

THE BLAME GAME

How easy it would have been for Joseph to blame God for his misfortunes. Yet not one time do we read about Joseph trying to point a finger at God for causing bad things to happen in his life.

When someone dies, we can't help but wonder, "WHY?" Did God cause this misfortune? Did I do something wrong? Is God punishing me? If God is punishing me for some sin, then I must deserve to be unhappy.

In Chapter 3 we considered some possible reasons why Christians suffer. In this chapter we will delve more deeply into the manner in which some people blame God for causing a death or suffering. While a human is sometimes at least partially to blame for a death, at times blame is improperly attributed when the death was accidental.

When Angie died, Joe told me several times that God must be punishing him because he waited so long to become a Christian. Joe was saved in 1994, and at that time all of his sins were washed away. Even if God did make a practice of punishing people during this lifetime for their sins, it would not be possible for God to be punishing Joe in 2003 for what happened – or did not happen – before he was saved.

Undoubtedly there are many who share Joe's concern, and who need to be reassured that their sins did not cause God to punish them by taking the life of a loved one. This reassurance can be found in a study of God's Word. We must seek to know and understand the truth, and not merely what someone has told us –

or what we feel because we are so discouraged. Does God punish Christians here and now for sins they commit?

Christ's Answer

Fortunately, the Lord Himself replied to this question:

There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish (Luke 13:1-5).

Jesus thus falsified the automatic equation of one's sins with present day punishment. Jesus said they did not suffer these fates because their sins were greater than the sins of others.

When a natural disaster strikes, we can't say that the people living in that area were stricken due to their sins. Some of the people who suffer in this manner are undoubtedly very devoted and faithful Christians.

Some would still point to Hebrews 12:1-12 and say, "Yes, it sure does sound like God punishes us right now when we sin." Before we jump to any conclusions, however, we should consider the passage more carefully. The following section, quoted from

Questions and Answers, Open Forum, Freed-Hardeman College Lectures, by Guy N. Woods (1976) will shed light on this passage.

Answer by Guy N. Woods

Question: "How does God chastise his people? Please explain Heb. 12:5,6." (The remainder of this section is quoted from the previously mentioned book.)

"Some, among the Hebrew Christians to whom the author of the book of Hebrews wrote, were apparently becoming faint of heart and discouraged in the face of the fiery trials and bitter persecutions already falling upon them (Heb. 12:4,5). They were either unmindful of, or were overlooking the fact that it is the lot of all who faithfully serve the Lord to suffer (2 Tim. 3:12). They ought to have recalled the 'exhortation' of the wise man who pointed out that God deals with Christians *as sons*: 'My son regard not lightly the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art reprov'd of him; for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth' (Heb. 12:5,6). This is a quotation from Proverbs 3:11,12. This affirmation embodies a truth applicable in all times and places; and, the author of Hebrews cites it here in support of the premise that the burdens which the suffering saints were then being called upon to bear were actually proofs of God's love, not evidences of his indifference. We thus learn (a) God chastens his children; (b) this chastening has, as its object, our welfare, and it ought not to be lightly regarded; (c) it is one of the many evidences of God's love for us.

"The word 'chastening' is from a Greek term (paideia) which describes the discipline and correction which wise parents regard as essential to the well-being and

proper training of their children. That such is administered by parents is itself evidence of the parent-child relationship; and, the administration of discipline (chastisement) by the heavenly Father points to our sonship: 'It is for chastening that we endure; God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chasteneth not? But if ye are without chastening, whereof all have been partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.' (Heb. 12:8). Inasmuch as it is a characteristic of an earthly father to discipline and to correct his sons, we ought not to feel surprised when God does this for his children! Indeed, in the absence of such chastisement, there is the question whether one is really a true child or not. Since all legitimate children whose parents love them need correction, and are often punished for deviations from the right course; and, since this discipline is proof of the regard which the parents have for their children thus being corrected, were we without similar discipline from God, such would prompt serious questions regarding the genuineness of our sonship. God, in disciplining (chastening) us, is but following a course which even earthly fathers concede to be proper, wise, and necessary for their own offspring:

“Furthermore, we had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?’ We respect and honor the memories of our fathers and mothers, even in those painful moments of chastisement, because we know that they did this for our good; therefore, we ought not to shrink from chastisement, as Christians, since such chastisement has as its object our spiritual world to come. The object and end of the Lord’s chastisement is vastly superior to that characteristic of earthly parents, worthy though such is:

“For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed good to them; but he for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness’ (Heb. 12:10). Brief, indeed, was the period in which we received correction from our earthly parents; in the nature of the case, the period of the chastisements, and the benefits resulting therefrom were necessarily limited; but, the chastening which we receive from God is not limited to our present existence, because it prepares us by enabling us to become ‘partakers of his holiness,’ to live with him forever in the world to come.

