A person is seen from behind, climbing a large, reddish-brown rock face. The climber is wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt, blue pants, and a climbing harness with gear. They are reaching up with their right arm towards a crack in the rock. The rock surface is textured with various cracks and crevices. The entire scene is framed by a white border.

FAITH **for the hard times**

Denis V Smith



Solutions by Design
ABN 7090 5164 723 Denis V Smith



FAITH FOR THE HARD TIMES

If God loves me, why do I still have problems?

Dr. Denis V Smith



FAITH FOR THE HARD TIMES

A pastor I know fought the fight of faith and his 16-year-old daughter Janetta died with a brain tumour.

A teenage girl from my congregation in Perth died within days of falling unconscious.

Upon my return from a conference, I received news within one hour that one person in my church had died, two were critically ill with cancer and another was sick in hospital.

Let's not ignore life – it is happening all around us!

Many people are experiencing crushing experiences like these all around the world.

Whenever we think of tragedy, there is always a face attached.

If we cannot place a face on a tragedy, it is easy to hold the questions at arm's length. But, sooner or later it will come to you in one form or another. You will need an answer to the questions like:

"Why is my daughter a vegetable?"

"Why did that marriage that started so well disintegrate?"

"Why did my child do that?"

"Why, after you invited God into your business deal did it go sour?"

"Why did a faithful pastor die with Parkinson's disease?"



Robertson McQuilkin

Robertson McQuilkin, a few years ago, retired as the highly esteemed president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary

This scene was described to me in a letter from a missionary friend of mine who knew him well.

"He ran his fingers nimbly over the combination lock which secured the gate of his fenced-in yard. He graciously stepped aside to allow Julie and me entry to his home turf a small back yard and simple, but adequate, frame house.

As we approached, we saw Robertson's wife, Muriel observing us through the window in the back door. As Robertson reached the top step, Muriel pressed her lips against the glass pane and patiently waited. With no hesitation, embarrassment, or explanation Robertson pressed his face against the very cool window. Only then did Muriel step aside to allow Robertson to come in, hug her, and give her another more authentic kiss.

It was all I could do to restrain tears. I will never forget that moment of expressed love. It is an indelible imprint that I trust will forever be a guiding model to me in my relationship with Julie as we move toward more "mature" years of life.

You see, Muriel is in a very advanced stage of Alzheimer's disease. Her thin, frail body is forever on the move . . . rearranging things, seeking to open locked doors, pacing around her back yard domain, and at times, sitting hand in hand, contentedly beside her lover. Muriel's brain has just about blinked out. She had no idea who we were or recollection of the fun time we had together for six days in the Philippines in 1986.

Her communication is reduced to simple words or, at most, phrases.

As we left the home we gave Muriel a hug and remarked, "Robertson, it seems Muriel only understands the language of love."

She probably is left with the mind and behaviour of a 16 month old child ... and downward counting.

If I allowed my mind free roam, I could easily become cynical about Christians.

My spiritual father and Julie's as well, both stepped into the world of repeated adultery and subsequent divorce.

My spiritual "hero," a leader, who had it all together, took the same route into lustful abandon. Another esteemed evangelical luminary who had meant a lot to me, especially in his emphasis on integrity, decided he needed a second personal home worth several million dollars.

Enter Robertson. He, with calculation, walks away from one of evangelicalism's prime positions [at just over 60 years of age] and, in reality becomes a baby-sitter. He cleans house, makes meals, washes dishes, bathes and dresses his lover and on occasion cleans her of body malfunctions. And..., I see integrity reinterpreted. Not smooth words, not institutional kingdoms, not power grasping...

My friend's prayer for them in his letter went like this...

"Oh God, help me to redefine Christianity away from all the hype status that seems so important in our culture. Give me a humility and brokenness that authenticates my verbosity. I thank you for Robertson's 41 years of marital faithfulness that holds secure in the terrible crucible of emotional devastation. Lord make me real and tenacious in my love toward you and toward my beloved."

Years ago Robertson wrote a poem that has powerfully communicated to thousands. It seems almost ironic that he closed with this question and prayer.

**"But will I reach the gate in lingering pain, body distorted,
grotesque?
Or will it be a mind
wandering untethered among light fantasies or grim terrors?
Of your grace, Father; I humbly ask
Let me get home before dark."**

One of TV's favourite characters came to our screens a few years ago in the form of a hairy, alien character called "Alf." He had an unusual ability to handle any crisis, which he himself usually started. His catch cry was "No problem!"

I must confess, when I first became a Christian, I had a concept that from that time on, my life would be problem free.

I found that my concept may have been good – but the practical reality was that I still had problems.

"If only I had more faith!" I thought, as I wrestled with my problems.

