

***MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU***
(Lesson 1)

PURPOSE: TO TEACH MY YOUTH HOW TO DEAL WITH THE TRIALS THEY FACE.

OBJECTIVE: BY THE END OF THIS SERIES, MY YOUTH SHOULD BE VIEWING THEIR TRIALS FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE AND REACTING IN A BIBLICAL WAY.

PERSONAL NOTE (Could be used as part of introduction, especially in contexts of grief):

I didn't write these lessons from an ivory tower. I wrote them while caring for my dear 37-year-old wife as she fought cancer. We had been on the mission field for a year when doctors found the cancer, forcing us to return to the States and fight cancer for the next four years. At the time, our four boys were 9, 6, and 8-month-old twins. A few months after completing this series, the Lord took her home. In most situations like this, grieving hearts scream "Why?!" With such a need for missionaries, why would God call someone to drop everything and go, only to call him back after one year? And while many abusive parents live long, healthy lives, why would He take one who daily showered her children with love. So I know firsthand something about living with grief, sorrow, and unanswered questions. I also know firsthand about the very real comfort that Jesus can bring in the midst of it all. So, these messages were written from one suffering heart to other suffering hearts, letting you in on where I found the comfort and peace to carry on.

FOR THE TEACHER:

As always, take the time to make the message your own. When I teach this series, I illustrate many of the points with my own life, rather than the lives of others. Before you let my ideas influence you, jot down your own ideas on keeping your joy during hard times. Reflect deeply on what you have personally gone through. How have these difficulties made you a better person, enhanced your ministry, helped you identify with others? What biblical principles ministered to you as you faced these difficulties? What Scriptures come to mind that help you make sense of it all? Some people become *bitter* through their trials. Others become *better*. What makes the difference? Who are some people you know who demonstrate these principles?

INTRODUCTION

Is your happiness totally ruled by your circumstances? You know, if your family is getting along, your friends all like you, and your grades are fantastic, you're on top of the world. But if the next day you wake up to the sound of your parents fighting, look in the mirror and find a huge pimple on the middle of your forehead, go to school and your friends all laugh and call you Cyclops, then your emotions go to the pits. Most live on this emotional roller coaster, unable to find joy or peace when circumstances turn sour.

But in a world where most students can't handle hard times, those who find joy even when things go wrong can't be ignored.

ILLUSTRATION: Steve, a tenth grader, went on a ski retreat, mainly because a girl he liked was going. It was a horrible day for skiing. The ski report called it a “hard, granular surface,” which meant that most of the snow had melted during the warm days, frozen back at night, leaving a slope of hard, lumpy ice. The horrible conditions, plus the fact that none of the people were experienced skiers, made for a terribly frustrating day. More skiers were on their rear ends than on their skis. But in the midst of the contorted bodies lying on the slope, Steve observed a fellow named Ron who seemed different. Although Ron, too, spent most of the day on his rear, he seemed to have a joy and peace that set him apart, as if his joy didn’t come from his circumstances. That evening, Ron spoke about John 10:10, telling how Jesus came to give us an abundant life. Steve knew that Ron had something he was missing, and that night knelt by his bed and surrendered his life to Christ.

Would you like to have a life like Ron’s, that makes people wonder, “How does he do it?,” when they see you handle adversity? Would you like to get off the emotional roller coaster and find a joy that will stick with you, even during your darkest days?

ACTIVITY: To make this extremely practical for you, jot down on your student sheet a few difficulties you face that really get you down. In this way you can apply the principles specifically to where you are. I’ll name a few possibilities to get you thinking: Are you down because of your physical appearance, lack of skills or abilities? Distressed because your home is a war zone, your friends have betrayed you, or a romantic breakup? Depressed because of the death of a dear friend or family member? Jot down what most gets you down.

Over the coming weeks we will search God’s word for answers to “How To Master Your Circumstances, Before They Master You.” And we will illustrate God’s answers with the lives of real people, including a professional athlete who lost his pitching arm to cancer, a brilliant astrophysicist who copes with a crippling disease, an active teenager who became a quadriplegic, and some who survived Hitler’s concentration camps.

As we begin, pray silently that God will speak to you about how to handle the trials you listed.

PRAYER

Before we start on our road to joy, let me clarify a couple of things. I’m not talking about:

- **Hiding your hurts behind a fake smile.**

“I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.” (Rom. 9:1,2; cr. II Cor. 6:10)

This was no wimp who wrote this. It was the apostle Paul, a spiritual James Bond who spoke the truth boldly, whether he risked beating, imprisonment or death. But when he thought of those of his race who rejected Christ, it tore him up emotionally. And he wasn’t afraid to express it. It’s healthy to grieve at times in our life. It’s also healthy to tell loved ones what you are feeling. Those who bottle up their emotions sometimes regret it later.

- **Never feeling down.**

“When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled.”

“Jesus wept.” (Jn. 11:33,35; cr. Lk. 19:41; Heb. 5:7)

Remember, if Jesus wept openly, then none of us should hesitate to express our sorrow, thinking it is unspiritual, unmanly, or uncool. But it’s one thing to express emotions and quite another to be ruled by them.

So, when I talk about mastering our circumstances, I’m not talking about hiding your hurts or never feeling down. I *am* saying that, like the Apostle Paul, we can face persecution, physical pain, betrayal, and even undeserved imprisonment with a deep peace and joy that no one can take away.

How many of you would like that quality of life? Let’s turn to God’s Word.

I. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR BATTLE

<p>Hints: 1) Resist cramming too much material into one lesson. You can easily get five or more lessons out of this series. 2) Make the lesson more interactive by having students read the main passage for each point and draw out each principle on their own.</p>

A. Don’t Get Caught Off Guard

“All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.”(Jn. 16:1)

“In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted....” (II Tim. 3:12, cr. Acts 14:22; II Cor. 6:4-8; I Pet. 2:20,21: 4:12-14; Jn. 15:19-21)

ILLUSTRATION: Dave Dravecky, formerly a major league pitcher with the San Francisco Giants, faced some intense challenges when doctors diagnosed cancer in his pitching arm. But he wasn’t the only one who suffered during his surgeries and loss of an incredible career. His wife, Jan, struggled not only with Dave’s crisis, but the recent death of both of her parents. It seemed that her life was tumbling in.

But what made matters even worse was that her understanding of the Christian life was falling apart. As she put it, “I was angry because I felt I had been lied to. The road to the abundant Christian life had been pictured to me as a scenic journey, something like a yellow brick road leading to a wonderful wizard who would grant all my wishes. But where had that road taken me? It wasn’t the Emerald City.” And for a moment, she thought about turning back to her old life, away from Christ. (Dave and Jan Dravecky, When You Can’t Come Back, pp. 79,80, Zondervan, 1993)

But had *Jesus* really let her down? Did the *Bible* ever promise that life for Jesus’ followers would be all roses? No. It was those who painted a false picture of the Christian life, not Jesus, who let her down.

And Jan’s not alone. Many of us became Christians because of some need in our life that God graciously met. Wasn’t it exciting to get that guilt off our shoulders, find peace, or get

some other need met?! But some Christians mistakenly took it that from then on God would just sort of bulldoze all difficulties from their path.

Do you ever ask questions like,

- **“If it really pays to serve Jesus, then why don’t I have as many friends as the bad crowd?”**
- **“If Christianity is true, then why did God let my parents go through that nasty divorce soon after I became a Christian?”**
- **“If God is good, then why did my close friend have to die so young?”**

If questions like this bother you, you may have an emerald city picture of the Christian life. And just like Jan, you’re setting yourself up for a big shock.

To get a more balanced picture of the Christian life, look at what Peter wrote in **I Pet. 4:12**. He probably wrote this between 63 and 68 AD. In AD 64 Nero viciously persecuted the church. Rumor had it in the empire that Nero had ordered the fire that ravaged Rome. To dispel the rumor, Nero set up the Christians as the culprits. They were arrested, convicted, and killed in sadistic ways. Some were dressed in animal hides and torn to death by dogs. Others were crucified, still others set on fire to illumine Nero’s parties. (“The Neronian Persecution,” 64, Tacitus, *Annales*, xv. 44) And Peter himself would soon die at the hand of Nero, crucified upside down in Rome. That’s why Peter warned these folks, **“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you....”** So where do people get the idea that the Christian life in the 90’s should be easy?

Make sure you hear me. Living for Jesus doesn’t insulate you from hard times. Learn *now* what Jan Dravecky learned, and your faith won’t fold when hard times hit.

A. PREVENT UNNECESSARY TROUBLES

“Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.” (Gal. 6:7; I Tim. 6:6-11; cr. Prov. 13:15; Num. 14:26-35; Ps 89:30-34; Heb. 12:4-11)

ILLUSTRATION: *According to the US Centers for Disease Control, 43 million US citizens (almost one in five) have an incurable sexually transmitted virus. Some will die of it, others will suffer with symptoms all their lives. (Dobson, When God Doesn’t Make Sense.) A recent issue of Jane Magazine (not a Christian magazine) reported that girls who have sex with more than one partner have 500 times the chance of getting Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (March, 1999, p. 90, quoted from the book, About Sex). And once you get it, it’s no picnic. So, if you decide not to save sex for marriage, and one day find yourself face-to-face with a serious-looking doctor who breaks the news that you have a Sexually Transmitted Disease, don’t start asking “Why me, Lord?” He warned you about that lifestyle over and over.*

So if you’re hanging with the wrong crowd, drinking the wrong drinks, holding unforgiveness in your heart, dating a loser, surfing web sites that you’d close in a split second if Jesus were to walk into the room, and rebelling against your parents, don’t be whining “Why me Lord?” when life tumbles in. You see, God’s been around a long time, and if he warns us against that lifestyle, it’s because he knows it’s self-destructive. He wants you to avoid much of the heartache that others are bringing upon themselves.

And the good news is that no matter how far you've traveled down a self-destructive path, God still loves you and wants you back. Before the apostle Paul was a Christian, he dragged Christians off to jail and oversaw putting to death a godly saint named Stephen. But God still loved him, washed him clean, and gave him a fresh start. And He can do the same thing for you.

CONCLUSION

Some of you have bought the lie that God is an almighty party pooper in the sky, who constantly looks around for someone having a good time so that He can say "Now you stop that and get back to work." There *is* a force in the world that's out to destroy you, but it's not God. As Jesus Christ Himself said,

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (Jn. 10:10)

Not a life without difficulties or even tragedy, but a life that can be lived to the full in the midst of it all. Do you want that kind of life? It starts with getting honest with God and telling Him that you've blown your life and desperately need His forgiveness and a new start.

(Share the gospel and give an opportunity for silent prayer.)

