

Embracing Life As It Is (Rather Than The Way We Wish It Would Be)

Rich Nathan
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Home Improvement Series
Job 1 and 2

What we just heard from Connie and Randy Anderson really forms the back-drop of tonight's (today's) talk because, as many of you know, I have been doing a series on the family that I have called "Home Improvement," and I believe that a part of dealing with family life is having, at least, some answers for those times in life when things don't work out according to our plans. You know, most of life is pretty smooth sailing. But every so often, in our homes and in our own families, we get a shock to the system.

Part of the challenge of building strong families in the church for me, as a pastor, is to try to assist you to have enough of a grounding in the Christian faith so that you can weather various storms in life. A few weeks ago, I talked about the story of Jesus that Jesus told of building our houses on rock versus building our houses on the sand. And I questioned you about the foundation that you are building your home life on.

Now, I know what Randy and Connie shared with us is not what we all would prefer life to be like. We adults carry with us a lot of childhood fantasies about what life ought to be like. We try to make life a certain way, pretend that it is other than it is. We try to keep the waves away from our house and the wolves at bay. Every once in a while, we can't keep the pain out, but we try to. All of us do.

What are your preferences regarding what life ought to be like? Probably regarding people, you might like to prefer to believe that people are basically good and trustworthy. That all parents everywhere want to do the best things for their children. That people who exchange vows with each other before God and many witnesses on their wedding day will keep their vows. That the person we are married to or a friend of ours would indeed forsake all others. That they would stand by us for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer. That people would be like that.

We prefer to believe in a world populated by good, trustworthy, honorable people who keep their word. People who function rationally, who won't break into our houses or into our cars, who aren't interested in starting a fight with us over nothing. If we just give people a fair shake, they will return a fair shake to us. We'd also prefer that people's sins affect only them. That a person's alcoholism affects just them and not their kids. We'd prefer that a person's violent temper just hurt them; a husband who commits adultery would not be able to pass an STD to his innocent wife. We'd prefer that people's sins only affect them.

What do we want to believe regarding circumstance? I know my two favorite fantasies are: 1) That life will contain no surprises or shocks for me. 2)

That everything will go according to my plan. When I wake up in the morning, I am already planning the day out. My plan contains no accidents; no crisis; no unexpected intrusions. One of my favorite fantasies regarding life would be that nothing would break in to disturb my plan. How about you? Would you like the Lord to tell you on January 1st of the New Year, "Son, Daughter, this next year there will be no unexpected tragedies or any surprises that you didn't anticipate in your life. You get a 12-month pass, right to go, you collect \$200, a free trip around the board. And along the way, you are not going to land on anyone else's property. You are not going to go to jail." I would prefer life without any shocks at all. Without any phone calls in the night or unanticipated bad news.

And I also would prefer life to keep pain far from me and far from anyone I know. Oh, I am saddened by what I read in the newspaper, the floods and the deaths and the wars that are happening to other people, and my preference would be that that is the way it would remain. That all of this stuff would keep happening to other people that I don't know, that I don't love and that I am not in relationship with.

Yeah, I have fantasies regarding people and circumstances and God. I would like bad people to be immediately dealt with and punished for all the bad things they do. That wife abusers and child abusers would just not be able to laugh at the court system and lie about what they have done and hire high priced attorneys. I would like bad people to be immediately dealt with.

And I would like those who play according to the rules, who didn't cheat on the test, who studied hard and worked hard to get the very best jobs over against those who are well connected, promote themselves and lie on their resumes. I would like God right now to give good to those who do good and give bad to those who do bad.

Childhood fantasies. I'll bet you have lots and lots of those yourself. Life should be fair. Life should contain no surprises. Everyone I meet ought to be good. I ought to be able to control everything that happens to me and to my children.

I want you to turn with me to the book of Job because this is a book that shatters our fantasies about what life ought to be like. And the book calls us to embrace life as it is rather than, as we prefer it to be. If you want to understand the book of Job in the Bible, that is its central message. To embrace, to come to grips with life as it is, to come to a peace about that, a resolution, that this is the way life is rather than to continue to cling to life, as we want it to be, as we pretend it is.