I must also confess that most of my problems were internal, rather than external, as well. Most of the problems I was having with myself!

Then, there were problems that came my way that I was not responsible for. I could easily see that in others.

Some people had problems because of their own stupidity -- but on occasions, they had problems that they didn't seem to deserve – least of all, ask for!



Life became complicated. After a few years of Christian "maturity," I figured that problems must come to me for either of three reasons:

1. Problems were a punishment for past failures!

In other words, somewhere in my past life, I had failed either God, or my fellow man, or myself and the problems that were multiplying in my life like a mouse plague were a punishment because I had been a failure. I want to tell you, that didn't add a lot of hope to my life!

2. Problems were because God somehow had stepped out of my life!

I thought that perhaps God needed a vacation from me in particular and occasionally, others in general. In other words, He was tiring of me coming continually to Him with all my ups and downs. My roller coaster Christianity was making him tired of me so He took a well-deserved break and I was on my own!

3. Problems were the mischief of Satan!

This appealed to my human nature - blame it on somebody else! After all, I could find enough Scriptures to back up my theory on this. The devil was the thief and robber, who was going around like a roaring lion and causing me problems.

I was set then. "The Devil made me do it!" But, if I was completely honest with myself, and I wanted to be – many of my problems were my own fault and this form of escapism, to blame it on the devil was not real anyway!

What could I do? I figured if I was God, I would distribute problems more equally. After all, some people didn't seem to have a problem in the world!

In high school, some of my friends always seemed to have an unending supply of pocket money, while I had to go out picking water melons on Saturdays – and when it came to pick up my pay, the day was hot and I was thirsty and the farmer would sell us a watermelon which cost about 25% of our pay.

I hoped that his watermelons would die on the vine!

When I had finished high school and gone to Sydney, it was only me who had problems. No one else had problems, or so I thought.

I grew a little older and wiser and found that everyone had problems after all – but what good was that knowledge to me – I needed an answer to solving MY problems!

On the 27th November 1958, I became a Christian and I thought all my problems would go away.

I heard a lady say, "Before I was a Christian, I had real problems. Now I'm a Christian, God has helped me with all my problems!"

My testimony was "Before I was a Christian, I had real problems. Now I'm a Christian, I've got more problems than I ever had before!"

I had a whole new set of problems.

"Why was I always facing challenges?"

"Why did my father kick me out of home when I became a Christian?"

I thought everyone would want to hear about what I had experienced!

"Why did my so called friends now turn their back on me?"

If my three fold philosophy for the reasons for problems was correct.

1. Problems were a punishment for past failures!
2. Problems were because God somehow had stepped out of my life!
3. Problems were the mischief of Satan!

I really had a problem because I knew that deep down that my philosophy was a bit suspect!

Let me share three false ideas that Dr. Lloyd Ogilvie [If God Cares, Why Do I Still Have Problems, p17ff] discovered about problems that cause us to miss the creative possibilities of problems that come to us:

1. False Idea #1

We have come to believe that there is something inherently bad about problems because they involve us in unpleasant pressures, distressing conflict or an inconvenient interruption of our plans for a smooth and easy life.

We see problems like "an invasion from outer space" into our inner space attempting to tear us away from the plans we have made to make us happy.

2. False Idea #2

We think that freedom from problems should be a reward for hard work, careful planning and clear thinking.

We struggle through various stages of life, battling the problems associated with getting an education, finding a job, developing a career, raising a family, making ends meet and eventually retiring.

At each stage, we look forward to the next stage in the hope that the problems will be behind us. And we have a built-in hope that we can take the present level of problems on the chin, because at the next level [there is this deepest hope] that things will get better.

Even that somewhere out there in the future, problems will end!

I read about a lady in a church who said, "My husband and I have had more than our share of problems all through the years. We kept thinking the struggles were worth it because some day we'd get to a place when all our problems would be solved.

Now look at us. We've arrived at where we wanted to be financially and socially, and we've still got problems! Yes, they're different problems, but they are no less distressing. When will the problems of life go away?"

3. False Idea #3

We think that if we love God, commit our lives to Him and diligently try and serve Him, He will work things out for us smoothly and we'll be free from problems.

We'll just "stay under the spout where the glory comes out" and then drift along on the euphoria of our previous experience.

We have a philosophy that says, "I can understand it why criminals, rapists and murderers and other scoundrels get their problems. But why me, "Who am the apple of God's eye - how come I get these problems!"

Inevitably we ask this question in one form or another, "If God loves me, why do I have problems?" Or putting it theologically, "Why does a just and loving God permit good Christians like us to experience difficulties and hard times?"

And putting it bluntly – "We are happy to accept and praise Him for the blessings, but fail to see that the problems are actually blessings in disguise!"