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(Lesson 2)**

INTRODUCTION

Last week we saw that God is not an almighty party pooper in the sky who continually looks around for someone having a good time so that He can say, “Cut that out and get back to work.” It’s Jesus Himself who said, ***I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.***” (Jn. 10:10) But for the deep thinkers among us, this presents a big problem. Some of you, when you are alone in your room late at night, think things like this:

“If God loves me, then why does He let such awful things happen to me? Why did my parents divorce and my friend die? Why is my dating life nonexistent? Is God judging me for something I did wrong? And by the way, if God’s so big and powerful, then why would he allow all this misery in His world?”

Now let me warn you: these are heavy questions. And for tonight’s lesson and next week’s, I’m challenging you to think. You see, some skeptics think that Christians have two brains: one is lost and the other is out looking for it. But God never asked us to hand in our brains when we come to Him. Because of the questions we’re asking, some of your classmates either hate God or deny His existence. Over the next couple of weeks, we’re going to try to get some answers.

Let’s Pray for wisdom...

Some people don’t like God because they see every trial as coming directly from His hand. Maybe their parents are strict, unloving parents who just punish all the time, and that’s the way they see God. No wonder they don’t like Him! So whatever you do, ...

B. DON’T MISJUDGE THE SOURCE OF YOUR TROUBLES

1. By Always Blaming Yourself (Jn. 9:1-5)

***ILLUSTRATION:** When baseball pitcher **Dave Dravecky** came down with cancer, he received all kinds of advice from people, much of it contradicting each other. One person told him that he needed to repent of his sin. Another assured him he simply lacked faith. **If you were Dave, how would you have responded?** (Try to get some discussion.)*

Look at Jn. 9:1-5.

“As he went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus....”

Jesus' disciples viewed suffering much like Dave's advisors. They saw a man born blind and assumed he was blind because of his own sins or his parent's sins. But Jesus said that in this case it was neither. It wasn't this guy's fault that he was born blind. And apparently, it wasn't his lack of faith that kept him from being healed sooner in life.

Often, when tragedies strike, people ask, "What did I do to deserve that?" We asked that question under "B", but often you may come up with a blank. You see, not all suffering comes because of personal sin. If it did, then tell me why so many godly people have suffered so intensely. (Think: Jesus [I Peter 2:18-24], Paul [I Cor. 4:7-13; 11:23-28], and so many Old Testament heroes [Heb. 11])

If you are suffering, but you're a believer and God's not revealing any rebellion in your life as the cause, you're in good company! Don't punish yourself with the "What did I do to deserve this?" question any more.

2. By Always Blaming God (II Pet. 3:9; cr. Mt. 23:37)

Some people turn from God when they can't reconcile His goodness with our suffering. "If God is so good," they ask, "then why does He make the innocent suffer?"

A good first step to answer this question is to change the "make" to "allow." You see, God doesn't present himself as the direct cause of all suffering. Give me some ideas. Who else can be responsible for suffering?

Sometimes Satan is responsible.

"Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour."(I Pet. 5:8, cr. Jn. 8:44, II Tim. 2:26, I Thes. 2:18)

According to the Bible, the world lies in the power of the evil one (I Jn. 5:19). Satan is called the *"god of this world"* (II Cor. 4:4), so much of the mess we see around us reflects *his* character, not the character of the Creator.

Sometimes People are to blame

"When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." (Jms. 1:13,14)

Temptation is a trial, but God is not the author of it. Where does this verse place the blame for temptation? (Our own evil desires)

God tells people to love their spouses and their children, indicating His perfect will, but they often rebel and do the opposite. So although some people try to thank God for every event that comes into their lives, it would seem inappropriate to thank God for the abuse of a wife by a drunken husband, when we know the drunkenness was not God's perfect will.

When the Bible says that every good and perfect gift comes from God (Jms. 1:16,17), the implication is that not everything that comes our way is good and perfect. So don't be deceived into thinking that God sends everything that comes our way. But although the direct cause is often evil, we *can* thank God that He allowed it for some good reason.

“But that’s just the problem!” some object. ***“Since God could have stopped the suffering, isn’t He ultimately responsible?”*** To make this problem more personal, let’s reflect on a skit.

Setting: Annie and Phil are hanging out after school, waiting for the bus.

Phil: Hey Annie, long time no see.

Annie: Yea, how have you been doing Phil?

Phil: OK, but we sure miss you at youth group. Why haven’t you been coming around lately?

Annie: I’ve made a lot of flimsy excuses to people, but we’ve always been pretty open with each other, right Phil?

Phil: Sure.

Annie: So here’s the real problem. About a year ago my mom came home from a doctor’s appointment, and I could tell she was all torn up. For the first few weeks, she wouldn’t level with me, but finally she told me that she had a terminal case of cancer. At first I totally lost it, but soon I turned to God. But no matter how much I prayed, the cancer kept winning the battle. As you know, she passed away three months ago.

For a few weeks, I kept attending the youth group, but my heart just wasn’t in it. I know it sounds awful, but every time we sang a praise song, I thought, “If God really loved me, then why would he take my mom?” Just think about it: Hugh Hefner publishes Playboy Magazine, makes millions, and lives rich and well into his 70’s, continuing his promotion of sexual immorality. But my mom was a decent person who gave her life to God and her family. Why did He have to take her? I just can’t believe that a God of love would give my mom cancer.”

Discussion: Divide into small groups. Let each person imagine that you are Phil. What are some things you would like to say Annie, to convince her of God’s love for her? (Let a representative of each group report back to the main group.)

Here are four truths, which, if you can grasp them, will protect you from spiritually tubing out when tragedy strikes:

a. God is Good

Some of you think, “Yea, yea, I’ve heard it all my life. Jesus loves me, this I know....” But if you’ve never thought deeply enough about this truth to securely anchor yourself, you just might end up drifting away like Annie. Here are some things that convince me God is good, even when my world is falling apart:

1) Look at Jesus’ Life (Rom. 5:8; I Jn. 4:9).

We have plenty of evidence that says Jesus Christ was more than just a good man. He was God dressed in flesh. So if we want to know what God is like,

we need to think about Jesus. And when we think about Jesus, what hits us in the face is His love. Think about it. As God, He could have really thrown his weight around on earth, slapping around the Pharisees, turning the officials who condemned Him into donkeys, and tossing around hulking Roman guards with His all-mighty pinky.

Instead, we find Him abandoning His glory in heaven to hold children, comfort the fearful, wash his disciple's stinky feet, stand up for the truth, forgive His enemies, heal the sick, and side with the poor. And He offered people a path to heaven, a place free from the pain and misery of this earthly life. Then He proved for all time that He loved us by allowing Himself to be tortured to death on the cross, taking upon himself the punishment we deserved, so that we could live with Him forever in heaven. (I Jn. 4:8,16)

Now listen carefully, **the way we know that God is good is *not* by our circumstances here on earth.** If that's the way we determine God's love, then the apostle Paul would have never believed that God loved him. He was beaten times without number, jailed, stoned, and ridiculed. But the same guy who experienced all these hard times wrote that *"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Rom 5:8)." He didn't look to his circumstances to find God's love. He looked to the cross. Because an evil God/man would have never written into his scheduler: "At 33 years old, have yourself crucified for the sake of all those undeserving people."

So whenever you're ever tempted to doubt God's love, take a closer look at Jesus.

2) Look at the lives He has changed

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God."(I Jn. 4:7-10).

Christians aren't perfect. But as people follow God, we see bad people turn good and good people get better. People like Mother Theresa attribute their selfless lifestyle, not to their own natural goodness, but to God's work in their lives. Again, this doesn't seem like the business an evil God would be up to.

Idea: Consider having youth share testimonies as to how God has made them into more loving people. Give them some warning so that they can prepare a week ahead of time.

3) Look at His commitment to truth

"I am the way and the truth and the life."
(Jn. 14:6; cr. Jn. 1:14; 19:37,38).

God *claims* to be just, loving, and worthy of our praise. If He is not, then He is a liar. But all I learn of God through Jesus tells me He is not a liar. He never flinched on the truth, and stood against public opinion, even when He knew it would cost Him his life. So if God *says* He is love, I have good reason to trust Him.

So God has given Annie and all of us a massive amount of evidence to show that He loves us. If Annie rejects God's love because of "the problem of suffering," she now has "the problem of good" to deal with: If God *doesn't* love me, then why did He send His Son to die for me?*"

*And if a youth contends that her present troubles make her doubt that the events of the Bible ever took place, you might need to refer to the material in my "Christianity On Trial" Series, which covers evidence for the Christian faith. Or, have her read a book such as More Than a Carpenter (a quick overview of Christian evidences) or Evidence That Demands A Verdict (a heavy duty book that contains hundreds of pages of evidences. Currently, Josh McDowell is rewriting the latter book, updating it for a new generation.)

Regarding further reading on the issue of suffering, make the books Where Is God When It Hurts, by Philip Yancey, When God Doesn't Make Sense, by James Dobson, and Joni, the story of Joni Eirikson's life after an accident as a teen left her a quadriplegic. There is also a Christian movie based on her life. I try to keep books and resources available for youth in some area of the church that youth frequent.

CONCLUSION

So what do you think? Is God for you, or against you? Is Jesus on the side of love, or simply a deceiver? These are probably the most important questions you could ever answer. I've given you a lot to think about tonight. And don't be surprised if it takes some days and weeks to think through what we're discussed in light of the troubles you face. I just want you know that I sometimes struggle with questions too, and if you need someone to bounce your questions off of, I'm here. That's not to say that I have all the answers. But I'm here for you, and sometimes just sharing your struggles with someone else is the first step toward a solution.

Let's Pray...

MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES... BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU

(Lesson 3)

INTRODUCTION

Last week we began talking about some deep issues. And I don't apologize for forcing us to think. Because when you go through the fire in your life, you wake up to realize that some of life's questions are more important than "What should I wear to the prom?" or "What kind of wheels should I put on my 4x4?"

People's answers to the big questions of life either make or break them in the long run, and we can't afford to be air heads when the world is crying out for answers. Remember, in the greatest commandment, Jesus said that we're not only to love God with all of our *hearts* but also with all of our *minds*.

Activity: In order to understand more of what we're trying to get away from, and to give us a little comic relief in the middle of a heady series, let's all tell a few blonde jokes (or rival university jokes, etc.).

When I hear those jokes, I feel a little better about myself! At least I'm not *that* bad off! But as we will see this morning, the difference between us and the airheads in these jokes is nothing near the difference between God's wisdom and our wisdom. When we understand this, it can help with some of our deepest questions.

Let's pray...

Last week we discussed God's goodness in the light of the evil in His world. Today we want to take on a few other areas of His character that hard times sometimes make us question.

b. God is Smart...

...And We're Dumb In Comparison

"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known." (I Cor. 13:12; Job 38:1-5; cr. 38:17,18; 40:1-5; 42:1-6)

Job 38:1-5 – I like Andersons comments: Job "does not say in the end, 'Now I see it all.' He never sees it all. He sees God (42:5). Perhaps it is better if God never tells any of us the whole of our life-story. ...This is more than enough to answer his questions, or rather it liberates him to live with joy even when the questions are not answered."

