



The Incredible
Journey

FINDING STRENGTH

IN THE MIDST OF

pain

GARY KENT

FINDING STRENGTH IN THE MIDST OF PAIN

Have you ever wondered what you would do if everything you own, everything you've built, was suddenly taken away; if one disaster after another left you with nothing, absolutely no possessions?

Read about this remarkable story of survival.

He was the most prosperous landowner in the entire area. He'd slowly built his stocks of sheep and cattle into a big enterprise which employed many people.

This godly man who had been richly blessed was enjoying the good life with his large family until the terrible day that the sky seemed to fall in on him. One inexplicable disaster followed another.

First, a band of outlaws swept down on his herd of cattle and drove them off, killing all but one of the men tending them. In shock, the servant ran to his master to recount the horrifying story.

The landowner was still trying to deal with this terrible news, when he got word of another tragedy. His entire herd of sheep had been consumed in a bushfire. The fire had ignited so suddenly and so violently that the flames seemed to have come down from heaven.

How could a lifetime of work disappear, just like that?

But there was more bad news. A messenger came hurrying up to tell him that his children were all dead.

How could that be?

It turned out that all seven sons and three daughters had been enjoying a meal together in the eldest son's house. Suddenly, a fierce windstorm had swept in, striking the house with the force of a tornado. All the walls just exploded inward and the whole house collapsed. Everyone inside was crushed.

This was the worst news of all, and the landowner tore his clothes and collapsed to the ground, overwhelmed. There was nothing left. Everything had been taken away. It was really too much to grasp.

But amazingly enough, the tragedy hadn't yet run its course. It seemed he had nothing left to lose; his life was now an empty shell. But that emotional pain and emptiness would soon be filled with physical pain.

In the midst of his shock and sorrow, the landowner developed a terrible skin disease. Boils broke out all over his body, covering him from head to foot. He tried to scrape at them, to remove the pus that kept building up. But there was no escape from the pain.

Tragedy piled on tragedy. Emptiness and pain. What would you do in a situation like that? How would you respond?

The landowner's wife offered her solution. We find it in the book of Job in the Bible. This isn't some tall tale from the wild west. It comes to us from a man who lived long ago in Uz, east of the Jordan River. Job was the landowner, a godly man who had been terribly afflicted.

The Bible records the advice he received from his wife: *"Do you still hold to your integrity? Curse God and die!"* (Job 2:9).

It seems a cruel thing to say. But Job's wife had given up hope. She had lost everything, too, including all her children. Perhaps she herself wanted to die. It was the only escape from misery that she saw for her husband, as well: Curse God and die!

That is often our instinctive reaction when tragedy overwhelms us, or when extreme pain assaults us. We want to get away from it as quickly as possible, by whatever means.

In other words, just end the pain. Do whatever you have to do to end the pain.

People looking on from the sidelines might have other advice to give. In fact, the book of Job records that he did indeed receive a great deal of advice from three of his friends. Their speeches fill up most of the forty-two chapters of the book of Job.

However, people on the outside don't necessarily know what it's like to suffer. They may not have felt the extremes of pain. They may not have experienced the total emptiness of devastating loss, and then have had that emptiness fill with physical pain.

What can you do when pain seems to drown out everything else? Whether physical or emotional, how can you cope with misery so extreme that you wish for the escape of death?

One person who suffered such acute pain was a lady named Ellen. Ellen had served God all her life. In the late eighteen hundreds, just before her sixty-fourth birthday, she had left the United States to travel to Australia to assist with establishing a Bible school. Only a few months later, she found herself stricken with fever and inflammatory arthritis. The pain was so severe that Ellen could scarcely move.

Ellen began to question whether it had really been God's will for her to leave America to come to such a remote place. As she carefully reviewed the past months, however, she became convinced that God's hand had guided her. Despite the pain, described by Ellen as the "most terrible suffering" of her whole life, she continued to trust in God.¹ As she prayed, promises from God's word flooded into her mind that were a source of comfort in her agony.