You see, we are accepting a false philosophy on life if we think that God takes us from the zoo of this world and puts us in His own zoo, to be admired by angels and envied by devils! Jesus said of us when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane as recorded by John in John 17:15 ff... **"I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one."** [John 17:15]

And, if God intends we stay in this old world until we are called up on roll call – then we need to understand that there is a purpose in Him leaving us in the world!

And we should be asking questions about that purpose rather than the question we normally ask in one form or another, "Why did this happen to me, I'm such a wonderful person!"

And while we spend our time analysing our situation and contemplating the perplexities, and allowing failure, resentment and self-pity to set in while we see our relationship with God strained because we think He has orchestrated the problems because He has some axe to grind on the wheels of our life!

We miss the purposes of God by a mile!

And we walk further into the bog by then saying, "God, what do you have against me?"

"God, don't you know that these problems are hindering me from doing your will?" [That's when we become spiritual!]

Now, just for a moment, put the question another way.

"If I really clean up my act, will God step in and bless me with solutions to all my problems and the wisdom to know how to head off every other problem in the future?"

"But, it's not fair," you cry.

"I'm such a wonderful person that nothing bad should ever happen to me!"

Get real!

The Bible clearly says that tests that come to us in life are common to all mankind. The hope we have is that God will make a way of escape so we can bear the burden in the heat of the day.

Forget about your ingrown toenail for a moment and look into an open casket – what can the world offer – nothing!

Hear the words of Jesus, **"let not your heart be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions - if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you unto myself that where I am, there you may be also!"**

There is no real hope for life after death outside of the historic Christian faith!

Let me pass on a word of wisdom to you – life is *not* fair!

And God is always right!

The problem is our reaction to the challenges of life!



Henri Charrière

Let me share the story of Henri Charrière who was known as "Papillon" the butterfly, because of a butterfly tattoo on his chest.

During the 1930s, Papillon was unjustly condemned to the French penal settlement of the Iles de Salut off the coast of French Guiana.

After eight years in solitary confinement and eight escape attempts, he was finally taken to Devil's Island - the same island where Captain Alfred Dreyfus had been exiled for four years at the turn of the century.

Everyone knew that it was impossible to escape from Devil's Island. In fact, few guards were needed because the gigantic waves crashing on the island would pound anyone to death on the rugged coastline.

But Papillon did escape from Devil's Island, after five years of imprisonment because he made an important discovery.

He learned one of the basic secrets of life – "that the very forces that some men see as imprisoning them could also be seen as a highway to freedom."

He saw opportunity whereas his other prisoners saw hopelessness.

He patiently observed the surf pounding on the rocky shore, particularly near a horse shoe shaped inlet where every seventh wave was something of a "super wave" which, after hitting the rocks, reacted violently, with its waters surging back against the incoming waves. He called the great wave "Lisette."

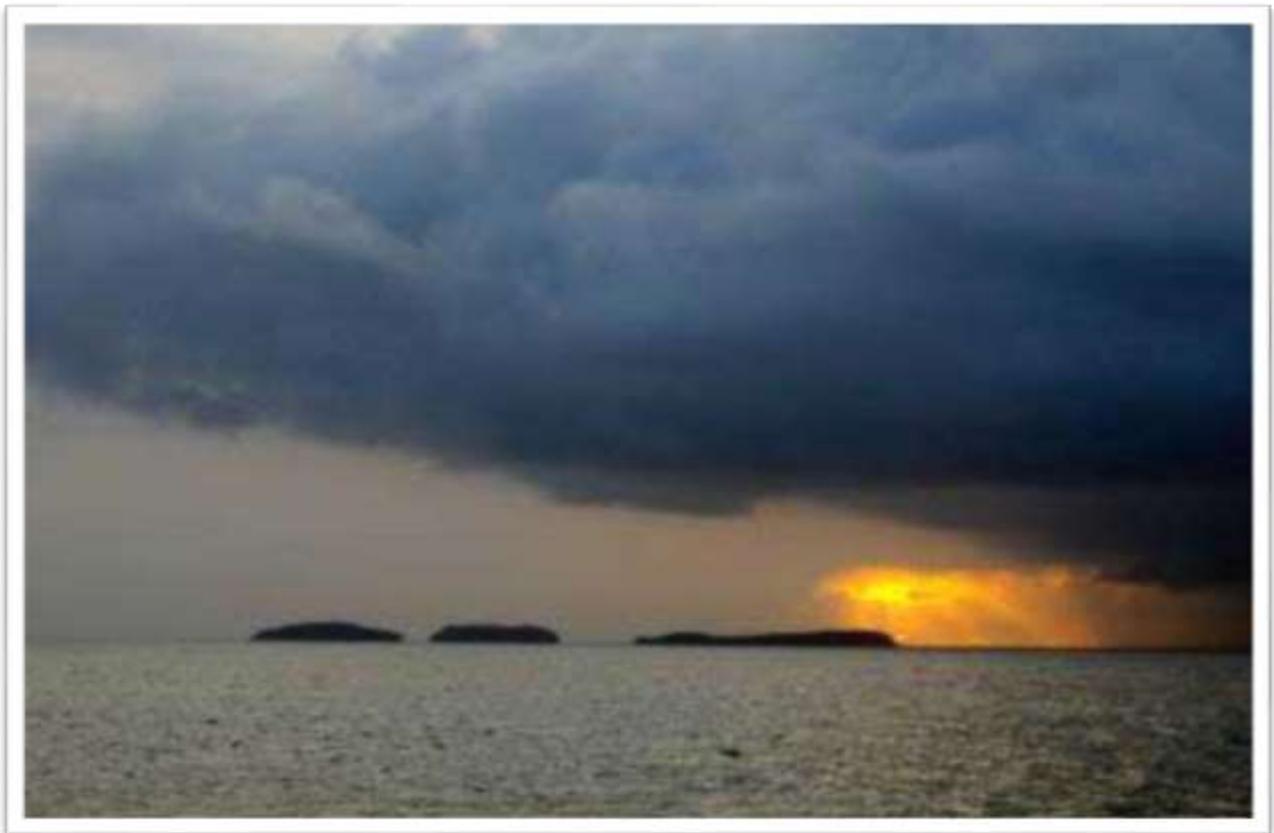
Papillon studied the currents and tides and with his two friends, Chang, a Chinese man imprisoned for piracy and murder and Silvain another robust prisoner planned their escape.