“Here, as always, where comparisons are drawn between the earthly and the heavenly, between what man does and what God does, care must be exercised in not pressing the comparison beyond the point intended. It was the apostle’s purpose in this section of the Hebrew treatise to establish the premise that the corrective discipline which parents administer to their children is for the good of the children, and should be regarded as proof of the parents’ love; similarly, when children of God feel his chastening hand they should not resent it, but accept it as a manifestation of love and fatherly concern.

“But, *how does God chasten us?*

“Does he send sorrow, suffering and bitter trial upon those whom he loves? Is he the actual author of the evil which often befalls our way? Surely not (Lam. 3:33; John 3:20). God does not afflict us willingly; he is tender and compassionate toward all of his children; and evil is not of God, but of the devil. We have seen that it was the design of the sacred writer to indicate a similarity between the need for, and the chastening received by, the children of earthly fathers, and that which God administers.

“*Why are children disciplined and corrected?*

“Children require periodic discipline because they have not conformed to the expressed will of their parents. In such instances, who provides the *occasion* for the discipline, the parents of the children? Who does the chastening? The parents. For whose failures? The children’s. We, too, as children of the heavenly Father are often thoughtless, frequently wayward, sometimes openly disobedient; thus, when God *allows* the natural and necessary consequences of violations of his laws, whether in the natural or spiritual realms, which follow poor judgment, unwise decisions, and alas, overt acts of evil, to fall upon us, and we suffer the consequences thereof, God who is often said to *do* things, which he *allows or permits* (cf. the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, which God is said to have done, and which he did by making demands on the king which Pharaoh, because of his rebellious heart, was unwilling to accede to, the fault being his, (Exodus 4:21) wants us to see in these experiences the hand of divine wisdom, and the importance of avoiding those actions which must lead to such. If we are wise enough to see in the trials of life the importance of faithful obedience, then these trials are used of God as chastening instruments to bring us up to the divine standard. It is in these senses that we suffer chastisement in this life. It is an exceedingly wicked attribution to charge God with *sending* disease, death and physical destruction upon his children arbitrarily; earthly parents do not punish their children for disobedience done by others, or when the children have not been bad; and the assumption that God sometimes takes the lives of innocent children to punish wicked parents is utterly and completely false. God is good, not despotic, in his dealings with his children.

“When we violate his law, walk contrary to his precepts, and live in disobedience to his will as,

indeed, in some measure, all of us do, and we suffer the natural and inevitable consequences of the violation of the laws of God, we ought to see the suffering which results there from God's will, an observation having the disciplinary effect of keeping us from engaging in such in the future. In such instances, the just and proper penalties which attend disobedience will become chastening influences bringing us back to God. Such, the apostle affirms: 'All chastening seemeth for the present to be not joyous but grievous; yet afterward it yieldeth peaceable fruit unto them that have been exercised thereby, even the fruit of righteousness' (Heb. 12:11). Thus, the lessons of chastisement – corrective discipline – though at the moment painful will, when properly learned, bear blessed fruit in our hearts and lives, and lead us into a life of righteousness.

“But is there not some implication, in Hebrews 12:4-11, that persecution and oppression from evil-doers, *because Christians are good rather than bad*, is to be regarded as a form of divine chastisement? Yes, God suffers (not *sends*) bitter trials and persecution to come upon his children and uses such as a furnace to separate from them every element of character and disposition not good. It is in this way that ‘all things’ work (out) to our good (Rom. 8:28) and we are ‘to count it all joy’ when we fall into ‘manifold trials’ (James 1:2). From these experiences, if we love God and do his will, we shall emerge strengthened, refined, and made fit for the Master's use!”

Modern Application

So exactly what does this mean in my own personal life? Let me use my experience as an example. When Angie died, some would (perhaps unwittingly) “blame” God saying that it was “God's will” for Angie to die.

Others would even go so far as to say it was her “time to die,” implying that God caused it to happen just then for a reason.

