

Introduction

A sober reality in the life of faith is that “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22b). In these ordeals God’s people are buffeted in two ways: sometimes we suffer *for the faith* and other times we suffer *with* faith. Either way, our faith remains a work in progress. In the midst of troubles, our emotions can oscillate between hope and despair, our wills vacillate between submission and rebellion, and our understanding alternates between moments of comprehension and times of total confusion.

Right here, “Houston, we have a problem.” Whenever faith is in the grinder, it may *seem* that God is not living up to his billing or performing as advertised. In times of distress, especially periods of prolonged suffering, his character may not *seem* to us to measure up to his biblical résumé.

So how do we keep the faith, sunny side up, in the face of this maddening mystery side of God? And how can we “recommend” a walk with God when, frankly, he *seems* to have abandoned us to wallow in our pain, to have shut his ears to our pleas, and to have heartlessly left the scene of the

accident? What is an *honest* saint to do when God appears either indifferent or impotent?

This book confronts these issues head-on and offers believers in despair biblical perspective and practical direction that should reinvigorate the spirit of all who will regularly heed and apply them. It is about walking with God in times of trouble, about being tested to our socks, about what to do when extreme pressure threatens our very faith. And for illustrative purposes, it is about the multi-layered afflictions of a young woman, my younger daughter, and her devoted husband, who have faced it all (and then some) as a baffling, mind-boggling illness hijacked their youth and shattered their dreams.

A friend reminded me of that small figurine depicting a man sitting under a tree branch, looking up at a bird, which is about to do that dirty little deed all birds do. If you have ever felt like that fellow about to get dumped on, then this book is for you. When life circumstances make you want to say, as this ill-positioned victim does, “Go ahead, everybody else does,” then this story will resonate with you.

This book aims to provide you with spiritual perspective and insight in suffering that will lift you above the destructive forces of adversity and help your faith survive any pounding on the anvil of tough circumstances. Equally important, whether you are physically ill or spiritually debilitated, burned-out, burned up, depressed, or distressed, this volume about faith under fire will arm you with a thoroughly biblical and absolutely critical coping strategy that I call “polishing God’s monuments.”

Now here is a caution. Our message and its interwoven story are for serious-minded Christians (that ought to be a redundancy!) on such intimate terms with serious pain and suffering that they sometimes feel like pulling out their hair, if not throwing in the towel.

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The message unfolds between edited pastoral letters, mostly written to my congregation during some of the worst of our agony, recounting for them limited details of our plight, as well as insights we have gained—the light of God’s Word illuminating harsh circumstances.

The first letter begins five years into Paul and Juli’s illness, which was near the beginning of my ministry at Lake Bible Church. In a few cases the original letters were expanded to give you, the reader, the same context the first recipients had, and in other instances they were condensed. However, the intent, names, and events have remained unchanged.