He takes up the story in his book [Henri Charrière, Papillon, translated by June P Wilson and Walter Michaels [New York: Pocket Books, 1971], pages 386-389.

"It was all set for Sunday at ten in the evening. There would be a full moon; hence a twenty five foot tide and Lisette... would be at full strength.

I would sleep all of Saturday and Sunday. Departure at ten - the tide would have started to ebb two hours before..."

They went to the top of the cliff and waited for Lisette...



Iles de Salut off the coast of French Guiana

She was on her way; Lisette was coming straight for us, standing up like the spire of a church. With her usual deafening roar she broke over our rocks and swept towards the cliff.

I threw myself in a fraction of a second before my buddy, but we were close together as Lisette sucked us out into the open sea with dizzy speed.

In less than five minutes we were over three hundred yards from shore...

Chang had scampered up to Dreyfus' beach, and holding a white rag in his hand, was waving a last goodbye.

Now we were a good five minutes beyond the dangerous area where the waves heading for Diable [Devil's Island] formed.

The night went smoothly. Then we felt a powerful change in the direction of the sea. The tide which had drawn us out had turned and was now pushing us back toward Grande Terre."

Papillon discovered... **"The very forces that some men see as imprisoning them can also be seen as a highway to freedom."**

The things that have the power to pressure us, also have the power to produce in us the opportunity to not only survive but escape from the prisons in which we find ourselves.

Allow me to share with you a different perspective on problems you may not have considered before:

I have read the story of many great men and women both in the Bible and out of it – and there's one thing I have noted that is common to them all --

Regardless of their station in life or their destiny or desire – I have made this outstanding discovery which has the power to change your perspective today –

THEY ALL HAD PROBLEMS!

And let me share another thing I have noticed in their life and yours –

They made the greatest discoveries about life because of those problems!

And that just about blows away every theological misconception we may ever have had written in our diaries.

And here are those different perspectives:

1. Problems don't happen without God's permission
2. Problems are a gift in God's providence
3. Problems are a sign we are alive in God's plans

1. PROBLEMS DON'T HAPPEN WITHOUT GOD'S PERMISSION

Now God gave to us the awesome gift of freedom, so we could choose to love, glorify and serve Him. Refusing to do that is perhaps the cause of most of our problems.

We live in a world fallen from God's original purpose and yet He never gives up on His creation.

He continually intervenes into our circumstances and I am sure, when "This is Your Life" is played on instant replay when we stand before His throne.

We will be amazed to see just how many times He, in love and mercy stepped in to our situations because He wanted to help us!

Problems are the line to which we come so often, which make us call out to God and prove his sovereignty in our lives.

Never forget that God is still sovereign in this world.

2. PROBLEMS ARE A GIFT IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Paul said to the Christians in Rome in Romans 8:28, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

God can make all things work together for our benefit as long as we love Him – and that presumes there is a relationship with Him and walk according to His purposes for our lives!

