

# GOD IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK

## *Making A Way When There Seems To Be No Way*

### Philippians 4:12-13

Created by *Dale Obmair*

Big Idea: *When the problems we face are more than we can handle, God is still near to make a way for us.*

From the moment he got up in the morning, nothing went right for Alexander. He had gum stuck in his hair, his brothers got all the prizes in the breakfast cereal, the teacher criticized him all day long, his mom forgot to put a dessert in his lunch...his whole day was one disappointment after another. That is the plot of the children's book entitled, *Alexander And The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*. His experiences made Alexander want to run away to Australia, until his folks reminded him that they have bad days in Australia, too!

What is your definition of a terrible, horrible, very bad day? I guess, for adults, the idea of a "very bad day" sounds kind of appealing because most of our bad times aren't confined to just a day, are they. Like that guy I talked to one time who told me that he had been having a bad day for about five years! Now that I think about it, I think he had an Australian accent.

What is it that makes Alexander's story so amusing to us? Why do we laugh at the miscues of the characters in our favorite sitcom? What is so funny about the movie *The Pacifier*, where Vin Diesel plays the role of a highly trained, elite Navy Seal who is assigned to watch out for five out-of-control kids? Perhaps the reason is that we can identify with the problems they are facing.

But it isn't funny when it happens to us, is it. We don't laugh when we get gum stuck in our hair...or when we are in crowded circumstances...or when people criticize us for singing too loud or missing 16. We don't laugh when the dentist finds a cavity or when we fall into the mud. When those things happen, our natural response is to say...well, we'll keep the language rated G here in church. When we get hit with another problem, our natural response is, "Why me, Lord?"

That question is rooted in an idea that is deeply ingrained in the human mindset. Ancient cultures believed that problems were a punishment from God, and that the severity of the problem was determined by the seriousness of the sin. We might not say it in so many words, but I think we still have that unconscious feeling. So when our lives get hit with a problem, we start looking for a reason. Where have we gone wrong?

### ***Problems are not always PUNISHMENT from God***

Of course, God does punish us. Actually, I would rather say that God *disciplines* us.

### **Psalm 32:3-4**

<sup>3</sup> *When I refused to confess my sin, I was weak and miserable, and I groaned all day long.* <sup>4</sup> *Day and night your hand of discipline was heavy on me. My strength evaporated like water in the summer heat.* (NLT<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> Scriptures marked NLT are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation copyright © 1996 by Tyndale Charitable Trust. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers.

## Hebrews 12:7-10

<sup>7</sup>Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? <sup>8</sup>If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. <sup>9</sup>Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! <sup>10</sup>Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. (NIV<sup>2</sup>)

In my opinion, **punishment** and **discipline** are not the same thing. According to *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language*<sup>3</sup>, **punishment** is “a penalty imposed for wrongdoing.” It’s like I’m angry and I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done. It’s about doing something that makes me feel better about the situation. Is that the idea of the verses we’ve just read? Does God send problems into our lives so that He will feel better about the situation? I don’t think so.

Here’s what Jesus Christ had to say about the question.

## John 9:1-3

<sup>1</sup>As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man who had been blind from birth. <sup>2</sup>“Teacher,” his disciples asked him, “why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?”

<sup>3</sup>“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins,” Jesus answered. “He was born blind so the power of God could be seen in him....” (NLT)

See that? The circumstances of the man who was born blind gave God a stage to do something that would show people what He is all about. It was an opportunity for God to express His grace toward the man. It was a chance for God to show people that He is not limited by the malfunctions of nature. And do you get the wordplay? “He was BORN BLIND so the power of God COULD BE SEEN in him....” What a powerful statement! Someone asked Helen Keller, the phenomenal woman who was both blind and deaf from infancy, if there was anything worse than being born blind. She said that it was worse to be a person with sight and no vision.<sup>4</sup> The man in **John 9** gave Jesus the opportunity to distribute a bit of spiritual vision by giving sight to the blind.

What God does in our lives is more about discipline than punishment. **Discipline** is “training expected to produce a specific character or pattern of behavior, especially training that produces moral or mental improvement.”<sup>5</sup> It may involve punishment, but there is an end in mind. It is intended for our good. And that brings me to another vital thought about problems...

## ***Problems reveal the TRUTH about us***

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<sup>3</sup> *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Copyright © 2000 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Published by Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

<sup>4</sup> Stu Weber. *Tender Warrior*. Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, copyright © 1993, 1999, page 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

Back in September, I decided to fix some water damage on the front of my house. So I recruited my good ole buddy, Dan and we started to work. We thought it would be a simple job to replace a couple of square feet of siding. All I can say is, ignorance is bliss, and my bliss evaporated with just a few strokes of the hammer. The more we took apart, the more the truth was revealed. Underneath the siding, in the huge piece of wood framing the flooring of my daughters' bedrooms, we found tracks and grooves that had been eaten away by termites. I took a screwdriver and intended to tap on the side of the wood to see how solid it sounded. The tip of the screwdriver disappeared all the way up to the handle. The wood was just a collection of splinters.

