

# AFTER THE FALL

## Recovering Faith (after having the wind knocked out of you)

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Have you ever been hit in the solar plexus (or mid-section)? It causes the diaphragm muscle to spasm, expelling most of the air from the lungs, and also making it difficult to relax the muscle in order to draw the next breath. Pain from the blow, plus a stunning shock to one's body, plus the panic that results from the inability to breathe, make this a most uncomfortable condition. It is disabling.

### A Stunning Blow

Something similar happens emotionally, when we receive a blow from contrary circumstances or mean people. Pain, stunned emotions (shutting down or isolating), and panic (fear or anger taking over) are the results. Prayer is often disabled, God's presence seems "nowhere to be found," and reading the Bible for help feels like reading a medical textbook or a scientific journal (incomprehensible).

Perhaps you have experienced such a blow. The unexpected loss of a loved one, a financial reverse, a major personal rejection, a failed attempt to produce or provide. And if they come in series — one after another — it can leave you "gasping for air" and unable to function as before. We usually call it "depression."

You may feel disappointed about the past. You may be discouraged about the future. You may want to withdraw, or blame someone else. You wouldn't be the first; it's happened before.

Adam and Eve wanted to withdraw.

*Genesis 3:6* *The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. <sup>7</sup> At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they covered themselves with fig leaves.*

*<sup>8</sup> When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid themselves from the Lord God among the trees.*

They each wanted to blame someone else.

*Genesis 3:11* *[God asked,] "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?"*

*<sup>12</sup> The man replied, "It was the woman you gave me who gave me the fruit, and I ate it."*

*<sup>13</sup> Then the Lord God asked the woman, "What have you done?"*

*"The serpent deceived me," she replied. "That's why I ate it."*

### Bad Things Happen

Of course Adam and Eve *did something* to create their predicament, something that earned their shame and the consequences that followed. However, many good people experience heartache for no detectable reason. Sometimes, it is the misbehavior of someone else that creates the situation (as when we were rear-ended yesterday, while waiting at a stop light). Other times, there is no discernible "guilty party" at all (like when a tsunami strikes the beach where you are sunning, or the housing market dips just as you bring your home to market).

Denny's comment last week (about the man who said to a woman devastated by the loss of her home in the Southern California wildfires, "God let your house burn down because of sin in your life") reminded me of an email I received a couple of months ago. Referring to the church's construction project, the writer said, in part: "You can't possibly believe that it was the economy [that created this fiasco]. Bottom line is that this failure has to be owned by someone. There is always forgiveness after a failure if it is confessed. But there are only continued valleys for the prideful and arrogant."

I did not quote that to garner your sympathy, but to educate you. Some of you may have had similar thoughts (I myself did as I struggled to understand what we were experiencing!). Or, someone may have suggested something similar to you. It doesn't feel good (you want to tear up the email). It may have made you angry (you want to lash back at them). It took me days before I could write a response, and weeks more before I could finally edit and send it.

In the process, I remembered a story recorded by Luke.

*Luke 13:1 About this time Jesus was informed that Pilate had murdered some people from Galilee as they were offering sacrifices at the Temple. <sup>2</sup> "Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other people from Galilee?" Jesus asked. "Is that why they suffered?" <sup>3</sup> Not at all! And you will perish, too, unless you repent of your sins and turn to God. <sup>4</sup> And what about the eighteen people who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them? Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem?" <sup>5</sup> No, and I tell you again that unless you repent, you will perish, too."*

"Repent of what?" you might ask. Of the notion that bad things only come to those who deserve them.

The principle is simply this: Sometimes bad things happen to people who do not deserve them. Karma is not a Christian concept. Job asked, "Should we accept only good things from the hand of God and never anything bad?" And the narrator added, "So in all this, Job said *nothing wrong*."

But when bad things happen in spite of your efforts to do good, it shocks the system. Your emotions go haywire. Your thoughts get cloudy. You begin to isolate. You become irritable. Just getting through the "must do's" of your day requires concentration and strength that are now in short supply, and there's nothing left over at the end.