Let's look at Job 1. The first five verses of the book of Job are a description of life as we wish it were continually. It says:

"In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil. He had seven sons and three daughters, and he owned seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred donkeys, and had a large number of servants. He was the greatest man among all the people of the East. His sons..."

I mean he has everything. The ideal life in the ancient world. A full number of sons and daughters, herds so large that they could hardly be counted. Servants galore. And he had so much wealth, prosperity, that his “sons used to take turns holding feasts in their homes, and they would invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. When a period of feasting had run its course, Job would send and have them purified.” Here is a man who didn’t use his wealth as a wall between he and God. He is the ideal man. He didn’t become proud or self-sufficient like Pharaoh in the Bible or Nebuchadnezzar or one of these ancient kings who said, “My hand has gotten me all of this. I am a self-made man.” He wasn’t arrogant in his use of wealth.

Instead it says, *“Early in the morning he would sacrifice a burnt offering for each of them thinking, ‘Perhaps my children have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.’ This was Job’s regular custom.”*

Always being honest with God. He had a regular habit of sacrificing for sin. Later on in the book of Job, he was not only right with God, but right horizontally. He used his wealth to be a benefactor for the poor. The ideal life. A great family, enough money that you could do what you want, but yet using money to help others, to not just consume, but to give, and a warm, open, honest relationship with God.

Anyone not want a life like that? Anyone not want a great family, plenty of money, lots of friends, a great relationship with God and a generous warm heart toward the poor and those in need?

Verses 6 - 8: *“One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the Lord, ‘From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.’*

“Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’”

And so this little contest arises where Satan says, *“Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face. The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’”* Verses 9 -12.

Verse 13 says: *“One day when Job’s sons and daughters were feasting and drinking wine at the oldest brother’s house, a messenger came to Job and said, ‘The oxen were plowing and the donkeys were grazing nearby, and the Sabeans attacked and carried them off. They put the servants to the sword and I am the only one who has escaped to tell you.’”*

There is a key phrase in verse 6 and 13 that you need to underline. “One day,” a day like every other day. Job probably woke up early in the morning to pray, to give thanks to God and to acknowledge God as the one who was the source for all that he had. It was a day just like every other day. Job had a plan in his mind for the day. But on that day, he lost everything. On that day, life did

not go according to Job's preferences or our fantasy. On that day, life was not predictable because on that day pain broke into his life and everything he owned was taken. On that day, his children died. The newspaper just this morning contained this very idea regarding the death of a young athlete from DeSales high school. Here is a direct quote from the article: "I got in around 12 or 12:30 a.m. It was a typical night. I heard Chris laughing with his girlfriend in the other room. I went to bed and the next thing I knew, she was yelling for help. Everything was normal until the night was shattered by the screams of someone saying, 'He's dead. He's dead.'"

On that day, everything that God had given Job was returned to the creator so that he summed up the day in verse 21 this way, those famous words: *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has now taken away. May the name of the Lord be praised."*

The Lord gave this life and now the Lord has taken it back. The Lord gave this money and now the Lord has taken it back. He gave me the job and he took it back. This wonderful spouse and now it is taken back. Now he or she is taken back. Job's life was like a car whose wheels suddenly got caught in a rut and was shook violently off the road down a cliff that he never planned on driving down.

I have a dear friend who has had more influence on my faith than any man on the face of this earth – John Wimber. John Wimber is the president of the Association of Vineyard Churches. He, up until recently, pastored a very large church in Anaheim, CA – 5,000-6,000 people. He started a movement of churches of which we are a part about 15 years ago. That little movement grew from 7 churches to 600 churches today, planting churches all over the world. God used John powerfully in bringing a message of renewal and healing to folks in many different countries.

Over the last five years, John's life has really been like the life of Job. He is a good upright man, loves God, has a warm relationship with the Lord, and is real honest about his faults, quick to try to make amends for his weaknesses as well as the weaknesses of his family.