3. PROBLEMS ARE A SIGN WE ARE ALIVE IN GOD'S PLANS

Paul said to the Christians in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 10:13, "No temptation has overtaken you except such is as common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Problems come to all mankind – they show us that we are alive! That's why some people suicide – they try and remove themselves from the problems! It doesn't work!

I believe for every problem we encounter – there is a perfectly matched promise of God!

A uniquely suited promise for our problems!

And beyond all this – God never leaves us or forsakes us!

Let's turn to Judges 6 for a fine example of a man who illustrates what we are saying. And you know, there is a little bit of Gideon in each of us!

Look at his historical background – he knew he was a failure!

Gideon was in the winepress for fear of the Midianites. The angel said, "The Lord is with you – you mighty man of valour!"

"If God is with me, why do I still have problems?" might be the paraphrase of his response to the angelic visitor.

"Go in this thy might!" was the response he received.

God wants us to go out with Him and defeat our Midianite problems!

Let's do it!

VICTOR PLYMIRE



Victor and Grace Plymire

In the early Pentecostal missionary thrust into the world, a young man, Victor Plymire, and his wife went to the furthest borders of China, close to Tibet to take the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ to this unreached people.

They laboured there for 16 years without a convert and then God honoured their endeavours and they began to see a few converts and commenced an assembly.

After 19 years of labour, tragedy struck and Victor Plymire's wife and son both contracted smallpox and died within a week of each other.

He was shattered by this devastating experience and went to the local cemetery to buy a plot of land, but was told he could not bury his wife and child there because it was a burial ground for the Buddhists and that a Christian would desecrate the ground.

A DARK HOUR

Victor Plymire was then forced to buy a small plot of land outside the community in which he was labouring for Christ. On one dark dismal day, he went to the site and broke through with his pick and commenced to dig a grave.

Too exhausted to dig a second one, he buried both his wife and son in the one grave.

This man of God walked away from that scene, heavy in heart and wondering where was God in his hour of darkness. Despite the loss he continued on with his work in China.

Later, he remarried and built a small church in this isolated outpost. Finally, he was forced from China in 1949 when the Communists set up their government and, after a number of years in retirement, passed on to be with Jesus.

Victor Plymire never really understood why God took his first wife home in that isolated spot, but just went on faithfully doing the work to which God had called him and had some precious stars to lay at the feet of Jesus Christ in heaven.

SEEKING PROOF

The small church struggled on, mainly underground due to the property being confiscated in the Communist take-over. However, towards the end of the 1980s, the new openness to the West enabled the church leaders to come out more into the open and they laid claim on the Chinese government for the return of the church building.

At first, the local authorities resisted this request even though a more open policy to churches and return of properties to such bodies had been given approval by the national government in Beijing.

One of the requirements sought by the authorities was proof that a body of Christians had existed there and if this could be done, by some deed of trust or title, it would strengthen the case for the church's return.

Officials, of course, were well aware of the existence of the group of Christians for many years and needed no evidence. However they seemed to be doing everything possible to make it difficult for the church to regain its property.

One of the former Chinese missionaries began to go through the files of the AOG in Springfield, USA, to see if there were any title deeds for the property and, to his amazement, he came across a title for a block of land which had been bought by Victor Plymire and, incredibly, placed under the name of the Assemblies of God when he purchased land to bury his wife.

WHAT GOD FORESAW

The missionary wondered whether this could be proof which would be acceptable by the government.

Here was tangible evidence that land had been purchased by a missionary back in the 1920s and would prove conclusively that the church had existed.

So, armed with this information the church leaders once again approached the government and local officials.

On this occasion, faced with the evidence before them, they willingly returned the church to the believers in this remote village and today there is a thriving Assemblies of God church there for the glory of God.

The sovereign God of all the universe had seen the events of the church in the late '80s and 1990s and even though there are still some mysteries as to why such a high price was paid by the missionary back in the '20s, the fact is that even through that dark experience, God was able to bring forth victory to the church 60 years later.

You have problems?

Life is not fair?

You're right – it's not!

And God's not fair?

By whose knowledge, wisdom and judgment do you make that assumption?

Life is not fair!

But God is!

Fair can be changed by the addition of two letters – First, "take off "r" then add."th!"

The "R" stands for reaction the "TH" stands for trust Him! This is faith!

CHARLES "CHUCK" COLSON



Charles Colson

Charles Colson shared these thoughts in 2005 in these words.

"I am a product of the best in evangelicalism: converted 32 years ago in a flood of tears after hearing the gospel, disciplined by a strong prayer group, taught by great theologians.

I know the strength of evangelicalism in bringing people to an intimate relationship with Jesus.

But what happens when you have relied on this intimacy and the day comes when God seems distant? What happens in the dark night of the soul?