God called Job a righteous man. So when tragedy struck (and it struck hard – his livestock, servants and children were killed suddenly) it was not because of his sin. In fact, God never told Job why it all happened. In the end, God simply enlightened Job as to how far His intelligence and power outstripped Job's. The bottom line for Job from God? - "I'm smarter than you can imagine. Trust me. I know what I'm doing." And when Job personally saw God for who he was, he was satisfied. (See Job 38-42) As Job put it,

"My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you." (Job 42:5)

ILLUSTRATION: *But all too often, we're like a meddlesome half wit in a master auto mechanic's shop, who keeps demanding that the mechanic explain his every move: "Why are you replacing that gasket? Now listen, you're going to remember where to put that part when it comes time to put it back together, aren't you?" No wonder they post a sign: "No customers beyond this point."*

Apparently God has thought it best to post a similar sign just beyond some of our troubles that reads, "No questioners beyond this point. I know what I'm doing. Trust me."

But why would He keep a full understanding of the "why's" from us?
There are several possibilities.

Job 42:1-6 – In the first parts of vss. 3 and 4, Job quotes God's words to him in 38:2,3; 40:7. The NIV translation supplies "You asked" and "You said," although not in the original Hebrew, to make it clear that Job was quoting. "Repent in dust and ashes" was the custom of expressing deep grief by sitting in dust and ashes. (Keil)

First, God highly values trust and faith

"We live by faith, not by sight."(II Cor. 5:7; cr. Heb. 11:1).

If we could fully understand everything God allowed us to go through, then there would be no need for faith, would there? Only during the dark times can we learn to walk by faith, not by sight.

ACTIVITY: TRUST WALK Divide into groups of two. Have enough blindfolds for half. One is blindfolded while the other leads him/her around. Then, the situation is reversed. You could do it without blindfolds by having one person keep his eyes closed, and ask afterwards, "how many of you peeked at least once? "How many wanted desperately to peek?" That's how it is in our lives. God is saying to walk by faith, not by sight. But we're so desperate to peek.

Second, certain knowledge might be too heavy for us.

"So when they met together, they asked him, 'Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' He said to them: 'It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.'"(Acts 1:6,7; cr. Gen. 2:17; 3:11,22).

We don't need to know some things. Remember, the world's first nudist colony had no shame. Adam and Eve walked around in paradise, with everything they needed. What ruined this original paradise? They disobeyed by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God knew that there were some things they were better off not understanding. Why can't we see that discovering other forbidden knowledge might wreak similar havoc in our lives?

***ILLUSTRATION:** As a child, **Corrie ten Boom** over heard a discussion about sexual immorality, while travelling with her father in Europe. Confused, she asked her father to explain what they were talking about. But her father realized that she was too young to understand. In Corrie's words, this is how he responded,*

"...To my surprise he said nothing. At last he stood up, lifted his traveling case from the rack over our heads, and set it on the floor.

"Will you carry it off the train, Corrie?" he said.

I stood up and tugged at it. It was crammed with watches and spare parts he had purchased that morning.

"It's too heavy," I said.

"Yes," he said. "And it would be a pretty poor father who would ask his little girl to carry such a load. It's the same way, Corrie, with knowledge. Some knowledge is too heavy for children. When you are older and stronger you can bear it. For now you must trust me to carry it for you."

"And I was satisfied. More than satisfied – wonderfully at peace. There were answers to this and all my hard questions – for now I was content to leave them in my father's keeping." (Corrie ten Boom with John and Elizabeth Sherrill, The Hiding Place, Fleming H. Revell Co., 1971, pp. 26,27.

Think about it. If God were to explain why he allows certain things to happen, He might have to give you the big picture by laying out a series of events that will happen to you over the next fifty years. But although this might make you feel better about your present situation, if you knew all those future events, you might begin to worry constantly about preparing for them today.

So, sometimes God doesn't let us in on the answers because **He wants us to learn to trust**. Other times, **the knowledge might be too much for us to bear**. But here's another reason:

Third, Can We Fathom the Depths of God?

Since God is so much greater than us, wouldn't it be unreasonable to expect to understand all His ways?

***ILLUSTRATION:** Scientists often run into mysteries using the scientific method. For instance, some experiments show us that light is waves. But other experiments show us that light must be particles. It can't be both. And we can't fully explain it. But you don't see scientists giving up on the scientific method because of this apparent contradiction. They seem perfectly willing to accept some mystery in their field, especially in dealing with subatomic particles. So*

why should we expect to understand everything about the ways of an infinite God?

ILLUSTRATION: *C.S. Lewis once said that he thought our first words, upon making it to heaven, would be “Of course.” For then I will “know fully, even as I am fully known”. (I Cor. 13:12) We will look back and say, “Now it all makes since. I see exactly why God allowed me to grow up without a father, why so many people rejected me in high school, why I had such a hard time with Math. And if I hadn’t had zits, I would have never met and married that fantastic Dermatologist! Thank you God that things were not different!”*

It should be enough that He told us that He loves us and gave us an incredible demonstration of that love through His Son. I don’t understand why He lets certain things happen to His children. But I can live with it until I see Him face to face in heaven. And when I see Him as He is, I doubt I’ll need to ask Him for any explanations. For now, we need not expect clear answers to things we may not even be capable of understanding. For now, I can simply trust in one Who has proven Himself trustworthy.

c. **God is just**

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (II Cor. 5:10; I Pet. 2:23; I Cor. 4:5; cr. Rom. 14:10-12)

Annie responds, “Okay, so I can trust in His wisdom, but I still can’t see His justice. My mom served Christ and His church faithfully, then died of this horrible disease. And all this while some criminal is getting away with murder, and may live to a ripe old age. What gives?”

Does it strike you odd that the great devotional writer **Oswald Chambers** died at 43? Christian author **Diedrich Bonhoeffer** was hanged by the Nazis at 39. **David Brainard**, famous missionary to the American Indians, died of TB at 29. Godly singer **Keith Green** died at age 33, while **Mick Jagger** (who’s early songs included “Sympathy For The Devil,”) continues to pack out audiences well into his 50’s.

Check out Hebrews 11 and you’ll find that the saints of Bible times often faced the same troubles. Righteous **Stephen** died young in the Bible, while wicked **King Manassah** was allowed to reign a full 55 years.

So how can we trust God’s justice, when what we see of life seems so unfair?

ILLUSTRATION: *Imagine that you are watching a trial in a court of law. After a couple of witnesses testify for the prosecution, the judge tires of the case and calls for a verdict from the jury. “That’s unfair!” cries the attorney for the defense, “You haven’t heard our witnesses! All the evidence is not in!” (Could this be a skit?) It’s like the old hanging juries, that send cold shivers up our backs. But isn’t that exactly what we do when we make a judgment on God’s character before all the evidence is in?*

So remember that the whole story hasn't been finished. Heaven and eternity will be the great levelers of fairness. So don't reach a verdict before the judgment (I Thes. 1:5-10).

d. God is in control

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28; Hab. 3:17-19; cr. Deut. 33:26,27; Phil 1:12-21; I Tim. 1:17)

ILLUSTRATION: *Imagine that you are Joseph, sitting in an Egyptian prison, reflecting on your life. You were taken from your family and sold into slavery by your cruel brothers, falsely accused and jailed in foreign country, then having the guy who was supposed to plea for your release forget all about you. Your brothers are scoundrels, but they're home with dad. Mrs. Potifer is free to find a new boyfriend. And you're sitting in a jail cell for things you never did. If all this happened to you, would you have become bitter in that cell, concluding that God had abandoned you? But don't forget. The glorious end of Joseph's story comes later. Only in retrospect can we see God's hand in it all.*

Idea: Bring a picture that is to be viewed at a distance. Or, one of those pictures that has a hidden picture that can only be seen after staring for a certain amount of time. “Just because you can't see the picture doesn't mean it doesn't exist.”

ILLUSTRATION: *We've all seen paintings that were created to be viewed from a distance; not up close. It's amazing how I can observe one of these paintings up close all day and see what's apparently only random blotches of color. But when I step back, I see a beautiful landscape.*

Here on earth we're too close to the picture to understand how all the colors fit together. It's enough for me to know that one day I'll step back and see the whole picture clearly (I Cor 13:12).

You may wish to have a youth read each of Amy's responses.

Annie objects: *“But if God's in control, then are we saying that God gave my mom cancer, and His hand is squeezing every suffering child? It seems so cruel.”*

Discussion: How would you answer Amy's question?

If Annie views God as personally giving her mom cancer, you can see how this belief could have contributed to her bad feelings toward God. But the Bible doesn't blame everything that happens directly on God. Think with me here.

- **Not everything that happens reflects God's perfect will.**

In Mt. 23:37, Jesus spoke of wanting to have a relationship with many 1st century Jews, but they wouldn't have it. So don't blame Jesus for these people's condition. God doesn't want anyone to turn from Him (II Pet. 3:9), but many do. He doesn't want people to sin, but they do. So if a drunk driver runs over a dear friend, don't blame God for making that guy drunk. God aches with us over the results of sin in our world.

Annie: *But why then is there any suffering at all? I mean, if He's all powerful and all wise, couldn't He have made a world that suffering would have never infested?*

Discussion: This is the heart of the historic "problem of evil." Why not divide your youth into small groups and let them take a stab at answering this question for Annie?

- **God must allow suffering for higher purposes.**

I believe that God has a *perfect* will, in which everyone follows Him, loves their neighbor, and ends up in heaven (II Pet. 3:9). But He's also got a *permissive* will, in which He allows all kinds of tragedy and suffering.

"So," Annie asks, "It helps to know that God might not have directly placed the cancer in my mom's body. But it still bothers me that God even allowed it. Why didn't he stop it, when He could have?"

Pain and suffering are only evil if they don't result in a higher good. So the only bad suffering is senseless suffering.

ILLUSTRATION: *Often doctors must hurt us in order to help us. Small children wonder, "Mom, why are you allowing this man to stick me with a needle? It hurts!" And the child will never understand, until he is old enough to understand. Then it will all make sense. The hurt was worth all the benefits. Until he understands, he must trust that his parents have some good reason for the pain. Now the difference between the understanding of a child and that of an adult doesn't even compare to the difference between the understanding of God and that of an adult. Doesn't it seem reasonable that the answers lie somewhere in God's infinite understanding?*

"But," Annie asks, "if God is all-powerful and all-wise, couldn't he figure out a way to bring about the same good end He is working toward without doing it through suffering?"