Was it “God’s will” that Angie die and leave a baby without a mother? God is not cruel. God did not cause the accident to happen.

If you call it “God’s will” because God did not make the driver of the other vehicle sick so he could not run into Angie at just that moment, or cause another event to take place, which would have changed the circumstances, then I guess you would say it was “God’s will.”



God does **cause** some things to take place. He created the world. He causes the laws of nature to remain consistent in our world (Gen. 8:22).

God **allows** other events to take place. Was it “God’s will” that many lost lives during Hurricane Katrina in 2005? God allowed it, but He did not arbitrarily take the lives of those who died. Nor can we say that those people who were in the path of Katrina somehow deserved the pain and suffering which resulted from the hurricane.

Jesus explained in Matthew 5:44 that God “maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.” We are accusing God falsely if we say God deliberately caused people to die in the hurricane. Nonetheless, God is with those who are His children, and will bring good from their trials in life.

Good From Tragedy

God can bring blessings to those who suffer through tragedies if we will cast our cares on Him (1 Peter 5:7). The unsaved can witness how God's people care for each other during times of tragedy. Jesus described how the world would view us: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

When a hurricane or other natural catastrophe occurs, Christians are afforded many opportunities to reach out to comfort and assist other Christians and the unsaved. We may be able to talk to people about our faith because we show them our love. Souls may be reached and saved. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Therefore, benevolence is a form of evangelism.

A few months after Angie died, a woman told me how our experience had touched her heart. This lady knew Angie when she was going to college. In fact, Angie had helped her daughter recover from the death of her dad (the lady's husband).

Although she was a Christian, the woman thought her life would be better if she had nothing to do with her deceased husband's family. Many years had passed. She read on my web site about how being a part of Sophie's life was a life preserver to Joe and me. She knew Angie would have wanted this more than anything – for Joe and me to be close to Sophie. This made her ponder her own actions years ago.

Realizing her mistake, my sister in Christ told me she repented and asked God's forgiveness. Then she went to her deceased husband's mother and did what she

could to make amends for the wasted years. She took her baby grandson to see his great-grandmother for the first time. Unfortunately, she was not able to reach out to the baby's great-grandfather, as he had passed away.

Did God cause Angie to die so this woman would realize how her decision must have hurt her husband's parents? Absolutely not! But God **did** bring good from a tragedy. I pray that much more good will be accomplished in the lives of those reading about Angie's death. May it cause you to better understand the suffering of friends and relatives. May knowing about our loss and recovery help you be able to recognize that you **can** survive and overcome your own personal trials in life.

Blaming God

Those who choose to "blame God," saying He is punishing Christians when tragedy strikes, hold a very shaky position. Are they going to ask what sin was committed every time a house burns or a child dies? Will they blame God for "punishing" a good Christian woman who is ill and no diagnosis can be made to help her recover? Do those who die from cancer "deserve" to die because they must have sinned to cause God to so punish them? What a quagmire we step into when we adhere to this false doctrine!



Their reply might be that although God punishes us by causing illness or death, Satan also uses these things to tempt us. In addition, some sickness and death might be attributed to the laws of nature. While both

of these are true, I firmly deny that God causes death and illness to punish us.

Consider the illustration of a loving parent. Would a loving father spank a child and then say, “Now you figure this out. Did I spank you because of something you did, because I was angry with you, or did it ‘just happen’?” Absolutely not! A loving father would make sure the child knew exactly why he was being spanked before the punishment took place!

Chastisement results when disease is a direct result of our sins. AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are often the result of sin. There may be some cases where even these diseases are a matter of the laws of nature remaining constant. But there is no question in the mind of the suffering individual as to whether or not sin caused the disease.

Undoubtedly one reason we have the book of Job in the Bible is to counteract the false accusations of friends and relatives during times of suffering (physical and/or emotional). When Job’s children all died and Job lost his material wealth, what did Job’s friends say? They accused Job of sin.

Eliphaz wrongly admonished Job, “Behold, happy is the man whom God correcteth: therefore despise not thou the chastening of the Almighty: for he maketh sore, and bindeth up: he woundeth, and his hands make whole... Lo this, we have searched it, so it is; hear it, and know thou it for thy good” (Job 5:17,18,27).

Does this sound like anyone you know? Eliphaz was telling Job that he had sinned and God was punishing him. Job should accept it for his own good! Contradicting this view, Job told God, while with his friends, that he had not sinned, “Thou knowest that I

am not wicked; and there is none that can deliver out of thine hand” (Job 10:7).