I found out this past year. Weeks after finishing *The Good Life*, my son Wendell was diagnosed with bone cancer. The operation to remove a malignant tumour took 10 hours – the longest day of my life. Wendell survived, but he's still in chemo.

I had barely caught my breath when my daughter, Emily, was diagnosed with melanoma. Back in the hospital, I again prayed fervently. Soon after, my wife, Patty, underwent major knee surgery. Where was my good life?

Exhausted from hospitals, two years of writing *The Good Life*, and an ugly situation with a disgruntled former employee, I found myself wrestling with the Prince of Darkness, who attacks us when we are weakest. I walked around at night, asking God why he would allow this. Alone, shaken, fearful, I longed for the closeness with God I had experienced even in the darkest days of prison.

An answer came in September. I was standing alone on the deck of a friend's home in North Carolina, overlooking the spectacular Smoky Mountains arising out of the mist. I was moved by the glory of God's creation. It's impossible not to know God as the Creator, I realized, for there is no other rational explanation for reality.

God *cannot* not be.

It struck me that I don't have to make sense of the agonies I bear or hear a clear answer. God is not a creature of my emotions or senses. God is God, the one who created me and takes responsibility for my children's destiny and mine. I can only cling to the certainty that he is and he has spoken.

I'm not sure how well the contemporary evangelical world prepares us for this struggle, which I suspect many evangelicals experience but fear to admit because of the expectations we create.

At such times, we can turn for strength to older and richer theological traditions probably unfamiliar to many – writings by saints who endured agonies both physical and spiritual.

TERESA OF AVILA

Teresa of Avila was a 16th century Spanish mystic and author of *The Interior Castle*. Teresa, who suffered from paralyzing illnesses, wrote, "For his Majesty can do nothing greater for us than grant us a life which is an imitation of that lived by his beloved Son. I feel certain, therefore, that these favours [sufferings] are given us to strengthen our weakness."



Teresa of Avila

ST JOHN OF THE CROSS



St. John of the Cross

John of the Cross, persecuted and thrown into prison, wrote the classic *The Dark Night of the Soul*. "O you souls who wish to go on with so much safety and consolation."

John wrote. "If you knew how pleasing to God is suffering and how much it helps in acquiring other good things, you would never seek consolation in anything, but you would rather look upon it as a great happiness to bear the Cross of the Lord."



Charles Spurgeon

CHARLES SPURGEON

In the evangelical heritage, we could draw on spiritual forerunners like the Puritans and Charles Spurgeon. "When thy God hides his face, say not that he has forgotten thee," Spurgeon once wrote.

"He is but tarrying a little while to make thee love him better, and when he cometh, thou shalt have joy in the Lord and shalt rejoice with joy unspeakable."

The point of these older traditions is that faith becomes strongest when we are without consolation and must walk into the darkness with complete abandon.

Faith isn't really faith if we can always rely on the still, small voice of God cheering us on.

A prominent pastor once told me he experienced the Holy Spirit's presence every moment. Contemporary evangelicals regard this as maturity. Perhaps it is – or maybe it is a form of presumption expressed in cliché.

True faith trusts even when every outward reality tells us there is no reason to.

I heard a man say years ago – "The facts ARE – BUT the truth IS!"

Sometimes we must look at the facts that surround us and weigh up the whole situation in the light of faith. Your circumstances may be screaming at you and their deafening roar is overwhelming everything that you see.

There are storms, heartaches, and gut-wrenching moments that have the potential to bring us into a life-changing crisis. What will we do then? Will we be prepared to face it? Will we have the inner resources that we need? And if not, then how can we prepare ourselves for that day?

The scene flashes into my mind as I write – it was the night of the storm on the Sea of Galilee.

“Immediately Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowd. After he had dismissed them, he went up on a mountainside by himself to pray. Later that night, he was there alone, and the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.” [Matthew 14:22-24]

The disciples weighed up Jesus’ instructions – “you go and I’ll disperse the crowd.”

Seems fair!

Not only did they leave Him, but He left them and climbed into the mountains surrounding the lake. He communes with His Father while the disciples row for their lives – for hours they struggle at the oars. The seasoned fishermen among them are somewhat at home in the storms as they had undoubtedly been in this situation before.

However, Andrew is possibly wondering why he left following John the Baptist. After all, John only walked in rivers.

Matthew, the tax-collector was possibly reconsidering his commitment to leave his lucrative business on solid ground to die in the storm. Bartholomew had second thoughts about leaving the tree he used to sit under. Most of them were out of their comfort zones.

Shortly before dawn Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake. When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. “It’s a ghost,” they said, and cried out in fear. [Matthew 14:25-26]

Tradition related that if people saw an apparition approaching it was often a sign of approaching death. This only fed their fears. Peter also experienced this on the Sea of Galilee as the waves of the storm tossed their cold spray on his body. The waves were high. He knew the water was deep and his position untenable – he would check this out this new possibility.