Four or five years ago, it was a day just like any other day. John discovered he had cancer and he went in and had to go through a year or two of cancer treatments that were, as some of you have been through cancer treatments or have had loved ones go through those treatments, you know that the treatment is sometimes worse than the disease. After he had gone through all the treatments and all the pain of that, John gave his church away to one of his young associates. About a week after he gave the church away, John suffered a stroke that rendered him paralyzed for a period of time and caused him to be terribly weakened. And then once he began to regain strength from his stroke, his first son, Christopher, was diagnosed with inoperable melanoma, skin cancer. And they are predicting that Chris will die in the next six months.

You heard the story of the Andersons this morning, I have told you the story of Job and John Wimber. I will not go through the stories of many, many other good upright, faithful people who were just living life in warm relationship to God and man, when one day suddenly, without warning it all began to come

crashing down. I want to help you to be able to deal with those days. It's not every day that I am talking about. For some of you, you will listen to this message and you will say, "Ah, it has never happened to me. It has not happened to anyone I know." But others of you have been through this or you are wise enough to know that day is in your future.

Friends, God's Word, the Bible, has some incredibly relevant counsel that enables us to embrace life as it is rather than as we would prefer it to be. Let's pray and ask the Lord's presence here.

You know the Bible describes the days of shock, the days of surprise, as "walking through the valley of the shadow of death." Days when everything is dark and you are in the valley. 1 Corinthians 13 says, *"When I was a child, I talked like a child. I thought like a child and reasoned like a child. But when I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."*

What I am talking about with you, friends, today is getting rid of childhood fantasies about the way life ought to be. Having a more mature, more adult perspective on life. Paul goes on to say that not only did he put childish ways behind him, but he also recognizes that we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror. Then, when Jesus returns we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, but then I am going to know fully even as I am fully known.

You know, when you are walking through the valley of the shadow of death, it is so important to remember that what you see in the valley, what you feel in the valley, what you know in the valley is only a part of reality. It is not the whole thing.

Again, Job expresses the feelings of a person in the valley so well. If you turn with me to Job 7, Job says, *"Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a hired man? Like a slave longing for the evening shadows, or a hired man waiting eagerly for his wages, so I have been allotted months of futility, and nights of misery have been assigned to me."*

What is life like now that Job is suffering? Life is hard service. People are basically slaves. Look over to Job 14. *"Man born of woman is of few days and full of trouble. He springs up like a flower and withers away; like a fleeting shadow, he does not endure."*

Job is saying let me tell you what life is like. Life is all tragedy. Life is all pain. It is all bleak. There is nothing good. And you know I see this kind of valley thinking with those who are struggling with an area of sin or even in their relationship or family or marriage. Valley thinking is all disaster. Satan comes along and whispers in your ear, "Look at you, there is no change in your life since you became a Christian. You are just the same person as you always were. The promise of a new life and different life, the hope that you signed up for, and there is no hope. Look at your marriage, there is nothing good, no reason to stay together. It has always been entirely bad. Never any love or affection."

Somehow Job forgot that not every one of his days was full of trouble. He didn't always live like a slave. There were days of feasting and days of celebration. There were days of warm fellowship with God. Days when his sons and daughters would gather. Days when he would look out and see the herds and sheep and thank God for his blessings.

You know, it is important to remember that when you are going through the valley, you don't see the whole picture. Not all of life is a disaster and your whole life has not been a disaster. Your whole marriage was not a disaster. There was a time when you were in love, otherwise, you would not have married. What is it that you saw in that person? Why did you believe that your life would be better with her or him than without her or him? Start stirring those feelings back. When you are struggling with a sin, remember it is not as if there has been no change, you just can't see the person that you are becoming right now, all you can see is your sin.

The fact is the whole picture is not disaster. And the full picture is not all disclosed. Job thought he understood. He thought he saw the entire picture of reality. The fact is he was totally unaware of this conversation that was taking place in God's heavenly court between God and Satan. He was completely unaware of God's plan to use his life as a model for the next 4000 years of teaching people how to embrace life as it is rather than, as they would prefer it to be. He had no inkling regarding the fact that his story would be told millions of times, in hundreds of different languages. But he thought he knew.