Zophar accused Job of lying: “Should thy lies make men hold their peace? And when thou mockest shall no man make thee ashamed. For thou hast said, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in thine eyes. But oh that God would speak, and open his lips **against thee**; And that he would shew thee the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is! Know therefore that God exacteth of thee less than thine iniquity deserveth” (Job 11:3-6).

He thought Job was lying. This supposed friend of Job’s told him that God was actually punishing him even less than he deserved. Those words could be uttered by people today who say that because we suffer, we must have done something really bad for God to punish us so severely.

Job defended himself to his friends, saying, “But ye are forgers of lies, ye are all physicians of no value. O that ye would altogether hold your peace! And it should be your wisdom” (Job 13:4). Job told his friends they were adding to his misery, “How long will ye vex my soul, and break me in pieces with words? Ten times have ye reproached me....” (Job 19:2,3). Job tried to set the record straight. They acted like they wanted to heal Job, but in reality they only wanted to accuse him of being evil and causing God to necessarily punish him.

Blaming Loved Ones

Admittedly, there are people who lose loved ones due to the deliberate act of a friend or relative. If you are facing such a situation, you need to obtain professional assistance. Even if the death was due to the accidental actions of a friend or relative, you may

need counseling and/or medication to overcome the loss.

There are some truly exceptional people who have overcome without laying blame. The following relates how one woman handled the loss of her son.

Spud and Gladys Yoder were very close friends to my mom and dad, Joe and Ada Bender. We all lived in New Paris, Indiana. My brother, Carl, was alive at the time, and Spud and Gladys had three children. Johnny was the middle child, a little older than I was at the time of his accident.

Spud was driving home from work, going up a hill with the sun in his eyes. He heard a thud and stopped the car to see what had happened. He found his son, who had been riding a bicycle close to their home. Johnny was rushed to the hospital and lived only a short time.

Johnny's death could have led to a divorce. It would have in many families. Spud caused Johnny's death, albeit accidentally.

Gladys saved her marriage and her husband's sanity (in all likelihood). She told Spud and everyone she knew, "If it had to happen, I'm glad it was Spud who hit him. If it had been anyone else, I would have always thought the accident could have been avoided. Since it was Spud, I know there was no way he could have seen Johnny and not hit his bicycle."

Undoubtedly the recovery was long. Spud and Gladys had to make a lot of adjustments in their lives. Later they were blessed with the birth of another child. Although he could never take Johnny's place, he brought the family even closer together, and gave them peace and joy.

If you are ever in a similar situation, remember Gladys and her loving attitude toward her husband. As I said earlier, in most instances when a child dies, a couple either draws closer or becomes estranged. Gladys' solution would apply to any accidental death, not just when a husband and wife lose a child. Blaming a loved one only makes the death even more difficult to bear. Acceptance of the fact that it was, indeed, an accident will make the death easier to cope with.

When We Suffer

If we live long enough we will all suffer, some more deeply than others. When suffering comes to us, let us remember Paul's admonition:

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus; Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he **humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death on the cross** (Philippians 2:5-8).

Jesus willingly suffered for us. He loves us and understands our pain. Look to His example of humility. As we study the Word and learn how to be more like Christ, we will be an example for other Christians and a light to those in the world.

Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and **glorify your Father** which is in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Give one example of a sin and consequence that would be considered as the chastening of the Lord.
2. If a person is an alcoholic and then becomes a Christian and stops drinking, will God remove the consequences of this sin? Give other examples.
3. How does it help us and others in the world when God chastens us by allowing us to suffer the consequences of our sins?

4. What loving acts are taking place in the congregation where you worship to fulfill Jesus' prediction in John 13:35?
5. Give one example of good coming from a tragedy (either a specific example, or a general concept).
6. When Angie died, the preacher of the congregation where she worshiped told us that he would be using her accident occasionally through future years when he gives the invitation to become a Christian. How might this affect the unsaved?

7. To what did Job's friends attribute his suffering?

8. What did Gladys say when her child died that may have saved her marriage? Could you be as generous?

9. How can we adopt the "mind of Christ" when we face suffering?

10. Read Hebrews 12:1,2. As we strive to have the “mind of Christ,” consider how Jesus had His eyes on “the joy that was set before him” as He endured suffering. How will this help us accept our trials and suffering in life?
11. Explain how God is glorified when we remain faithful to Him following the death of a close loved one or when we are facing another difficult trial.
12. Read Matthew 11:28-30. What song is based on these verses? (If you are in a Ladies’ Bible Class, it is suggested that you sing this song and ponder the meaning.)