“But Jesus immediately said to them: “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”

They had heard His voice before, but the wind screaming through the mast ropes mixed with the screams coming from them only deafened them.

“Courage – did He say courage?”

“We need a life preserver – don’t put this trip back on us – You organised it – get us out of here!”

“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”

“Come,” he said. [Matthew 14:27-29]

Now it is personal – Peter takes up the challenge – he will prove to himself that it is indeed Jesus.

Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. He was heading in the only direction that could save him – towards Jesus! If he had taken a step in the other direction, he would have sunk immediately.

That’s the best direction I know.

All too often, when a crisis occurs we withdraw from Jesus, blame God and turn the other way.

We cry out, “How could God let this happen to me?”

We must not turn our personal calamities into weapons against God, claiming that either “God doesn’t love me” or “God does not even exist; because if He did, He would not allow this to happen to me.”

As I have considered the problem of pain and suffering, I see two distinct groups of people.

Men like Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Augustine, accepted pain and suffering as God’s “agents” to bring them closer to God.

However, many modern books on pain and suffering come to a different conclusion.

The authors assume that the “amount of evil and suffering in the world cannot be matched with the traditional view of a good and loving God.” Big God or Big problems – one has to be bigger than the other! Both cannot be right, surely?

As I read their conclusions side by side, the difference is remarkable.

In the twenty-first century, we think we have cornered the market on suffering and pain and our theological conclusions want to get it out of our lives.

Remember that these ancient luminaries lived in a miserable world where chloroform was a hard hit to the side of the head with a mallet and penicillin was unknown in a world when life expectancy averaged thirty plus years.

Today's modern authors, who live in significant comfort and work in an air-conditioned office while swallowing chemist remedies by the handful at the first snuffle are now the "experts" on pain and suffering and will not accept it in any form.

Let's keep it in context. In our self-absorbed world of comfort and ease we think something is wrong if our status quo is disturbed. We cannot take the remote control on our lives and "channel-surf" to a different station.

We must accept the fact that life might be dealing us a hard hand to play, but we must get through this storm.

The Sea of Galilee had dealt these disciples a huge challenge and Peter accepted the challenge. Sure he was usually impetuous and spoke before he thought – but in this case, he knew where safety was assured – with Jesus Christ!

And he stepped out of his comfort zone; not because others made him do it – but because the Lord called him to do so.

Returning to the storm, "But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, "Lord, save me!" [Matthew 14:30]

The normal focus is on Peter sinking!

But for those few moments, he was walking on the storm.

The thing which had the power to destroy him was under his feet and would stay there as long as his focus was on the Lord and not the storm.

In those faltering moments, "Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. "You of little faith," he said, "why did you doubt?" [Matthew 14:31]

While there was a risk associated with getting out of the boat, the risk was greater by staying in when the Lord had told him to go forward. Sure he sank but his prayer was heard. "Lord, save me!"

God is the God of second chances.

“And when they climbed into the boat, the wind died down. Then those who were in the boat worshiped him, saying, “Truly you are the Son of God.” [Matthew 14:32-33]

When we sink beneath the waves of despair while the winds are contrary, we are quick to quote our model Peter as our reason for sinking!

Let us not forget that although he sank temporarily – he did walk back to the boat on those waves!

As the theologian Michael Novak explains, true faith says, "Let this be done, Lord, according to your will" – even if we don't know what "this" is.

Evangelicals must rely on more than cheerful tunes, easy answers, and happy smiles. We must dig deeply into the historical church's treasures to find what it is like to worship God, not because of our circumstances, but in spite of them.