We are like people who are standing on a beach looking through a telescope out on the horizon where we see a tiny boat. We focus on that boat and think that all of reality, the entire horizon is contained right there in our little telescopic lens. In fact, God has a wide-angle lens on his telescope. God sees the entire sweep. Not just this moment in time, not just this earth-bound existence, not just people in Columbus, Ohio, but also all of time and every single life. He sees it all. The problem is, he doesn't explain it all to us when we demand an explanation. There is something really frustrating about life and that is that God doesn't disclose all the cards that are in his hand.

And you know, friends, he never promises to in the Bible. Let me give you some verses in the Bible that will give you a much more real and a more truthful picture of who God says he is rather than whom we want God to be. If you think God is obligated to tell you what he knows, then you haven't read the book of Job and you are not aware of much of the rest of the Bible's teaching either.

Solomon wrote in Proverbs 25:2, *"It is the glory of God to conceal a matter."*

Isaiah 45:15 says, *"Truly, you are a God who hides himself."*

Deuteronomy 29:29 reads, *"The secret things belong to the Lord our God."*

Eccelesastes 11:5 says, *"As you do not know the path of the wind or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God the maker of all things."*

Romans 11:33 says that *"God's judgments are unsearchable and his ways are past finding out."*

It is simply the case that in this life, we really do know just in part. And God is not obligated to explain the part that we don't know.

The whole picture is not all disaster. The whole picture is not all disclosed. And you know, when you are in the valley, the whole picture is not all disconnected either. Along with not understanding, what makes the valley

experience so difficult is that we feel so alone and so disconnected from God and from everyone else.

Again, the book of Job puts it so well. If you will turn to Job 23 it says, *"Then Job replied, 'Even today my complaint is bitter. His hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him. If only I could go to his dwelling...[down to verse 8]...but if I go to the east, he is not there. If I go to the west, I don't find him. When he is at work in the north, I don't see him and when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him.'"*

I cannot find God when I am in the valley, Job is saying. I am completely left alone.

And the Psalmist in Psalm 102 echoes the feelings of Job. Here is a man who feels completely cut off; his is affliction. Completely alone. *"Hear my prayer, O Lord, let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ears to me when I call. Answer me quickly. For my days vanish like smoke. My bones burn like glowing embers. My heart is blighted and withered like grass. I forget to eat my food. Because of my loud groaning, I am reduced to skin and bones. I am like a desert owl. Like an owl among the ruins. I lie awake. I have become like a bird alone on a roof."*

One of the saddest verses in the Bible: *"I am like a desert owl. Like an owl among the ruins."* Just completely alone. Have you ever felt that? Totally isolated in your pain? No one understands. No one comprehends. No one is there. The full picture is not all disconnected, but that is what we feel.

You say, "Well, Rich, how do I begin to process through these feelings of disaster and disconnect? How can I not be afraid of life if life really does have those days when my plans totally fall apart and my career or my health is blown down like a house of cards?"

Let me suggest to you a process that all of us will probably go through in moving from a point of sitting alone like an owl in the desert to resolution and restoration with God, with life, family and friends. The starting point of most people's pain is condemnation regarding our own responsibility for the pain.

Friends, I don't think that you could talk to one parent in 50 who lost a child that didn't ask the question of themselves: What did we do to cause this? What did we do wrong? I don't think you could talk to one person who has cancer in fifty who didn't ask the question of themselves: Is this because of my sin? Because of this unresolved problem in my life? Because of this weakness? There are few people who have a day like Job's day who don't somehow have the thought that it is because of what I have done that I am now being judged and there are often people who will help you in that kind of thinking, like Job's friends. *"It's what you did wrong, it is because of your sin."*

Of course, there are times when we have been negligent. When because of our poor work habits or our attitudes or our failures, we get fired. There are times when because we haven't studied, we fail a test. Or because of our poor health habits we do suffer.