Chapter 8....

BEYOND “IF ONLY...”

Angie called me the Friday night before she died Saturday morning. I almost said, “I’m so tired, let’s talk tomorrow.” In fact, I started to say those words, but sensed that she really needed to talk with me. Little did I know that it would be our last conversation in this lifetime. In my mind I know there would have been nothing wrong with saying we should talk the next day, but in my heart I know I would have grieved deeply over a missed opportunity for a final visit.

This sample “If only...” is not as extreme as those many people must live with. Here are some examples:

IF ONLY....

- I had not said those cruel words right before my loved one died in an accident.
- I had put the poison up where my grandchild could not have reached it.
- I had stopped smoking so I wouldn’t have cancer (or emphysema, or another serious illness) now.
- I had watched my toddler better, so he wouldn’t have drowned.
- I had taught the deceased about being a Christian before it was eternally too late.

We may also have regrets that have nothing to do with the death of a loved one, or our own illness. It is impossible to go through life without ever having any regrets (if we are honest with ourselves). We can’t live a perfect life. Only Jesus was perfect. Some regrets, however, are more serious in nature than others.

If your regret relates to the fact that you caused the death of another person, you need to find a trained professional who can assist you. I am not qualified to offer you advice or counseling to overcome such a tragedy. Even if your situation is not this crucial, you may need counseling and even medication to help you find peace.

Because of the close relationship Angie and I shared, I do not have many regrets. I am blessed to be able to think more of all the good times we shared.

There are other times we think “If only...” as it relates to the actions of another person, or what has happened to a loved one. I have thought over and over, “If only Angie had not died.” “If only Angie were here to raise Sophie.”

How can we get past these “If only...” feelings? Two Bible examples to study are David and Paul.

King David committed adultery and then conspired to commit murder in order to cover up the adultery. I doubt if there will be many readers whose sins have been more disastrous than these. Of course all sin is harmful to the sinner. Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:1,2). We reap the consequences of our sins, which may bring about alienation from friends and family, health problems, criminal charges, etc. Even after we repent, some of the consequences will continue.

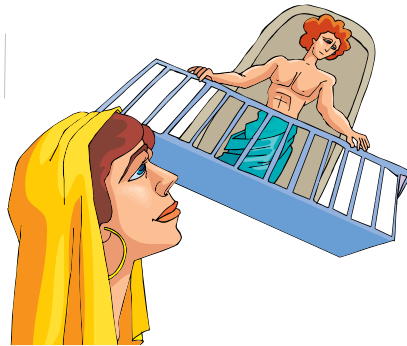
Consider this passage from James 1:14,15, as it relates to the sins of David:

But every man is tempted, when he is
drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.
Then when lust hath conceived, it

bringeth for sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

David's Sin

In 2 Samuel 11, we learn of David's temptation. He "arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon" (v. 2). David did not



turn away from his lustful feelings. He watched her bathing, and was enticed. He wanted her. And he was the king!

David knew full well that Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah (v.3), but he was not about to let that stop him. He longed for her body, and "sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her" (v.4).

Being the king did not prevent David from suffering the consequences of his sin, although he thought he could cover it up. When David discovered that Bathsheba was "with child" (v. 5) he had Joab send for Uriah, on the pretext of wanting to know how the battle was going (v.7). He sent Uriah home to Bathsheba, thinking that he would have relations with his wife, so they could pass off the baby as Uriah's.

But Uriah would not cooperate! He refused to accept the comfort of his own food and bed when the other men were living in tents away from home (v. 11).

How could David cover up his sin? He tried getting Uriah drunk so he would go in to Bathsheba, but Uriah still did not cooperate!

Finally David stooped even lower and sent a letter to Joab, carried by Uriah himself, ordering Joab to place Uriah “in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he may be smitten and die” (v. 15).

Nathan’s Parable

Nathan confronted David with a parable illustrating David’s sin (2 Samuel 12:1-9). He described a rich man who took a poor man’s only lamb to feed his company. Although the rich man had “many flocks and herds” (v. 2), he took the poor man’s lamb that was a family pet (v. 4). David was angry with the rich man and said that he deserved to die (v. 5). Nathan’s reply rings out through the centuries, “Thou art the man” (v. 7).