Apparently not. You see, there are things God cannot do. He can't make a rock that's too heavy for Him to lift, create a married bachelor, a round square, or a brilliant air head. They are logical absurdities. Neither can He

Some writers suggest that for God to fulfill his ultimate purpose of having a loving relationship with people for eternity in heaven, He had to allow mankind the option to say no to this relationship. Otherwise, we would have been robots, programmed to respond to his love, not people who choose to love Him. And allowing choice in the world necessitates the allowance for bad choices. If all sniper bullets turned into whipped cream before reaching their target, there would be no real choices. Thus even the righteous are subject to hardships caused by the sinful choices of others. To spare them these consequences would be to restrict the will to choose. (See C.S. Lewis, [The Problem With Pain](#). Also Yancey.

While this may be one reason for God allowing suffering, I wouldn't assume that this is the only reason.

lie (Heb. 6:18; cr. II Tim. 2:13, Jn. 15:19; Tit. 1:2). Not just won't. Can't. Apparently He can't act against His nature.

Could God have stopped Annie's mom from getting cancer? Undoubtedly. Could He have stopped her cancer without at the same time taking something away from either Annie's, or her mom's, or the creation's ultimate glorious end? Apparently not.

So if God is good, infinitely smart, and in control, we can rest in the fact that whatever He allows into our life is for our ultimate good. No matter how out of control things *seem* to us, He's in control. And one day, probably not now, we'll look back and see that it all makes sense.

CONCLUSION

Some of us here have been praying, staying up nights, and racking our brains to find the answer to all the "Why" questions. If God hasn't given you the answer, then maybe it's time to let go and leave it in God's hands. Like Corrie ten Boom with her father's heavy bag of watch parts, perhaps you need to realize that maybe the answers would be too heavy for you, and knowing the answers would make you miserable for the rest of your life. And like Corrie, maybe it would be good to just take those questions you've been asking, and finally relax to realize that it's enough to know that a loving heavenly Father sees the big picture that you can't see.

Prayer. (Allow them to symbolically put their questions in their hands and lift them up to God, giving them over to Him and trusting Him that all is in control.)

MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES... BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU

(Lesson 4)

INTRODUCTION

Hint: Use some body language here. Use your hand to demonstrate a roller coaster, lifted up for the highs and dipping down for the lows.

We're in the middle of a series which I call, "***Mastering Your Circumstances...Before They Master You.***" We've said that although most people live a roller-coaster existence, where when your girlfriend likes you, your parents do what you want, and your classes are easy, you experience the high part of the ride. But when your

girlfriend dumps you, your teachers pile on the work, and your parents are on your case, your exuberance for life gets disappears as the coaster hits a low point. How can we get off the roller coaster and find a joy, peace and contentment that will last through the highs and the lows? That's what this series is all about.

REVIEW: In the first half of our series, we talked about preparing ourselves for battle. Most of the preparation involves thinking through the big questions that sometimes plunge your classmates into despair. By way of review, let's take a question that a lot of people silently ask themselves and see how you would answer it.

"Your best friend comes up to you after school and says, "You're my friend, right? Well, I know it sounds horrible, but I've seen so much tragedy lately that I'm losing my faith in a loving God. If God is love, then why would he allow so much suffering in His world?"

Obviously, we can't cover all of the last three weeks, but several of you tell us one or two things you'd like to say. (Teacher, you may need to clarify and fill in a couple of main points that they miss.)

So the first part of our series dealt with preparation for life's fires. Now we begin part two, where the heat is on and we've got to respond. Most people wilt when the heat is on. You know them. You see them every day at school. You can see it on their faces: bitter scowls that show their anger at God and the world. Others close themselves off to themselves and sulk. Still others sink into depression.

But occasionally you run across a person who's different. Like Ron, the person Steve met at the ski retreat, who seemed to somehow live above his circumstances. Someone who, sure, cries during grief and is not out of touch with his emotions, but somehow is not ruled by his emotions. Those who find the secret that Ron felt become contagious. People desperately want what they've got.

Let's ask God for help as we try to learn a radical response to life's fires.

Pray

II. LEARN A RADICAL RESPONSE

“Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”(Jms. 1:2-4; cr. I Pet. 4:12,13)

If you caught what James was saying, you see how radical this response is. When hard times hit you in the face, James tell us, then “consider it pure joy.” Wow! But how can we get from being whiners and complainers to being rejoicers? Here’s how...

A. Ask God For Help

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”(Phil. 4:6,7)

ILLUSTRATION: Christian Psychologist James Dobson had a heart attack which left him alone in an eerie Cardiac Care Unit. At first, God gave him what he describes as “an inexplicable peace,” but at a later time, anxiety took over. He prayed, “Lord, you know where I am right now. And you know that I am upset and very lonely. Would you send someone who can help me?” Soon, Dr. Jack Hayford, a pastor from the other side of Los Angeles, walked in. “Why did you come to see me today?” asked Dobson. “Because the Lord told me you were lonely,” replied Hayford. (Dobson, pp., 130,131)

When I pray about troubles, He will either take them away, like the miraculous healings in the Bible, or give us the grace to handle it, like Paul with his thorn in the flesh. And remember, He works on His time frame, not ours.

Let’s go ahead and put this into action. Think of the hard times that are trying to get you down. Now, let’s bow our heads and silently ask God’s help to deal with something that’s too hard for us to handle on our own.

B. Take The Load Off

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”(I Pet. 5:7; 2:23; cr. Ps. 91:1,4; 55:22; 31:5; Lk. 23:46; I Pet. 4:19)

Sometimes you can pray about a problem, but still carry the burden around with you. God wants to carry our loads for us. But how do hand the load over?

ILLUSTRATION: Close your eyes. Now see yourself gathering up all your cares, the problems that are pressing the heaviest on you. Your problems at home. Your friendship troubles. Your bad health. Your overwhelming sense of loss. Now, place them in a sturdy box, tape it shut, then tie it up securely, like you’re gonna mail it overseas. As you pick it up, you realize how incredibly heavy it is. But just now, Jesus appears in the room, walking toward you with His powerful arms stretched out toward the box. For a moment, you cling to the box, but as it gets heavier and

heavier, you finally hand it to Him. He takes it away with ease. Now, do you feel as light as air as He takes the burden away with Him?

If your problems are more than you can handle, then you're in a great position to let go and let God take over. After all, without Him, we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5), but through Him we can do all things (Phil. 4:13).

We don't know whether God will take the trial away or give us the grace to handle it. But either way, we can have His peace. If you're facing the heat, you may find yourself daily taking back the burden, and reminding yourself to cast it back on Him.

C. Resist Bitterness

You can't be both bitter and happy. Bitterness can eat you alive.

1. Directed at God (Jn. 6:67,68)

ILLUSTRATION: When Jim Conway saw his daughter go through the amputation of her leg, he struggled with anger. But according to Conway, "Probably the most important thing I learned in this entire process is this: I became deeply aware that there were only two choices that I could make. One was to continue in my anger at God and follow the path of despair I was on. The other choice was to let God be God, and somehow say, 'I don't know how all this fits together. I don't understand the reasons for it. I'm not even going to ask for the explanation. I've chosen to accept the fact that You are God and I'm the servant, instead of the other way around.' And there I left it." (Dobson, p. 88)

You can't be a free agent here on earth. You must serve someone. If you turn on God, you serve the devil (II Cor. 4:4) And though people sometimes question God's goodness because of certain things He allows, we dare not leave Him and side with the devil, whom we know to be a liar and murderer from the beginning. At some point we have to realize what the disciples realized when many were turning away from following Jesus. He asked, "**You do not want to leave too, do you?**" Peter responded, "**Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.**" (Jn. 6:67,68)

Don't make a judgment till all the evidence is in. Remember, one day you'll be saying, "Of course."

2. Directed at People

"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly." (I Pet. 2:21-23; cr. Rom. 12:19)

ILLUSTRATION: Corrie ten Boom miraculously survived Ravensbruck, one of Hitler's death camps. After the war, she started a home in Holland to help people recover from the trauma inflicted upon them by the Nazis. What she

found was that those who were willing to forgive their tormentors could go on to rebuild their lives. But those who refused to forgive, hanging onto their bitterness, remained emotionally crippled.

But at a speaking engagement in Munich, Corrie was challenged to apply her own teaching on a new level. After the service, her blood ran cold as she recognized a man walking toward her. He was one of her former guards from Ravensbrook – and not just any guard, but one of the cruelest guards. Suddenly, the horrid memories flooded her mind.

“You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk,” he said, “I was a guard there.” Corrie realized that he didn’t remember her, only one of the thousands of prisoners. “But since that time I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear from your lips as well. Fraulein,” and he put out his hand, “will you forgive me?”

Corrie just stood there, as she put it, with a “coldness clutching my heart.” But she knew that forgiveness was an act of the will, not just of the heart. So she silently called out for Jesus’ help, and prayed, “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

“And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bring tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother,” I cried. “With all my heart.”

“For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely, as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5, ‘...because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.’ (Corrie ten Boom, Tramp for the Lord (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1976), pp. 53-55.

With a group this size, odds are that some of you are bitter at someone, maybe a lot of people. You think Sherri ruined your life because she stole your boyfriend. But do you really think that God is pacing the golden streets of heaven, repeating, “Oh no, I can’t believe that Sherri did that! Now how will I ever get that boyfriend back to the right partner?!” Don’t you see? If that’s the person for you, then nothing in heaven or earth will ultimately keep you apart. If that’s not the person for you, then God’s got something better for you. So don’t sweat it. And ask God to help you drop the bitterness.

Listen, mere mortals can’t frustrate God’s plan for your life. Don’t act like they have that power.

CONCLUSION

Do you struggle with Corrie's feelings, knowing you ought to forgive, but lacking the power and the feeling? Ask God for help. Ask Him to give you the want to. Just take the first step, and trust Him to take care of the rest.

In conclusion, I want to give you a moment to deal with God on this issue that Corrie did. Talk to him about those people you hate for what they've done to do. It may be a parent that deserted you or a friend that betrayed you. I know, I know that it hurts. And I know that they probably don't deserve your forgiveness. But if you don't deal with your bitterness, it will eat you alive.

So let's **pray**. *First* of all, if everything inside you is screaming at you to not forgive that person, ask God for the *power* to forgive. Admit to Him that you don't want to forgive. He knows what you feel, so you might as well talk to Him about it. Tell Him that you need His strength. (Give some silent time.)

Second, just silently get the words out to Him. You may want to repeat silently after me, a phrase at a time. "God, I thank you...that you forgave me when all I deserved was hell.... Give me the strength...to follow Your example....God, I forgive him or her.... (Give some silent time.) Amen.

Now you will probably find the bitterness creeping into your heart day after day. But when you feel it boiling up inside, whether it's at your locker at school or at the supper table, immediately ask God for strength, and silently repeat your attitude of forgiveness to Him. If you do, God can set you free.

MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES... BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU

(Lesson 5)

INTRODUCTION

We've been talking about mastering your circumstances, before they master you. We've said that most people live on an emotional roller coaster, where their peace, joy and contentment with life are dependent on whether their circumstances are at a high or a low. But there's a way off the emotional roller coaster. A way to have a joy that lasts through even the hardest times. A joy that will make your life contagious, so that others will want what you've got.

But to have this joy, you've got to respond, not naturally, but radically. Often, you have to do the very opposite of what feels right. Does anyone remember some of the steps we talked about last week? We talked about asking God for help, giving the load to Him, and fighting bitterness with forgiveness.

Let's pray that God will teach us more of the radical response that only He can give us toward life's trials.

PRAY

D. Resist Envy

Turn to Psalm 73 where we find a guy with a problem the we all face at one time or another. He's trying to follow God and be a good boy, but when he looks around him, it seems like the wicked people are getting all the breaks and he's left with all the struggles. Ever feel like this? Well, after having his private envy party, he comes to his senses toward the end of his writing. See if you can figure out what pulled him out of his envy. He's talking to God.

(Go back to include vs. 17?)

*“Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
You destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.” (Ps. 73:23-28)*

Idea: Think of a movie where people trade places and learn what it is like to be in the other person's shoes. Either show a clip or describe the outcome.

ILLUSTRATION: *George Mangakis, who was tortured as a political prisoner, found help in pitying his torturers instead of himself. "At this moment I am deprived of the joy of seeing children going to school or playing in the parks," wrote Mangakis, "Whereas they have to look their own children in the face." (George Mangakis, "Letter in a Bottle," Atlantic Monthly, October 1971, p. 253, cited by Yancey, Where is God...).*

E. Don't Trust Your Emotions

*"Never will I leave you;
Never will I forsake you." (Heb. 13:5)*

ILLUSTRATION: *Although God never leaves us, most Christians don't seem to live in a constant awareness of God's presence. Spurgeon is considered by many the greatest preacher who ever lived, but he often struggled with depression. He said that Luther's life might give a thousand instances of the same. C.S. Lewis, after His wife's death, said that when he prayed, it seemed like "A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence." (A Grief Observed, p. 4) Lewis later found that God was there all the time. But our emotions, particularly during a crisis, can lead us astray. Don't trust them.*

F. Get A Better Perspective

GAME: Make Me Smile. Everyone get a partner, and without physically touching, try to get the person to smile before the timer goes off (about 30 seconds). Then, we'll take out all the losers and let the winners try to get the other winners to smile. (Try to narrow down a few winners that no one can get to smile. Give happy face stickers as prizes to the winners.)

ILLUSTRATION: *There are two ways to view a **huge wave**. The sand castle builder looks upon it with anguish, realizing that his beautiful creation may be destroyed in a brief moment. But a talented surfer frantically paddles toward that same wave, hoping to catch it for the ride of a lifetime. But it's exactly the same wave, viewed from two different perspectives.*

How can we learn to surf life's trials, rather than merely endure them? We've got to learn to look at the waves through the eyes of a surfer. Here are some hints:

1. Realize you have all you need for your present happiness

*"For the LORD God is a sun and shield;
the LORD bestows favor and honor;
no good thing does he withhold
from those whose walk is blameless." (Ps. 84:11; Phil. 4:11-13)*

“...for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” (Phil. 4:11)

ILLUSTRATION: *Have you ever noticed how some dogs can live in a spacious, fenced in yard, but spend all their time at the gate, longing to get out?*

ILLUSTRATION: *A Polish believer had been imprisoned several times for his faith. Once, when passing one of his former prisons, he was overcome with emotion. He ran and embraced the building, saying, “God, thanks for the wonderful times we had together here.”*

Just think. No stereo, dating privileges, allowance, or telephone. But he was content.

Here’s an indicator to show if you lack contentment: how often do you say to others, or just to yourself, “If only...”

If only I were better looking...

If only I were smarter...

If only I my parents would get their act together...

“If only this...” Then what? Do you think you’d be happy? If you’re discontent, don’t count on it, because your circumstances will never be perfect.

Instead, our goal is to be like Habakkuk, when he said,

Phil. 4:11 – ***“Have learned”*** is aorist tense. Martin takes it to refer to the specific time of Paul’s conversion. Robertson thinks it is a constative aorist, which could refer to something that he learned over a long period of time, but looks at it as a unit.

“Content” = “content, self sufficient” (AG). “to be satisfied with what he was and had, to be inwardly independent of the varying outward circumstances.” (Muller) Socrates was once asked, “Who was the wealthiest?” He responded, using the same Greek word, “He that is content with least, for contentment is nature’s wealth.” (Lightfoot)

“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.” (Hab. 3:17-19)

But most of us don't seem to have the joy of the Polish believer or Habakkuk. We'd like to be able to find joy in the midst of our hard times, but practically speaking, *how* can we find such contentment?

2. See your problems in relation to your blessings.

“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.” (I Thes. 5:15-18)

Some people are so negative that when they see a donut, all they notice is the hole.

ILLUSTRATION (could be a skit): *Imagine that Kenny (use the name of someone in your group) wakes up to a day that seems like a dream come true. He wakes to the smell of mom cooking his favorite breakfast. At school he realizes that he is about a week ahead in his homework. Incredibly, the lunch room serves a choice of steak or lobster. He gorge himself with his lobster, plus a friend's left-over lobster. School dismisses early and as he waits for the bus, a friend passes him a note. It reads, “I had a long talk with Leah (the most incredible girl in your school). She's madly in love with you.” Getting on the bus, he steps on a fresh piece of gum. In the light of all that's gone on today, would it bother him?(No way!)*

But let's imagine that day #2 is very different. Kenny sleeps through his alarm and his mom yells, “Grab a piece of cold bread on the way to school, you sluggard.” In his first class his teacher reminds him of a long-term project that is due tomorrow. He had totally forgotten. As he walks into the lunch room, he sees a notice that reads, “Many students are suffering from food poisoning. But don't panic. This only concerns the few students who chose lobster at yesterday's lunch.” His stomach begins to hurt. As he double over and makes his way to the clinic, his best friend comes up to him laughing. “By the way,” he says, “you didn't believe my little joke about Leah liking you, did you?” Then, he steps on a fresh wad of chewing gum. Some of you, at this point, would throw your shoe down the hall and curse the day they were born. Why the different

Hab. 3:17-19 – The context: At the beginning of the book, Habakkuk was miffed. Strife, perversion, destruction, injustice and violence were everywhere. (Sound familiar?) You'd think that a righteous God would let the righteous prevail over the wicked, but the wicked prevailed. He talked to God about it, but his prayers seemed to go nowhere. But finally God let him in on the big picture. God was raising up Babylon to judge Judah. And in the end, God would save the day by rescuing His people. So even though his circumstances were still dismal, He could rejoice in the LORD, knowing that God and His faithful would eventually prevail. Seeing the big picture cured his major case of the blah's.

reaction from the chewing gum the day before? The incident was exactly the same. (Answer: the context in which it was seen.)

So our challenge is to become so aware of our blessings that our problems pale in comparison.

Now many of our blessings are **temporal and changing**. And since every good gift comes from above, we need to be thankful for them. If your family life is in shambles, you tend to forget that you may be reasonably healthy, be good at a certain subject at school, and have a friend.

We also have **eternal and unchanging** blessings (II Cor. 4:18). I think that some Christians become so caught up in the wonder of these blessings that they are little affected by their situation here on earth. As the old hymn says,

*“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.”*

BRAINSTORM: As a group, let’s try to brainstorm as many of these eternal, unchanging blessings that we have in Christ. (When your students run dry, add some of these: I’m totally forgiven. Power over sin (I C. 10:13) All needs met (Phil. 4:19) Trials will all work for good (Rom. 8:28) The ultimate counselor is our friend (Is. 9:6) (Are you starting to feel better?) We have a purpose in life (Mt. 28:18-20) He answers our prayers (I Jn. 5:14,15) He will never forsake us (Heb. 13:5) We have treasure in heaven that makes Bill Gates look like a pauper in comparison (a billion dollars? That’s pocket change in heaven. A ton of gold? The streets are paved with it there.) We are safe from hell. (Rev. 21:1-8) I am significant (God’s son died for me)

So, the more you get enamoured with these incredible blessings that can never be taken away, your short-term problems won’t seem as big. How do you become more aware of these blessings?

- **Regularly thank God for them.**

Don’t spend all your prayer time asking God for stuff. Next time, when you spend some time with Him in prayer, tell Him you’re not there to ask for anything. You just want to thank Him for what He’s already given you.

ACTIVITY: To make us more aware of our blessings, let’s have everyone think of some blessings, temporal and eternal, that you are thankful for. Now, let’s spend some time in prayer, just thanking God for these things.

- **Spend time meditating on God’s Word.**

The world sets its eyes on the things that go wrong and complains. The mature Christian sets his eyes on the blessings that never change and gives thanks.

I'm convinced that the more we understand the eternal, unchanging blessings we have in Christ, the less we'll get rattled by the comparatively minor troubles we experience here.

CONCLUSION

Let's not wait until we get home to put into practice what we've been talking about. In our closing time of prayer, let's brainstorm every blessing, some that change and some that never change, and thank God for them. You may have never before prayed out loud, but it's there's nothing to it. No special God language or way you have to hold your hands. Prayer is simply talking with God. And He can understand you the way you talk.

So **let's pray**. Please don't pray long prayers. A sentence is long enough. We want many to have a chance to pray. You might want to pray more than once as you think of more things to be thankful for. I'll begin... "Lord, thanks for the water that covers my eye, so that my eye doesn't dry out and hurt." Now what are you thankful for? (Let them pray.)

MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES... BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU (Lesson 6)

INTRODUCTION

Over the past month, we've been trying to learn to master our circumstances, before they master us. Last week we said that there are two ways to view a huge wave. Does anyone remember what the two ways were? (Let them respond.) The sandcastle builder sees it and panics, realizing that all his work could be washed away in a moment. But out in the water, a surfer paddles frantically toward the same wave, hoping to catch it for the ride of a lifetime. It's fascinating if you think about it. It's the same wave, but viewed with expectation by one and horror by the other.

Last week we started looking for ways to see our trials from the perspective of the surfer rather than the perspective of the sandcastle builder. How can we learn to ride waves rather than be clobbered by them? Let's pray that God will help us to find out...

PRAY

Transition: Last week we looked at two steps to a new perspective. The **first** was to realize that *no matter how bad things get, God has still have all that you need for your present happiness*. The **second** step was to *see your problems in relation to how many blessings you have*. Now we come to number 3...