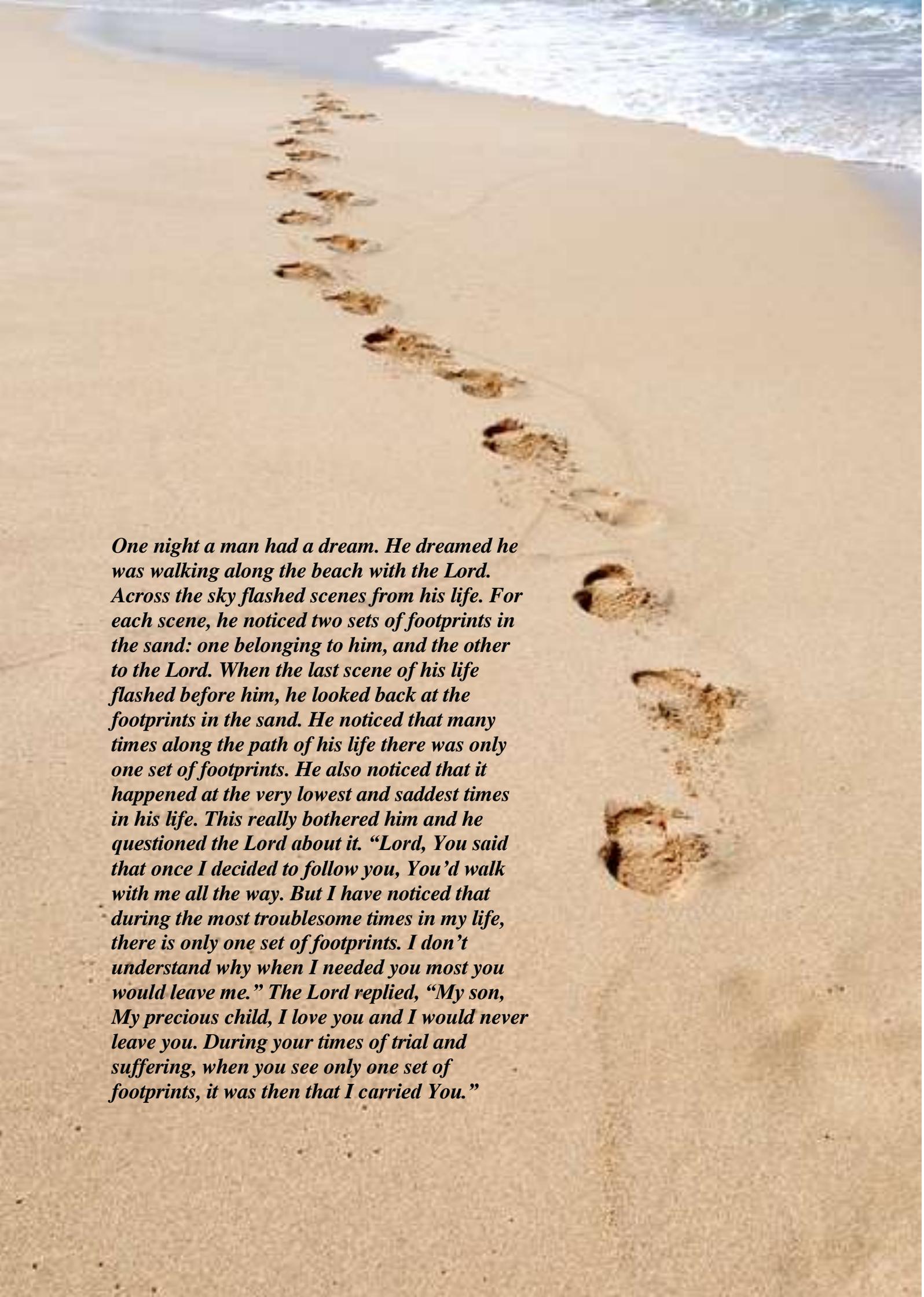
“My faith has deepened, said Chuck Colson. “Countless times over the years I've experienced God and his providence, but I've also known the dark night. God, I've realized, is not just the friend who takes my hand, but also the great, majestic Creator who reigns forever.” [My Soul's Dark Night by Charles Colson with Anne Morse; Christianity Today]



I wonder if Peter had this story in mind when he wrote, “Though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.” [1 Peter 1:6-7]

We can meet Jesus in new ways as we meet him in new crises and storms in life. We don't really understand who He is or the power He has until we see Him in action.

Hold on, until you see Him walking through your storms!



One night a man had a dream. He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord. Across the sky flashed scenes from his life. For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand: one belonging to him, and the other to the Lord. When the last scene of his life flashed before him, he looked back at the footprints in the sand. He noticed that many times along the path of his life there was only one set of footprints. He also noticed that it happened at the very lowest and saddest times in his life. This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it. "Lord, You said that once I decided to follow you, You'd walk with me all the way. But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times in my life, there is only one set of footprints. I don't understand why when I needed you most you would leave me." The Lord replied, "My son, My precious child, I love you and I would never leave you. During your times of trial and suffering, when you see only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried You."

COPYRIGHTS:

©Microsoft Images and Clip Art © Christianity Today; © If God Cares, Why Do I Still Have Problems, p17ff];© [Henri Charrière, Papillon, translated by June P Wilson and Walter Michaels [New York: Pocket Books, 1971], ©www.findagrave.com;© <http://www.yachtsentinel.co.uk>;© www.pe.ag.org/articles/©www.texemarrs.com; © Footprints, 1984 Mary Stevenson, from original 1936 text, All rights reserved "Scripture is taken from the AUTHORISED [KING JAMES] VERSION of the Bible; THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION ® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. The "NIV" and "New International Version" trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the permission of International Bible Society."

OTHER eBooks & DVDs AVAILABLE

From