But you know, the book of Job is startling testimony to the notion that all of our suffering must be the result of our wrongdoing. God sends a thunderous "no" to that kind of thinking. Job was innocent. He was upright. There was nothing

wrong with him when his life blew down like a house of cards. And certainly, in relative terms, he was no worse than others. The people who are now in Hospice here in the city or who are going through cancer treatments are probably no worse than you or me.

But we experience this condemnation regarding our responsibility. And then a confusion regarding our religion, our theology. Many of our theologies cannot handle life as it is dealt to us. I thought God was supposed to be fair. I thought good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people. I thought the innocent shouldn't suffer. I thought God would always disclose himself and explain what is going on when I ask him for wisdom. I thought God answered prayer. I thought God promised that we would always be protected. Why would God permit something like this? Maybe God is not in control. Maybe God is not good. Maybe my professor in college was right and religion is just the opiate of the masses. Ah, how people struggle with their theology when we meet life as it is rather than, as we would prefer it to be.

You know, the book of Job, again, is an answer, a statement in 42 chapters, that all the convenient orthodox neat, and tidy little ways of trying to box up life and box up God, are inadequate. That there is always a part of life hanging over the side. That there are a bunch of loose strings that are not all neatly tied up. That everything is not wonderfully resolved like a ½ hour sitcom on television. I take the message of the book of Job to be a slap in the face of every self-righteous, self-appointed expert who believes they have all the answers for everyone's problems.

It is simply untrue that life is fair. It is not always fair. It is simply untrue that all of our prayers are answered with a "yes." Some are answered with a "no" and some are answered with a "not yet." That bad people get bad things done to them. They do not always get bad things done to them in this world. Some of the bads do escape in this life and many who are good do suffer. It is simply untrue that God does not permit harm to his little ones or that we are entirely protected. God does permit harm and we are not entirely protected from calamity.

Jesus' own disciples thought they had things lined up in John 9 when they met a blind man who was born blind. They had the orthodox theology when they asked Jesus, *"Who is it that sinned, him or his parents that he was born blind?"* Surely, we ought to be able to come up with a rational explanation for this tragedy. Jesus said, *"Neither one of them sinned."* This wasn't some deserved punishment. But sincere Christians are going to wrestle with their theology as they try to connect up what they have secretly believed about God with what their experience is.

And it is for this reason that we must deal with life as it is that I have totally rejected what is known as the prosperity theology that tells us that if we have enough faith and we are obedient enough and confess our sins that blessing and wealth and health will always follow in our paths. I am sorry, friends, that too is untrue. Yes, I know you can cite the Old Testament promises to that effect, but they don't form the whole of biblical revelation.

And whereas 90% of the Old Testament suggests some linkage between obedience and prosperity, 90% of the New Testament says there is no such linkage and that the godly in Christ will suffer.

I think the third step that someone goes through is the conviction regarding reality. Where a person in a mature way settles in their heart that life, indeed, is not fair. That God does not explain everything. That not every prayer is answered and that not all suffering is the direct result of our personal sin. That the world that we know is a mix of great joy and great tragedy, of wonderful beauty and profound ugliness. Of something that we understand and some things that we don't understand. Which leads, finally, to our choice about responses to pain.

You know, the initial shock of tragedy doesn't really give us the emotional space to choose. We are often just stunned and we often have to go through this sense of getting free from our own personal guilt from sin and our confusion about God and working through all of that. But somewhere down the line, a few weeks later, a month later, a few years later somewhere down the line we clearly see that we have a choice regarding our response to the tragic unusual events of life.

There is a pastor named Jim Conway who wrote a book along with his wife, Sally, called *Trusting God in Family Crisis*. He says there was discovered in his 15 year old daughter that she had a lump behind one of her knees. After several biopsies, the doctors informed Jim and Sally that their daughter Becky had a malignant tumor and that they would have to amputate her leg.

The church rallied around Jim and Sally and the family. They had a 24-hour prayer vigil. Many hundreds of people and their friends fasted and prayed and asked the Lord to heal his daughter. Jim said that he really believed that Becky was healed. In fact, on the morning of her surgery, he demanded that the doctors go in and recheck their work because he knew that God was going to come through.