3. Think of some good that will result. (Jms 1:2-4, II Cor. 1:4; 4:17; Phil. 1:12ff.)

***ILLUSTRATION:** They say that the view of the dogs on a **dog sled team** is all the same, except for the leader. Think about it. I suggest that you occasionally glance around to get a better view. This is precisely why many people can't handle their hard times. All they can see is what lies immediately ahead, and it neither looks nor smells very good. I suggest that we occasionally peak around the pack to see the big picture of where we are going.*

***ILLUSTRATION:** Imagine that two classes are dismissed to go get **a shot in the school clinic**. One class is told that the shot will inoculate them against a deadly plague that has taken many lives in your community. The other class is told, "recent studies have shown that this inoculation doesn't work, but we hate to cancel the plans and put a longer teaching load on the teachers, so we'll continue the shots, **just as if they really help**." With this preparation, which group will be able to take the shot with a better attitude? Why? (People will joyfully endure some pain, as long as they know that the payoff is worth the pain. The worst pains are the ones we can see no purpose for.)*

Brainstorm. Imagine that you've been praying all year to get accepted at your favorite college, but just today your rejection arrived in the mail. You're tempted to get mad at God. But quickly, give me some ideas of good things that could come of this let down.

You've mentioned some of these, but I want you to see them in in God's Word.

a. Temporal Payoffs.

ILLUSTRATION: When Corrie ten Boom, and her sister Betsie, were shown to their quarters in Ravensbruck, they found themselves crowded into a flea infested room with 700 other women. (It was built to accommodate only 200!) Corrie groaned at the thought of the unwelcome fleas. But Betsie said, "Praise the Lord." In time, God's purposes became clear. Betsie and Corrie started a Bible Study group, and were amazed that the guards never came in to interrupt or search the quarters. But one day Betsie discovered the reason. "The guards refuse to come in because of the fleas!" Betsie laughed. ... "Because of the fleas, we can share the gospel freely with our fellow prisoners." (Corrie ten Boom, by Kjersti Hoff Baez, pp. 174-180)

Do you see what happened? In the worst of circumstances (a flea-infested prison) Corrie found reason to rejoice when she saw some good that could come out of her trials.

And I think that when we look around the pack of sled dogs on the team in front of us get a better view, we too can rejoice in where we are heading. So, just what good can we know will come from our problems?

- **They Build Character**

"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything." (Jms. 1:2-4; cr. II Thes. 1:4,5; Heb. 12:1-13; Rom. 5:3-5;8:16-18; I Pet. 2:19-25; Heb. 5:8.

Would you like to be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing? Then bring on the trials.

ILLUSTRATION: Steven Spielberg has been the most successful filmmaker for the last quarter of a century. Everyone is familiar with some of his blockbusters, including Schindler's List, Jurassic Park, and E.T. What you may not know is how some of his early heartaches taught him to make his audiences feel emotion. Once, when 24 year old Spielberg was directing a TV episode at Universal, the head of the camera department stopped an associate and said, "You've got to go down to the soundstage. It's something you'll never see again. Your friend Spielberg is directing." (He was directing an emotional scene where a character dies.) The associate

responded, “I’ve seen people directing before.” The camera man explained, “You’ve never seen a crew stand there and cry.”

So how did he learn the empathy that can’t be taught in film school? Spielberg says that as a young person experienced his grandmother’s death with his family at her bedside. He felt anti-semitism through bullies in school, and learned what it’s like to be an outcast from the rejection he experienced in school. He learned the anguish of divorce by seeing his parents go through it his senior year in high school. No one wants to experience these tragedies, but I doubt Spielberg could have learned to produce heart-felt films without them.

Says Spielberg, “E.T. was about the divorce of my parents, how I felt when my parents broke up.... My wish list included having a friend who could be both the brother I never had and a father that I didn’t feel I had anymore. And that’s how E.T. was born.” (Steven Spielberg, by Joseph McBride, Simon and Schuster, 1997, p. 72.)

So when I look around the pack to get a better view, I see my character developing as a result of my struggles. But there’s more up ahead.

• They Can Further The Gospel

“Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”(Phil. 1:12ff)

Phil. 1:19 – “*Deliverance*” – others have translated as “salvation,” “release,” “highest welfare” or “victoriously.”

ILLUSTRATION: *Kimi Aukino* was driving along a street in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, when he struck a drunken man who suddenly stepped in front of his car. The man died an hour later, and Kimi was thrown into cell #2 with 19 other prisoners. “Why would God allow this?” Kimi wondered. He felt confused and empty, like many of us would have felt. But the events of the next day answered Kimi’s questions. Upon learning that Kimi was a missionary, one inmate suggested that he share something from God’s word. The power of God filled the cell, as he began with John 3:16. Sixteen of the men responded to his invitation to repent! The next day he was allowed into cell #1, where all seven inmates prayed to receive Christ. In Cell #3, five out of six responded. Three days later, Kimi was released, leaving a church of 36 believers behind! When he returned to visit, he found that these convicts were meeting regularly for group devotions. (“SIM NOW” newsletter, Issue #79)

Remember, you might not *see* the impact you’re response to trials is having on others. The poor skier in the poor conditions never knew that his response prompted Steve to consider the gospel. But trust God. He’ll work.

So when I look around the pack, I see the gospel spreading because of my trials. But there’s more ahead...

- **They Bring Peace**

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” (Heb. 12:11)

- **They Can Help You Appreciate Life.**

ILLUSTRATION: For children who are spoiled with sweet Colas and fruit juices, a simple glass of water offered at a meal is grounds for pitching a fit. But put that same child in the middle of a desert for a couple of days, and he'll treasure every drop of pure water.

ILLUSTRATION: Stephen Hawking, regarded by many as the most brilliant theoretical physicist since Einstein, used to do little work, drank too much and called life a “pointless existence.” That was before he was diagnosed with Lou Gehrig’s disease, a degenerative muscle neuromuscular disorder that has left him unable to write, feed himself, comb his hair, or even speak. But his brilliant mind still memorizes “the long strings of equations that give life to his ideas.” He communicates these ideas to the outside world via a computer that responds to the tiny movements of his fingertips.

But the affect of this disease on his attitude may surprise you. Hawking once said, “When one’s expectations are reduced to zero, one really appreciates everything that one does have.” Small pleasures take on profound meaning, like a sunset or a child playing in a park. (Dobson, 145,146, drawing from Omni Magazine, Feb., 1979, p. 46)

- **They Can Get Your Attention**

ILLUSTRATION: A high school senior named George decided to surf a tragedy instead of let it sink him. Throughout high school, he had coasted through school with his mind in neutral, with a D average to show for it. Instead, he lived for cars. He loved racing, and was pretty good at it, accumulating trophies by driving his little Fiat in nearby races. His dream? To drive a formula race car.

But his dreams all ended just a few days before his graduation. While driving home from the library in his Fiat, he prepared for a left turn by glancing in his rearview mirror. But as he started the turn, he heard an engine, a blowing horn, and the impact of a speeding Chevy Impala crunching into the driver side of his car. It should have killed him. The little Fiat turned 4 or 5 complete flips before it wrapped around a solid oak tree. The impact was so great that it actually moved the entire tree a couple of feet a couple of feet over, leaving a huge hole in its former position. But miraculously, George survived. Get this: During the Fiat’s third flip, his regulation racing seat belt snapped, throwing him out of the open top and onto the ground. He was still close to death, but slowly recovered through two weeks in the hospital and months of physical therapy. His Fiat didn’t survive, ending up in the junkyard.

After the accident, George was a changed person. He decided that there must be some reason he survived, and set his mind to get his act together and make something out of his life.

*So he left his racing dreams behind and decided to go to college. There, he developed an interest in literature and writing. And instead of **driving** race cars, he began to **film** them. Today, I'm sure he's glad for the accident that changed his life. Without it, he might have never found his niche in the film industry, and no one would have ever seen Star Wars. That's right, George's last name is Lucas. I'm glad he let his tragedy count for something. (Facts from *Skywalking: The Life And Times Of George Lucas*, by Dale Pollock, 1983, pp. xiii-39)*

My point? Like Lucas, whatever trials *you* are facing, learn from them and realize that good can come from them, no matter how horrible they seem right now.

- **They Can Help You Leave Your Mark**

“...who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” (II Cor. 1:4; Phil 1:12)

ILLUSTRATION: At a Christian youth camp, a speaker did strength feats to direct people to the gospel. The strength stuff was flashy and got kid's attention, but what really seemed to leave its mark was when he shared about his troubles growing up, including rejection and abuse by his own father. When he shared his struggles, and how God brought him through, people could relate, and he got through to their hearts. His strength got their attention, but his struggles penetrated their hearts.

Another speaker could make people laugh. But when he shared about the agonies of growing up obese and dyslexic, the audience agonized with him. They laughed at his humor, but related to his struggles. When he shared how Jesus had helped him through his agonies, many wanted such a Savior.

Those problems that seem so senseless to you now, could be the very things that God uses to spark a powerful ministry.

- **They Draw Us to God.**

One of the worst things that could happen in life would be to breeze through with no trials, and thus see no need of God. Few things can shock us out of spiritual apathy like trials.

- **They Keep Our Eyes on Heaven.**

“If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;” (Phil. 1:22,23; cr. II Cor. 5:1-10)

Many people are so earthly minded that they're no heavenly good. And one day, all the things they lived for will perish, because they decided to live their life for themselves and their own pleasure. But some of us have to get knocked down on our backs before we can look up.

CONCLUSION

So are you seeing that without waves, a surfer could go nowhere? Are you seeing that it takes trials to get us where we need to go here on earth? With a new perspective, our biggest waves can become our greatest friends. Not that we don't cry at our losses or hurt with our physical pains. But when we see the good that can come out of our trials, we no longer have to despair.

Now, for the trials you are facing – recovering from the betrayal of a friend, the rejection of someone you loved, a defeat in a sport that you have lived for. You're left with a choice. You can either despair, conclude that life's unfair and live the rest of it in bitterness. Or, you can choose to view your trials from that different perspective. Can you see that, like for Steven Spielberg or Corrie ten Boom, your problems might just be the waves that push you on to future victories? Let's pray...

PRAYER

MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(Lesson 7)

INTRODUCTION

We're about to complete our series on *Mastering Your Circumstances, Before They Master You*. We've said that there's a joy, a deep inner contentment, a peace that is possible for us to have, even when our world is caving in around us.

Some of you have already discovered that one student can be rich, beautiful, and talented, yet miserable. And a student sitting next to her, who seems to have little going for her, has an enjoyment for life that just won't quit. The difference comes from what's going on up here (point to your head), your perspective on life.

We said that a huge wave can be viewed from two perspectives. Do you remember what they are? (The sandcastle builder and the surfer.) The same wave, yet it causes the sandcastle builder to retreat the surfer to charge.

REVIEW: How many benefits can you come up with, either just brainstorming or remembering from last week? (Let them share.)

Let's ask God to help us internalize a few more points that can help us master our circumstances.

PRAY

b. Eternal Payoffs

We talked about all the earthly payoffs that trials bring us. But for the Christian, the biggest payoffs will come when we hit heaven.