Is there any help for us? Can one really recover from such a shock to the spiritual system?

## **Grace Under Pressure**

I read the testimony of an evangelist who had suffered greatly (but kept pressing on) – (Paul to the Corinthians).

*<sup>2</sup> Corinthians 4:5–6 Remember, our Message is not about ourselves; we're proclaiming Jesus Christ, the Master. All we are is messengers, errand runners from Jesus for you. It started when God said, "Light up the darkness!" and our lives filled up with light as we saw and understood God in the face of Christ, all bright and beautiful.*

*<sup>7–12</sup> If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us. As it is, there's not much chance of that. You know for yourselves that we're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we're not demoralized; we're not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we've been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn't left our side; we've been thrown down, but we haven't broken. What they did to Jesus, they do to us—trial and torture, mockery and murder; what Jesus did among them, he does in us—he lives! Our lives are at constant risk for Jesus' sake, which makes Jesus' life all the more evident in us. While we're going through the worst, you're getting in on the best!*

<sup>13-15</sup> *We're not keeping this quiet, not on your life. Just like the psalmist who wrote, "I believed it, so I said it," we say what we believe. And what we believe is that the One who raised up the Master Jesus will just as certainly raise us up with you, alive. Every detail works to your advantage and to God's glory: more and more grace, more and more people, more and more praise!*

<sup>16-18</sup> *So we're not giving up. How could we! Even though on the outside it often looks like things are falling apart on us, on the inside, where God is making new life, not a day goes by without his unfolding grace. These hard times are small potatoes compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us. There's far more here than meets the eye. The things we see now are here today, gone tomorrow. But the things we can't see now will last forever. (The Message)*

*2 Corinthians 6:3 We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. <sup>4</sup> In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God. We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. <sup>5</sup> We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food. <sup>6</sup> We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love. <sup>7</sup> We faithfully preach the truth. God's power is working in us. We use the weapons of righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defense. <sup>8</sup> We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors. <sup>9</sup> We are ignored, even though we are well known. We live close to death, but we are still alive. We have been beaten, but we have not been killed. <sup>10</sup> Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything. (The Message)*

He makes seven good — vitally important — points. Listen to this!

### **1. Our message is not about ourselves.**

When we complain, our message *is* about ourselves. But this man found grace to keep his eyes on Jesus — saw God's hand in his circumstances (not causing them, but always available to help). And every circumstance became another opportunity for him to express his faith in Jesus.

### **2. We are unadorned clay pots.**

Any brightness or goodness or simple endurance comes from the Spirit of Jesus who lives within us. We would retreat, we would cover ourselves, we would blame others, we would lash back. Only Jesus prevents us from doing these things, and we lean on Him for that very purpose.

### **3. We're not keeping this quiet.**

Even difficult circumstances will not keep us from talking about Jesus and what He's done for us. That's just what the devil would want, and we won't let him win! By God's help we will turn our bitter circumstances into a refreshing drink of life-giving water for someone else.

### **4. We're not giving up.**

Faith is too precious to toss aside or to let it be buried. We will hold on to Jesus and trust Him, no matter what! He can turn our "mourning into dancing." He puts "a new song in our mouths." We'll be faithful today, and rejoice tomorrow.

### **5. We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us.**

Someone is looking to you. Your life impacts other people. Retreat, if you need to, to get refreshed, but don't isolate. When you turn out your light, others' lives become darker, too. Be a light for them to follow.

## **6. We prove ourselves.**

Check it out: Are you still keeping yourself pure? Don't cast off self-restraint. Are you seeking understanding from the Scriptures (not of the causes of your difficulty, so much as the best responses to it)? God's Word is the source of real and practical understanding. Are you practicing patience? It will be tested and it will be difficult — that's why it's called "practice." Are you maintaining kindness, in spite of your trouble? Nothing shines as brightly as the kindness that is difficult to offer. Is your love sincere? There is no greater evidence of the Spirit's work within us.