As much as I hated the experience and the expense that came with it, I am so glad that I learned the truth. Think what might have happened if that water damage had never appeared on the house. We might have continued on until one day the entire front of the house would have fallen into the driveway.

That is the value of problems in life. Most of us work very hard on the exterior of our lives. We want to look good to the general public. How many times have you seen the true measure of a person by studying their public image?

Do you remember the name of the man I talked about last week? Job lived in Old Testament days and suffered the loss of his property, the death of all ten of his children and ultimately the loss of his health. Would you like to know what initiated that cascade of catastrophe? Somewhere in the cosmic realms, God was having a conversation with Satan.

#### **Job 1:8-11**

<sup>8</sup>*GOD said to Satan, "Have you noticed my friend Job? There's no one quite like him-- honest and true to his word, totally devoted to God and hating evil."*

<sup>9</sup>*Satan retorted, "So do you think Job does all that out of the sheer goodness of his heart?"* <sup>10</sup>*Why, no one ever had it so good! You pamper him like a pet, make sure nothing bad ever happens to him or his family or his possessions, bless everything he does--he can't lose!*

<sup>11</sup>*"But what do you think would happen if you reached down and took away everything that is his? He'd curse you right to your face, that's what."* (MSG<sup>6</sup>)

In essence, what Satan is saying is that Job is nothing more than a "fair weather friend"...a "what have you done for me lately" worshipper. There isn't anything impressive about a guy who worships a God who has granted him riches and kept him from every trouble. Stop babying him...let him face some real hardship...and his true character will show through. And since God knew the true character of Job already, and knew that Job could pass the test, He let Satan attack Job.

What truth are your problems revealing about you? What are you learning about your faith? Are you discovering that up until now you're idea of God has been some type of heavenly Santa Claus? Or are you truly committed to Him...committed to holding on, no matter how rough the storms of troubles gets...committed to holding on even though you can't understand why He would allow you to suffer this way, and you're angry with Him about it...committed to holding on because you trust that in the end, He will lead you in the right way and do something in the process that is better than you could ever imagine?

In fact, perhaps the problems are a type of leading. In other words...

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<sup>6</sup> All scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *The Message*. Copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002 by [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

## ***Problems may be God's way of giving us DIRECTION***

In the early days of church history, a group of men were traveling from town to town and region to region telling people about Jesus Christ. Their leader was Paul, the man who wrote much of what we call the New Testament. They came to a point in their journey that is described in the Bible with a maddening lack of detail.

### **Acts 16:6-7**

*<sup>6</sup>Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. <sup>7</sup>When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. (NIV)*

Every time I read those verses, I want to grab the author by the shoulders, shake him and demand to know, "What did that look like? How did they know that the Holy Spirit was keeping them from preaching in Asia? How did they know that the Spirit of Jesus was not allowing them to enter Bithynia?" I don't know why God chose to be so ambiguous in the record of these events, but He did. So we're left to use our own imaginations, except to say that they were thoroughly convinced that God was directing their steps.

Let's agree on the same thing here today. And if God is directing our steps, and if God is intimately involved in our circumstances, that it must also be that the problems we face together and individually are there at least in part to help us know which direction to go.

In the Old Testament, a young man named Joseph could see it. Kidnapped away from his father as a teenager, dragged away to a foreign country to serve as a slave, falsely accused and imprisoned, he ultimately became the second most powerful man in the world. And then one day came the opportunity to take revenge on his kidnappers. Instead, listen to what he says...

### **Genesis 50:20**

*<sup>20</sup>You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (NIV)*

In the New Testament, Paul could see it. Over the course of his ministry, a burning desire began to grow in his heart...to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to the most powerful city and the most powerful people in the world. He wanted to preach in Rome. But his visit there seemed to always be delayed. And then he was arrested. How could a man in jail ever get a chance to preach in the capital of the world? But Paul knew how to take his circumstances. From his jail cell, he wrote...

### **Philippians 4:12-13**

*<sup>12</sup>I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. <sup>13</sup>I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (NIV)*

Like me, you have probably heard verse thirteen quoted by people who are trying to win some great victory or accomplish some great achievement. But the real meaning goes beyond that. Paul is saying something very profound. I can endure anything with the power of Christ...I can live with any circumstance and be content...I can persist through every problem and be at peace...I can trust that in every situation, God is at work accomplishing His purpose in this world and in my life.

Can you say that today? Would you like to? Your sense of direction doesn't have to be derailed every time a new problem raises its head. You don't have to handle your burdens in this life alone. God wants to develop an intimate relationship with you that will carry you through every difficulty this world could ever throw your way. He's done His part. What steps do you need to take for that relationship to be possible?

God hath not promised; Skies always blue,  
Flower-strewn pathways all our lives through;  
God hath not promised sun without rain,  
Joy without sorrow; Peace without pain.  
But God has promised strength for the day,  
Rest for the Labor, light for the way,  
Grace for the trials, help from above,  
Unfailing sympathy, and undying love.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Copied from HomileticsOnline.com, "Seeing the Elephant/Hearing the Owl." Article prepared for **2 Samuel 18:24-33**, 8/18/1991.