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.” (II Cor. 4:16-18; Mt. 6:19,20; Lk. 6:22,23,26; Col. 3:23,24; cr. Mt. 5:10-12; Rom. 8:17; I Cor. 2:9)

For the Christian, the big payoff for our difficulties here comes when we get to heaven, and lasts for eternity. We keep forgetting how short life is here, in comparison to eternity. When we see our eternal reward, all out of proportion to the relatively short duration of our trials here, we will realize that it was all worth it.

“But how will heaven be better for those who have suffered?” you might ask. A part of the reward could be in this: While all might experience the same blessings, those who lacked on earth may have a greater capacity to enjoy the blessings in heaven. So the person who experienced intense loneliness on earth will especially appreciate the intimate fellowship. The former pauper will exclaim: “I can’t believe the size of my home, the comfort of this bed!” The formerly hungry: “Look at all this food!”

Knowing that my future reward outweighs my present pains keeps me from becoming absorbed with the “why” question.

To sum up this point an last week, when you look at all the good that will come out of your hard times, you ought to get a better perspective on the hard times you face.

But remember, don’t think that for each trial you will be able to pinpoint a specific reason for God allowing it. The reason may be beyond your capacity to understand. There may be 112 reasons that you woke up this morning with a zit. But it’s enough to know that so much good *will* come, that one day we’ll consider the suffering well worth it. The more we keep our eyes on the results, the more we can view our trials, not as enemies out to destroy us, but friends who have come to make us better.

II Cor. 4:16-18 – ***“light and momentary troubles”*** = not in contrast to big difficulties. In fact, in the present context he’s referring to intense struggles, like “outwardly...wasting away” (vs. 16), being “perplexed,” “persecuted,” “struck down,” “always being given over to death.”

(8-11). Several translations of vs. 17 bring out to me the enormity of the reward:

- *“...is preparing for us, in a measure transcending thought, a weight of imperishable glory.”*
- *“...results in a solid glory past all comparison.”*
- *“...is piling up for me an eternal blessedness beyond all comparison.”*
- *“a reward multiplied in every way, loading us with everlasting glory.”*

4. Lean On Someone Who Cares

a. Friends and family for emotional support

*“Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their work:
If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!
Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?
Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Ecc. 4:9-12)*

Some think, “Just me and God is enough.” But often, God wants to meet your needs through other people.

ILLUSTRATION: Research from Stanford University found that cancer patients who attended a weekly support group lived an average of twice as long as nonattenders. (Fifty Essential Things To Do When The Doctor Says It's Cancer, by Greg Anderson, p. 82.)

Struggling with drug dependency or an alcoholic parent? Find some people you can confide in and lean on. We really need each other.

b. Wise counsel for difficult solutions

*“...let the wise listen and add to their learning,
and let the discerning get guidance....” (Prov. 1:5)*

ILLUSTRATION: When Jan Dravecky struggled with depression, she began reading some Christian books on depression. A Christian acquaintance took the book and threw it on the ground, declaring, “All you need is the Word of God.” But Jan knew that God’s Word directs us to sometimes go to others, like our parents or other wise counselors. In the end, God used these books and wise counselors to pull Jan out of her depression.

5. Realize That Nothing Can Foul Up God’s Plan For the Faithful Christian.

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28; 35-39; cr. Gen. 45:7,8)

ILLUSTRATION: We’ve mentioned Dave Dravecky several times, the fantastic pitcher with the San Francisco Giants, who lost his ability to pitch when surgery removed, not only a tumor, but half of the surrounding muscle from his pitching arm. But through his faith and iron will, he not only regained the use of his arm, but

returned to the major leagues! But the victory was short lived. In his second game back, his bone broke in a pitch, causing excruciating pain to shoot through his arm.

*Now tell me, what would go through your mind at this time? (Get some ideas.) Here's how Dave describes it: "As odd as it sounds, I wasn't discouraged as I lay there, because with the excruciating pain came a strange sense of exhilaration, a sense that God wasn't finished with the story He was trying to tell with my life. It was weird. There I was gritting my teeth, biting back, and I was thinking, Okay, God, what's the next chapter gonna be? **Then suddenly I became overwhelmed at what God was doing with my life, and I realized what He was doing was much bigger than baseball.**" (Dravecky, p. 11)*

Do you see how Dravecky's confidence in God's big plan helped him when most men would have folded? It wasn't that he was happy about leaving baseball behind. And he certainly wasn't looking forward to more doctor appointments and surgery. But he was assured that God had a bigger plan than baseball for his life.

Perhaps a romantic dream of yours has been recently crushed. If not, odds are it'll happen to you one day. And when it does, sure, you'll grieve. But I hope you can also lay back in your bed at night and say to your heavenly Father, "I can't wait to see the next chapter! Thanks, God, that it's bigger than that relationship."

6. Remember Those Who Have Suffered More Than You

"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches." (II Cor. 11:23-28, Phil. 4:11; cr. I Pet. 5:9; Heb. 12:3,4)

ILLUSTRATION: I heard of a person who complained that he had no shoes, until he met a person with no feet.

ILLUSTRATION: Joni Eareckson grew up hiking, playing tennis, and thinking that handicaps happen to other people. But all that changed one hot July afternoon in 1967 when she dove off a raft that was anchored offshore in the Chesapeake Bay. Her head hit something hard, snapping it back and sending something like an electric shock through the back of her neck. At 17 years of age, she found herself a quadriplegic, unable to feel anything from her neck down. As the months dragged on, depression set in, and anger.

A therapist wanted her to learn how to write with a pencil clenched between her teeth. She stubbornly refused. But then something changed her. Joni says, "But

that was before I met Tom, a young ventilator-dependent quadriplegic who was much more paralyzed than me. His attitude was buoyant and enthusiastic as he willingly permitted the therapist to put the pen in his mouth. I was ashamed of my grumbling and complaining.” God used her friends’ prayers and Tom’s example to show her that good could come out of her situation. In fact, she eventually learned to draw so well that she now sells her artwork. But seeing someone worse than her was a turning point for her attitude. God later opened up many doors for her to speak and write about her story, challenging people to trust God with whatever trials they face. (Condensed from “Joni’s Story,” booklet; A Step Further, Joni Eareckson and Steve Estes, Zondervan, 1978)

Understanding how most of the world lives can help us put some trials in perspective. For example, if you get down because your mother doesn’t prepare decent family meals, remember that one out of four people in the world today live with stunted bodies or damaged brains because of malnutrition. Much of the world would love to have the meals you turn your nose up at.

ILLUSTRATION: *To see yourself in relation to how most of the world lives, let’s shrink the world down to a village of 100 people and keep all the present proportions the same. Here’s how your neighbors would be living:*

- 80 would live in substandard housing
- 70 couldn’t read
- 50 would suffer from malnutrition
- only one would have a college education
- no one would have a computer

(from the internet)

From this perspective, your bad grade in chemistry no longer looks like grounds for suicide. While some are facing agonizing trials like parents divorcing or the death of a friend, others of us whine about relatively trivial things and need to get our eyes off of ourselves and become more concerned with the needs of others.

They say that misery loves company. If you’re suffering, there’s plenty of good company out there. And while you’re considering, consider Jesus and all that He went through. It ought to cheer you that you are sharing in what He suffered while He was here. You have something in common with Jesus! (Heb. 12:2,3)

7. Get Your Eyes Off Of Yourself (Phil. 1:12-25; cr. I Thes. 2:19-20; Acts 20:22-24; I Pet. 4:19)

Paul maintained his joy through incredible trials. What made this guy tick? Not his plans to visit “Six Flags Over The Roman Empire” or his hope of finding a good looking girl to date. Check out Col. 1:28,29 (cr. I Thes. 2:19,20; 2 Cor. 12:15):

“We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.”

Do you catch his heart? He wasn't here for himself. He was here for others, to fulfill his ministry.

ILLUSTRATION: *Patti (not her real name) had been excitedly planning for the birth of her child for months. But tragedy struck when the child was born dead. To make matters worse, the doctor never allowed her to hold or even see the child. Later, she became bitter, not only at losing the child, but at being denied the gratification of her motherly instinct to hold the baby. But after a time, she heard of another mother who had lost a child. Patti's wise mother challenged her to look outside of herself and use her experience to go help this other grieving mother. Taking this advice began her own healing process.*

Do you just turn inside and sulk when life throws you a curve? Try looking for others to help.

8. Realize Your Strategic Importance In God's Plan For The World.

“Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”(Mt. 28:18-20)

People can endure all kinds of suffering for a cause they believe in. Volunteer soldiers endure sleepless nights, minimal rations, physical exhaustion, and even torture for a cause they believe in – the protection of their country. Do you have a cause worth suffering for? Corrie and Betsie ten Boom did. That's how they could fill their prison days with purpose, giving hope to fellow prisoners who dangled on the edge of eternity. That's how Dave Dravecky turned the loss of his arm and career into an opportunity to point others to Jesus as his source of strength.

Have you ever grasped how much your life counts, when placed in God's hands?

9. Endure Till the End

“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.” (II Tim. 4:7,8)

ILLUSTRATION: *William Carey faced all kinds of trials as he left his beloved homeland and traveled to India to spread the gospel. His wife went insane and finally died. He took a second wife and she died. Three of his sons died. A flood destroyed the Indigo business that he used to support himself, and four of the seven missionaries who came to serve with him died. A fire destroyed his print shop, including some precious translations that were never replaced. Most people would have probably given up and lived the rest of their days in bitterness about the past. But not Carey. Rather than despair, he never quit, accomplishing incredible advances for God's kingdom. In his latter years someone described him as “cheerful, and happy as the day is long.”*

And rather than retiring and returning to his homeland, he died in India at age 73, while reading the proofs of his recently completed final revision of the Bengali New Testament. Today he is hailed as the father of modern missions. My point? No matter how much crud the world threw at him, he never gave up.

CONCLUSION

We've covered a lot of ground over the past seven weeks. We've confronted the big "Why?" questions that haunt people when tragedy strikes. We've peeked into the lives of people who faced life's deepest hurts but found a peace and even joy in the midst of them all. But it's one thing to hear the Word of God, and quite another to take it seriously and put it into your life. And for some of you, internalizing this series could make the difference between your future being a miserable existence, or an abundant life.

This world desperately needs more William Carey's, Dave and Jan Dravecky's, and Joni Earickson's. Men and women who refuse to get bitter, fold, or turn inward when life tumbles in. Men and women who trust their awesome Lord with the details and use their remaining strength to joyfully touch their world. Will you join their ranks?

PRAY

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 1)**

INTRODUCTION

“Ron Keeps His Cool; Steve Sees the Light”

ACTIVITY: WRITE DOWN THE MAIN TRIALS YOU FACE.