Well, the doctor left and didn't come back for a while. Jim and Sally stood outside of the operating room, ½ an hour, an hour, and finally they realized a procedure must be going on in there. Something was wrong. Two hours passed. Three hours passed. Finally, the doctor came out and said that they had amputated Becky's leg.

Jim said he was crushed. He was absolutely shattered. In anger he began to punch the wall of the hospital and say, "Where are you, God? Why did you let this happen?"

He was in a state of shock and he said, "Maybe I could have dealt with it better if I had been a plumber and worked with pipes all day rather than as a pastor. Because I have to get up and teach people the Bible and tell them about God." "Maybe, if I was a liberal pastor," Jim said, "it would be easier. I could dismiss so much of the Bible, but I believe the Bible and I am committed to teaching it."

Of course, lots and lots of people came up with their little words of comfort: Cheer up. Romans 8:28 – Everything is going to work out for good. Someone came up and actually said to them, "Well, you know the story of your

daughter's amputation caused a revival to break out in our local church." He was so hurt. He thought, "Well, what is God going to do next? Cut off her other leg so that we can have another revival?"

But a dear trusted friend, several months after this incident, went out with Jim and put his arm around Jim and said, "Jim, you have a choice regarding your response. You can give up and sink into despair and self-pity. Or you can surrender yourself to God's will."

He said, "I saw it all so clearly that I could continue in my anger toward God and follow the path of despair that I was on or I could just allow God to be God and say somehow, 'I don't know how all of this fits together. I don't understand the reasons for it, but I am going to accept the fact that you are God and I am your servant rather than the other way around.'" He says, "Like Job, I am now able to say, *'Though he slay me, yet I will trust in him.'*"

It boils down to either despair or the acceptance of God's lordship and sovereignty. Despair or God, there is nothing in between. He says, "I have chosen to hold onto God."

Let me finish this up with four reasons to make a choice to hold on to God rather than give up to despair. The first statement is simply this: **God is there whether I feel him or not.**

In those reading guides that we mailed out to you at the beginning of the year, the Bible reading guides, you should have received one if you are part of this church. By the way, if you would like a Bible reading plan, you can just go to the bookstore and pick one up. They are free. But the first thing that the Bible teaches us from beginning to end is that God is there whether we feel his presence or not.

This past week's reading plan for the church involved the life of Joseph, a person who was rejected by his brothers, almost killed by his family, sold into slavery, finally ends up being unjustly accused by a woman of sexual harassment. This false charge lands him in jail. But there is a little line in the story of Joseph in Genesis 39 that is repeated over and over again. The line was the Lord was with Joseph.

Now, I am not sure that if you ask Joseph at the moment that he landed in jail if he was aware of God's presence, that he would have said "yes, my whole body is just tingling with a sense of God." But the Bible tells us that at all of these points of injustice and tragedy that the Lord was with Joseph.

Several years ago the radio psychologist, James Dobson, wrote a book called *Emotions, Can You Trust Them?* in which he works through quite well a basic conclusion that our emotions are not terribly reliable, dependable guides to reality. And I have talked to so many folks who would deny that God is with them because in a moment of crisis they don't feel his presence. It is at those times that we have to say, "No, the Bible is true whatever my emotional state. God is there whether I feel him or not."

And **God has a plan for my life** whether I understand it or not. I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Campus Crusade Four Spiritual Laws that began, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." God loves you and he has a wonderful plan for your life. Most of us would understand

the phrase “wonderful plan” along the lines of career advancement, healthy long life, a wonderful marriage and healthy, bright children who never get into problems or wander away from the faith.

Well, God does have a wonderful plan for your life, but that wonderful plan may look like his plan for Job’s life. God’s wonderful plan may involve a trip to the hospital, or the loss of a job. God had a wonderful plan for the life of Stephen in the book of Acts, who some of you know was martyred. And he had a wonderful plan for James whose head was cut off. And he had a wonderful plan for his son, Jesus, who was hung on a cross.