Nathan described exactly the type of punishment David would receive from God. David was not left to wonder, “Is this a punishment from God?” God no longer speaks verbally to us, as He did to Nathan. Everything we need is provided in God’s Word (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

How did David respond when he knew he had sinned? David repented (2 Samuel 12:13). David did not resign as king. He did not hide away the rest of his life, and think, “If only I had not sinned, then I could do great things for God.”

David’s Repentance

King David had great respect for God and a deep devotion to doing His will. When David sinned, he

repented with a humble heart. Psalm 51 was written after David was confronted by Nathan. David pleaded with God:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.... Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me (Psalm 51:1-3,7).

Psalm 25 is another example of David's attitude. The first three verses are part of a hymn we often sing (and would be good to sing in a Ladies' Bible class studying this lesson!):

Unto thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in thee: let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me. Yea, let none that wait on thee be ashamed: let them be ashamed which transgress without cause.

May we always have a repentant heart like David! Even though David committed adultery and caused the death of Uriah, God forgave him.

Paul pointed out that God called David, "A man after mine own heart" (Acts 13:22). David wasn't perfect, and neither are we! But David was in God's favor because when he sinned, he repented. David's deep love for God is a shining example for us today. Consider how greatly we are blessed by the Psalms David wrote which show us that we, too, can overcome our past sins and find favor in God's eyes.

The only true peace and joy we experience comes from obeying God's teachings and submitting to His will. Peter taught that our joy is based on our obedience. He pointed out that we love Jesus, even though we have not seen him. He said, "though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory: Receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1:7-9).

Eyes on the Goal

When our eyes are on the goal of heaven, and we know we are doing all within our power to get there, we experience joy and peace within our hearts.

Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God (Hebrews 12:1,2).

Paul's Example

Paul is another example of one who sinned grievously, but repented when he was confronted and did much to serve God following his change of heart. Paul could have easily said, "If only I had not consented to the death of Stephen." "If only I had not had Christians thrown in jail." He might have become overwhelmed with guilt and unable to serve God, had he focused on what had taken place in his past.

When Paul stood before Agrippa, he used his experience in an attempt to convert Agrippa. He told him:

I verily thought with myself that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad [enraged] against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities (Acts 26:9-11).

Following his conversion, Paul told Agrippa, he had taught the Gentiles about Jesus (v. 20). Rather than wallow in guilt and self-pity for the sins he committed before he was saved, Paul used his time in a productive manner to teach all who would listen. He boldly declared to Agrippa, “I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost, and altogether such as I am, except for these bonds” (Acts 26:29).

Paul Never Gave Up

Paul devoted the remainder of his life to serving God. He taught the lost everywhere he went. Even when Paul was in prison, he spent time teaching the lost and encouraging Christians he had helped convert.

What a tremendous loss it would have been if Paul had not overcome the negative thoughts about his past. What a tremendous loss it is if **we** do not overcome negative thoughts about our past!

A Modern Example

It is not only the sin in our past that can cause us to lose our influence for Christ. Trials and tribulations may cause us to focus on the “If only...” attitude to the detriment of our Christian example.

Bob Spurlin’s life is a light to all who suffer adversity. Many who have undergone even lesser trials feel they have the right to crumple under the weight and expect others to carry their load.

Allow his story to stifle your “If only...” attitude, should you be tempted to withdraw into yourself because of tribulation. Follow Bob’s example of continuing service to God! Read his article, which can be found in Appendix D, “Victory Over Grief.”

Bob preached for nearly 30 years before he was stricken with multiple sclerosis. In spite of his declining health, Bob has written books to encourage and uplift fellow Christians. On the back cover of *Dial 911*, some of his trials are described:

Bob has had his share of burdens in life. He is, by life’s problems, qualified to discuss these pertinent matters. His brother was murdered. His sixteen year old daughter, Bethany, was killed in a traffic accident. Bob’s mother died from acute leukemia. His own battle with MS has kept him confined to a hospital bed for over eight years.

You will find strength, encouragement, comfort, and challenges in this book about the inevitable problems of life. You will see that the problems of life make us

either bitter or better, depending on how we tackle them.