What we’re _____ aiming for:

- *Hiding your hurts behind a _____ smile (Rom. 9:1,2)*
- *Never feeling _____ (Jn. 11:33,35)*

“Dave Dravecky Loses His Arm”

I. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR _____

- A. DON’T GET CAUGHT OFF _____ (Jn. 16:1, II Tim. 3:12, I Pet. 4:12)**

“Jan Dravecky and the Emerald City”

“Christians At Nero’s Parties”

B. PREVENT _____ TROUBLES (Gal. 6:7)

“An Epidemic Of Sexually Transmitted Diseases”

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 2)**

**C. DON'T MISJUDGE THE _____ OF YOUR
TROUBLES**

1. By Always Blaming _____ (Jn 9:1-5)

“Dravecky Gets Advice”

2. By Always Blaming _____ (II Pet. 3:9)

- *Sometimes _____ is Responsible (I Pet. 5:8)*
- *Sometimes _____ are to Blame (Jms. 1:13,14)*

“Annie Opens Up”

a. God is _____

- 1) *Look at Jesus' _____ (Rom. 5:8; I
Jn. 4:9)*
- 2) *Look at the Lives He has _____ (I Jn. 4:7-10)*
- 3) *Look at His Commitment to _____ (Jn. 14:6)*

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 3)**

- a. *God is Smart...and We're _____ in Comparison (I Cor. 13:12)*

“No Customers Beyond This Point”

Why won't God answer all our “why?” questions?

- *God Values _____ and _____ (II Cor. 5:7)*

ACTIVITY: “TAKE A HIKE!”

- *Certain Knowledge is too _____ to Carry (Acts 1:6,7)*

“Corrie Finds Peace Without An Answer”

- *Can We Fathom the _____ of God?*

“Scientists and Mysteries”

“Of Course!”

- a. *God is _____(II Cor. 5:10)*

“The Evidence Isn't All In”

- b. *God is In _____ (Rom. 8:28)*

“Imagine You're Joseph”

“Back Up To See The Painting”

DISCUSSION: ANSWER AMY'S QUESTION

- *Not Everything That Happens Reflects God's Perfect _____*

DISCUSSION: ANSWER AMY'S NEXT QUESTION

- **God Must Allow Suffering For Higher _____**

“Children See The Doctor”

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 4)**

I. LEARN A RADICAL RESPONSE (Jms. 1:2-4)

A. Ask _____ For Help (Phil. 4:6,7)

“Dobson Prays, God Answers”

B. Take The _____ Off (I Pet. 5:7)

“Put It In His Hands”

C. Resist _____

1. Directed at _____ (Jn.6:67,68)

“Only Two Choices”

2. Directed at _____ (I Pet. 2:21-23)

“Corrie Meets Her Former Guard”

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 5)**

A. *Resist* _____ (*Ps. 73:23-28*)

“How George Handled His Torturers”

E. *Don’t Trust Your* _____ (*Heb. 13:5*)

“A Door Slammed In His Face”

B. *Get A Better* _____

GAME: MAKE ME SMILE

“Two Views of the Same Wave”

1. *Realize You Have All You Need For Your Present*
_____ (*Ps. 84:11; Phil 4:11-13*)

“Dogs Standing At The Gate”

“A Polish Believer And A Prison”

“Don’t Play The ‘If Only...’ Game”

2. *See Your Problems in Relation to Your* _____
(*I Thes. 5:15-18*)

“Kenny Wakes To Two Different Days”

BRAINSTORM: ETERNAL, UNCHANGING BLESSINGS

- *Thank God regularly for them*
- *Spend time meditating on God’s Word*

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 6)**

1. *Think Of Some _____ That Will Result (Jms. 1:2-4, II Cor. 1:4; 4:17; Phil. 1:12ff.)*

“The View Of A Dog Sled Team”

“A Useless Shot”

BRAINSTORM! WHAT GOOD COULD COME OUT OF A REJECTION TO A SCHOOL?

- a. _____ *Payoffs*

“Corrie, Betsy, and a Flea-Infested Room”

- *Builds _____ (Jms. 1:2-4)*

“How Spielberg Touches Hearts”

- *They Can Further The _____ (Phil. 1:12ff.)*

“Kimi Gets Thrown In Jail.”

- *They Bring _____ (Heb. 12:11)*

- *They Can Help You _____ Life*

“A Brilliant Physicist Learns A Lesson”

- *They Can Help You Leave Your _____*

“Two Speakers: What Left It’s Mark?”

- *They Draw Us To _____*

- *They Keep Our Eyes On _____ (Phil. 1:22,23)*

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 7)**

b. _____ *Payoffs (II Cor. 4:16-18)*

4. *Realize That _____ Can Foul Up God's Plan For The Faithful Christian*

"Dravecky: When You Can't Come Back"

5. _____ *Those Who Have Suffered More Than You (II Cor. 11:23-28)*

"Joni Breaks Her Neck"

"Meet The Rest Of The World"

6. *Get Your Eyes Off Of _____ (Col. 1:28,29)*

"Patti' Loses Her Child"

7. *Realize Your Strategic _____ In God's Plan For The World (Mt. 28:18-20)*

8. _____ *On Someone Who Cares*

1. _____ *Friends and _____ (Ecc. 4:9-12)*

2. _____ *Wise _____ For Tough Situations (Prov. 1:5)*

9. _____ *Till The End (II Tim. 4:7,8)*

"Carey Keeps Going, And Going..."

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 1)**

INTRODUCTION

“Ron Keeps His Cool; Steve Sees The Light”

ACTIVITY: WRITE DOWN THE MAIN TRIALS YOU FACE.

What we're not aiming for:

- *Hiding your hurts behind a fake smile (Rom. 9:1,2)*
- *Never feeling down (Jn. 11:33,35)*

“Dave Dravecky Loses His Arm”

I. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR BATTLE

A. DON'T GET CAUGHT OFF GUARD (Jn. 16:1, II Tim. 3:12, I Pet. 4:12)

“Jan Dravecky and the Emerald City”

“Christians At Nero's Parties”

B. PREVENT UNNECESSARY TROUBLES (Gal. 6:7)

“An Epidemic Of Sexually Transmitted Diseases”

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 2)**

C. DON'T MISJUDGE THE SOURCE OF YOUR TROUBLES

1. By Always Blaming Yourself (Jn 9:1-5)

“Dravecky Gets Advice”

2. By Always Blaming God (II Pet. 3:9)

- *Sometimes Satan is Responsible (I Pet. 5:8)*
- *Sometimes People are to Blame (Jms. 1:13,14)*

“Annie Opens Up”

a. God is Good

1) Look at Jesus' Life (Rom. 5:8; I Jn. 4:9)

2) Look at the Lives He has Changed (I Jn. 4:7-10)

3) Look at His Commitment to Truth (Jn. 14:6)

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 3)**

b. God is Smart...and We're Dumb in Comparison (I Cor. 13:12)

"No Customers Beyond This Point"

Why won't God answer all our "why?" questions?

- *God Values Trust and Faith (II Cor. 5:7)*

ACTIVITY: "TAKE A HIKE!"

- *Certain Knowledge is too Heavy to Carry (Acts 1:6,7)*

"Corrie Finds Peace Without An Answer"

- *Can We Fathom the Depths of God?*

"Scientists and Mysteries"

"Of Course!"

c. God is Just (II Cor. 5:10)

"The Evidence Isn't All In"

d. God is In Control (Rom. 8:28)

"Imagine You're Joseph"

"Back Up To See The Painting"

DISCUSSION: ANSWER AMY'S QUESTION

- *Not Everything That Happens Reflects God's Perfect Will*

DISCUSSION: ANSWER AMY'S NEXT QUESTION

- **God Must Allow Suffering For Higher Purposes**

"Children See The Doctor"

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 4)**

II. LEARN A RADICAL RESPONSE (*Jms. 1:2-4*)

A. Ask God For Help (*Phil. 4:6,7*)

“Dobson Prays, God Answers”

B. Take The Load Off (*I Pet. 5:7*)

“Put It In His Hands”

C. Resist Bitterness

1. Directed at God (*Jn.6:67,68*)

“Only Two Choices”

2. Directed at People (*I Pet. 2:21-23*)

“Corrie Meets Her Former Guard”

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 5)**

D. Resist Envy (Ps. 73:23-28)

“How George Handled His Torturers”

E. Don't Trust Your Emotions (Heb. 13:5)

“A Door Slammed In His Face”

E. Get A Better Perspective

GAME: MAKE ME SMILE

“Two Views of the Same Wave”

1. Realize You Have All You Need For Your Present Happiness (Ps. 84:11; Phil 4:11-13)

“Dogs Standing At The Gate”

“A Polish Believer And A Prison”

“Don't Play The ‘If Only...’ Game”

2. See Your Problems in Relation to Your Blessings (I Thes. 5:15-18)

“Kenny Wakes To Two Different Days”

BRAINSTORM: ETERNAL, UNCHANGING BLESSINGS

- *Thank God regularly for them*
- *Spend time meditating on God's Word*

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 6)**

3. *Think Of Some Good That Will Result (Jms. 1:2-4, II Cor. 1:4; 4:17; Phil. 1:12ff.)*

“The View Of A Dog Sled Team”

“A Useless Shot”

BRAINSTORM! WHAT GOOD COULD COME OUT OF A REJECTION TO A SCHOOL?

a. Temporal Payoffs

“Corrie, Betsy, and a Flea-Infested Room”

- *Builds Character (Jms. 1:2-4)*

“How Spielberg Touches Hearts”

- *They Can Further The Gospel (Phil. 1:12ff.)*

“Kimi Gets Thrown In Jail.”

- *They Bring Peace (Heb. 12:11)*

- *They Can Help You Appreciate Life*

“A Brilliant Physicist Learns A Lesson”

- *They Can Help You Leave Your Mark*

“Two Speakers: What Left It’s Mark?”

- *They Draw Us To God*

- *They Keep Our Eyes On Heaven (Phil. 1:22,23)*

ACTION POINTS

**MASTERING YOUR CIRCUMSTANCES...
BEFORE THEY MASTER YOU
(LESSON 7)**

b. Eternal Payoffs (II Cor. 4:16-18)

4. Lean On Someone Who Cares

1. Friends and Family (Ecc. 4:9-12)

2. Wise Counsel For Tough Situations (Prov. 1:5)

5. Realize That Nothing Can Foul Up God's Plan For The Faithful Christian

"Dravecky: When You Can't Come Back"

6. Remember Those Who Have Suffered More Than You (II Cor. 11:23-28)

"Joni Breaks Her Neck"

"Meet The Rest Of The World"

7. Get Your Eyes Off Of Yourself (Col. 1:28,29)

"Patti' Loses Her Child"

8. Realize Your Strategic Importance In God's Plan For The World (Mt. 28:18-20)

9. Endure Till The End (II Tim. 4:7,8)

"Carey Keeps Going, And Going..."

ACTION POINTS
