveals to us what He already knows—the very thoughts and intents of our hearts. In all of these times, we can rejoice that we can come with confidence in Christ to the throne of grace and always find grace and mercy to help at just the right time. In all of these times, we must turn to Him and not away from Him. When we cling to Him, our love for Him and obedience to Him will grow. Our autobiographies will document our faith in Him.

14. As you embark on this study of facing life's challenges with faith in Christ, take a few moments to evaluate yourself.

- (a) Describe the burdens and blessings of your life now.
  
- (b) How has this brief review of the resources we have in Christ given you hope?