## **7. We serve God, whether or not.**

God is not evil, cannot be tempted with evil, does not plan evil. He will be good to you when others are mad at you. He forgives when you do wrong. And what the evil one plans to harm you, God turns to your good.

## **How to Move On**

How can you overcome the heartaches that you meet in life? How can you have a similar testimony? Here are four prescriptions to get your spirit back on top:

### **1. Step away from your emotions; step toward the Lord.**

(This may require help. If so, get it!) Don't ask God for vengeance, *or even for a miracle at this point*, but ask God to restore your sense of peace and equilibrium. He can do this even while life-circumstances are still reeling, but you may have to keep retreating to His presence. Do this as often as necessary!

### **2. Remember who your real enemy is (the devil).**

Paul said, "*We are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places*" (Ephesians 6:12) If you struggle with people, it is like fighting a shadow opponent. Our real enemy is behind the scenes. It is *his* intention "only to steal, kill, and destroy" (first your peace and joy, then your faith and hope). Don't let him take them! Ask Jesus to fight him for you.

### **3. Remember the Lord.**

God is not like people who lie or break their promises. Hasn't He shown His faithfulness in your experience before? His providence is superior to the devil's traps. No matter what the circumstances, His grace is sufficient — to change your situation or to keep you through it. "*We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them*" (Romans 8:29).

### **4. Get "back on the horse."**

Practice trusting God again. Don't wallow in skepticism or unbelief. Intentionally find a way to step out in faith (usually something you have done before, which now seems more difficult). Best choice would be to do again the very thing that ended in heartache. Announce to God, to the people around you, and to the tempter himself, "I will die trying before I try dying!" The refrain of an old Pentecostal hymn chanted, "I would not be denied! 'Til Jesus came and rescued me, I would not be denied."

## **Others Like You and Me**

Many are the examples in Scripture of those who suffered — some justly, others unjustly — while they sought to follow the Lord.

Abraham was promised descendants beyond number, yet he and his wife were old and had been unable to bear children. So, he tried to help God accomplish His will, only complicating his life immeasurably. In the end God pulled it off miraculously, just as He promised.

Joseph dreamed of greatness, which only made his brothers mad... so mad that they bound him and sold him to slave traders. He ended up as a servant to the ruler of Egypt, where he was falsely accused by the queen and thrown into prison. There he made two friends who promised to promote his release, but they forgot about him. Finally, by the supernatural power God gave him to interpret dreams he was released and became the second in command of the empire of Egypt, to the saving of his entire family from famine.

David was chosen by God to be king of Israel, but had to wait his turn, because the people preferred Saul. Saul felt threatened by young David and tried to kill him. When he finally became the king, David let his appetite get the better of him and seduced Bathsheba and had her husband killed so he could marry her. Their son died, and there was trouble in David's house from that time forward. Yet, despite his failures, David had such a worshipful heart that he arranged 24/7 worship in Jerusalem to honor the Lord, and God said, "David is a man after my own heart."

Peter denied knowing the Lord Jesus to protect himself. Weeping bitterly over his disgraceful behavior, he thought he had failed completely. But Jesus said, "Tell Peter to meet me in Galilee" with the other disciples after His resurrection, and He made Peter a foundation stone of the Church.

Paul was once a destroyer of Christians, yet the mercy of God captured his heart and he became the Church's most prominent missionary evangelist and spokesman. And, as we have read today, difficulties and mistreatment could not dissuade him from his course of faithful service.

All of these examples (and so many more) lead us to the inevitable conclusion that the grace of God is more than enough for us, if we will let Him lift us from where we have fallen and let Him minister to us during difficult times.

Our part is simply to believe and obey.

You see, there is something you have to *believe* in order to have peace restored to your heart once it has been lost or stolen. It is not enough to simply be in need. There is a *step of faith* you need to take to get back on top. What is it? Only *God* can tell you. And only *you* can take it.

God *will* tell you, if you sincerely ask Him, fully intending to respond to what He says.

And when you *take* that step, His power, like a wave nearing the shore, will carry you forward.

What is the step you need to take today? Ask the Lord to show you, and purpose to move in that direction today. God will meet you there.