God does have a wonderful plan for your life. But you know, he isn’t necessarily going to explain his plan to you or me. And it may not seem very wonderful to us.

Let me give you a third reason to hold on to God rather than give into despair. **God loves me**, whether he answers my prayers or not. People say, “You know, God has abandoned me because I have been praying and praying about this point of heartache in my life, this lack of a job, this lack of financial relief, this lack of health, this pain in my body, but God is not answering my prayers, so he must not love me.

The fact is, is that every single human being will at some point experience a “no” as an answer to their prayers or a “not now”. It may be that God has said “yes” to you regarding a healing. It may be that you have personal knowledge of God as healer. He has healed a disease of yours. At some point, he will not heal you and you will die. Remember that all of the people that Jesus healed one day passed away.

You say, “Well, then, if God hasn’t answered my prayers up until now, what should I do?”

Keep praying. Luke 18:1 contains this verse: *“Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and never give up, but keep praying.”*

Philippians 4:6 says, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*

Colossians 4:2 says, *“Devote yourselves to prayer. Being watchful and thankful.”*

1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, *“Pray continually. Give thanks in all circumstances for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”*

1 Chronicles 16:11 says, *“Look to the Lord and his strength. Seek his face always.”*

Whether you get an answer now or not, you keep praying. That is the only sensible course to take until God finally says, “Stop. I am not going to do this thing.”

Let me mention one final statement: **God sent Jesus, will you trust him or not?**

You know, I have said this before but every time I teach on suffering, I am reminded of the fact that I could not deal with the magnitude of problems that people have, the pain that folks have experienced, the newspaper accounts of inexplicable sudden tragedies, I could not deal with all of it, if I did not believe in

God's personal experience of pain at the cross of Jesus Christ. I continually remind myself that God absolutely understands every bit of pain that every human being suffers. That the nails that went through the hands of Jesus went into the hands of God. It was God hanging there on the cross. That God understands loneliness, rejection and physical pain. He knows what it is like to be paralyzed and have your hands fixed in place so that you cannot move. He knows what quadriplegics feel like. He knows searing pain that just won't quit and thirst and hunger and all the rest.

I want to finish with a story that some of you have heard. Several years ago I was down in Florida attending a street fair. There was a preacher trying to speak to a small group that was gathered around. Most of the folks were watching a juggler. There was a fire-eater out on the street. This preacher had attracted a little group of about 6-7 listeners. I decided to support him and stand and listen.

There was an English woman in that little group who tried to interrupt the preacher several times to ask a question. And he kept telling her no, not now, wait a minute, wait a minute. She kept trying to interrupt. I could see that even though she was being impolite, she was quite sincere and really needed to have someone talk with her. But the preacher basically treated her as an interruption and she walked away into the crowd. I said at that moment, "O God, I would like to talk with that woman. If it is your will, let me meet her again."

I needed to go and get my children and went and fetched them. There was just a huge crowd on the pier; there must have been 10,000-15,000 people. I am walking with my children and holding their hands. I turned a corner and this woman just about hit me in the face. She just walked right up.

I said, "Excuse me, can I speak with you a moment? I saw you trying to talk with that preacher back there."

She just blurted out, "O yeah, you know what all those preachers are like. Blah, blah, blah."

I said, "Yeah, I know that. I know that."

I said, "Well, what was it that you wanted to ask him?"

She hesitated.

I said, "No, really. I am interested. What was it that you wanted to ask him?"

She said, "Well, I wanted to ask that preacher if God was real why did he let my 35 year old husband die of cancer? If God is real, why did he let my 35 year old husband die of cancer?"

I said, "I don't know why God let your husband die of cancer, but I do know this, he understands and you can trust him."

She got real red in the face and said, "O yeah? How does God understand what it is like to lose someone you love?"

I said, "God understands because he watched his Son, Jesus, die on a cross. He knows exactly what it feels like to lose someone you love. And he kept himself back from rescuing Jesus when he could have. You can trust him. He understands."

Let's pray.