Bob sends out an e-mail newsletter (see Appendix D) providing encouragement to those who are downhearted and Bible teaching for all who will apply it to their lives. When Bob heard about Angie's death, he called me to offer sympathy and support. He understands. He cares. God is Bob's fortress, "a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

Bob has overcome extreme adversity. Because he is willing to share his experiences through his books and newsletter, thousands are uplifted and strengthened.

Bob could have wrung his hands in despair. He could have given up on life and spent his remaining years wallowing in self-pity. Bob could have blamed God for his misfortune and turned away from serving Him. Because he has persevered, we know we can, too!

Count It All Joy

Bob has found joy in his life in spite of his trials. We can, too. Joy is not the same thing as the happiness the world seeks. It is not frivolity, laughter and thrills. Biblical joy is an inner peace and contentment known only to Christians (Phil.4:7). As we suffer trials, we learn to depend more on God. The joy we experience during trials is not happiness that we are suffering, but joy in knowing that God is with us every step we take. James explains:

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations [or various trials]; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh [produces] patience.... Blessed is the man that endureth temptation; for

when he is tried [has been proved], he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him (James 1:2,3,12).

Finding Joy

Joy is not something that overtakes us and causes us to be at peace all of the time from that moment forward. It is the result of faithfully living the Christian life and working vigilantly to make it a part of our lives. You can't instantly jump from the dark night to the bright morning and expect the sun to never set.

I think I would label my progress like this:

- (1) **The night** – Life was very dark and very sad. It was difficult to focus on anything except my overwhelming grief.
- (2) **A ray of light** – Healing began as Christian friends prayed for us and reached out to us in love. The darkness was still very prevalent.
- (3) **Less night** – As time went by, I cried less often. I thought about happy times and how thankful I was that Angie was saved. It was still difficult to concentrate on things I could be doing for others.
- (4) **More light** – It took several months before I was able to turn my thoughts toward ways I could reach out to others.
- (5) **Inner healing** – When I started working on this book in earnest, I was feeling joy trying to push the extreme sorrow away.

(6) **Less of me** – Now, after two and a half years, I am able to think more of others and less of me. Thoughts of Angie don't always lead to tears.

(7) **Joy and Peace** – As time goes by I feel more joy and peace in my heart. I will miss Angie every day of my life, but missing her won't be the central part of my existence, nor will I allow it to consume the majority of my time left on this earth!

Within each of these phases, there were times when I would feel peaceful, but turn around and feel that the pain was almost unbearable. I spent time reading old letters from Angie and crying. The next morning, the tears had washed away some of the deepest pain, and I could again center my thoughts on serving God and growing stronger in Christ.

What I want you to know is that the battle is not all uphill, neither is it all downhill. Your loved ones who have experienced the death of a close loved one, especially a child, need your unfailing love and comfort. Not for a few days. Not for a few weeks or even a few months. Be there beside them on the long journey, which may take years. Recovery from other trials in life may not require this much time, but your presence in the life of the suffering one is still crucial. Be there and **know** what your loved ones require to return to peace and joy.

In concluding this chapter, I want to turn your minds to the fact that you are **truly blessed** when you are the one who can lift another's spirits. In turn, you are **doubly blessed** when you receive the lift from fellow Christians. As Paul taught in Gal. 6:2:

Bear ye one another's burdens, and so
fulfill the law of Christ.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How might David have acted differently when he saw Bathsheba if he had seriously thought about the consequences?
2. How can you benefit from heeding the admonition in James 4:7?
3. How did David first try to cover up his sin? How does this show us that it is easier to repent of the initial sin than to “get in deeper” in the hope of a cover-up actually working?

4. When Uriah didn't cooperate, what did David do?
Note: David blatantly involved **other** Israelites in His sin.

5. Describe Nathan's parable. How did this depersonalize the situation into one in which David could objectively see his crime?

6. How did David react when confronted with his sin? (Comment on Psalm 51.) What did David admit? At this moment in King David's life, who was his very best friend?

7. What can we learn from David's repentance and the way he kept on working in God's service?

8. David wrote many Psalms and did much to serve God. What can we do after we repent of a grievous sin?

9. What sins did Paul commit before he became a Christian?

10. What good things did Paul do after he was saved?

11. Read 2 Cor. 12:7-10. Explain what Paul meant when he said, “for when I am weak, then am I strong” (v. 10).

12. What can we do to “bear one another’s burdens” when a Christian is suffering, especially after the loss of a close loved one or following a divorce or other trial?