For eleven months, the excruciating pain continued. Much of the work that Ellen had hoped to accomplish during this time had to be given up. She became so ill that she could scarcely walk. After a few months, speaking presentations had to be given from a chair. A few weeks later, she was unable

¹ *White, 1893, Manuscript 75, as cited in White, A. L. (1983). Ellen G. White: Vol. 4. The Australian Years, 1891-1900. Washington, DC: Review and Herald, p. 31.*

to speak publicly at all. She could write, though not without pain. Determination enabled Ellen to pen two and a half thousand pages for publication during this time.

Despite the intense pain, and the threat that she would never walk again, Ellen wrote, "In all this there was a cheerful side...These months of suffering were the happiest months of my life...I am so thankful that I had this experience, because I am better acquainted with my precious Lord and Saviour."²

Often we expect that God will work an instant miracle to free us from pain. Sometimes, however, the miracle that God needs to work is in our character. In the book of Joshua, God promises us the courage to face each challenge, no matter how severe:

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be

² *Ibid*, p. 32.

afraid, nor be dismayed: for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:9).

In the midst of her pain, Ellen found inner healing and a deeper intimacy with Christ. Her determination to trust God enabled her to gain victory from what seemed like cruel defeat. Her strength and courage grew.

Ellen's experience is not an isolated case. The miracle of character transformation that God worked in her life is one that He wants to work in every heart. David compares God's children to "*stones polished after the similitude of a palace*" (Psalm 144:12). The very fact that we are going through "*fiery trials*" is evidence that God sees something valuable in us that He is working to refine (1 Peter 4:12).

The polishing process is painful, but ultimately, when the trial is over, we will "*come forth as gold*" (Job 23:10).

The story of Job illustrates another facet of the trials we face in this world. Not only can trials bring us closer to Christ, but the trials we suffer are part of a bigger picture: a war between good and evil that is playing out on our planet. Job didn't realise the significance of his actions; he didn't realise that his faithfulness to God during that time of crisis provided the necessary response to accusations against the character of God before the watching universe (Job 1:6-2:10).

If we lose sight of this cosmic view, and choose instead to focus solely on our personal pain, we can be driven to desperate measures. At such times, people are tempted to give up on God and sink into bitterness. When misery fills the horizon, when it seems to stretch ahead endlessly, it seems an easy solution to escape the pain by breaking the brittle thread of life.

However, when a person acts on that sense of hopelessness, it adds another layer of sadness that gives the tragedy and the powers of evil the last word.

The Bible offers another solution, a solution in which Ellen found comfort and hope. God's Word is filled with promises, promises that are more powerful than the worst pain or tragedy, promises that are so effective that they are like leaves from the Tree of Life, bringing healing to the soul tortured by suffering and sin (Revelation 22:2).

In Romans, God promises that He can bring triumph out of tragedy: "*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*" (Romans 8:28).

The prophet Jeremiah learned how God can bring good out of heartache. Jeremiah knew a great deal of sorrow. He watched as his people, the nation

of Israel, slid further and further from God; closer and closer to destruction. Jeremiah had been given a divine message of warning. But no one was listening. In fact, Jeremiah was reviled as a traitor. They claimed he wasn't upholding national pride. But true to his divine commission, he just kept on urging Israel to repent, or face doom.

Jeremiah was a sensitive young man who felt his isolation very keenly. In his book, he describes how the stern message he had to give felt like a fire that was eating him up inside (Jeremiah 20:9). There seemed to be no escape from it.

In his anguish, he cried out desperately to God, *"Why is my pain perpetual and my wound incurable, which refuses to be healed?"* (Jeremiah 15:18).

This has been the cry of millions of people through the centuries as they demand of God to know why their pain

is unending, why it seems to block out everything else.

God, however, had an answer for Jeremiah:

"You shall stand before Me; if you take out the precious from the vile, you shall be as My mouth....And I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall: and they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you," says the Lord (Jeremiah 15:19,20).

God gave to suffering Jeremiah the assurance, "There's more here than just pain. You will grow through this experience. You will become a fortified bronze wall. You will be delivered."

That's what we have to believe when tragedy seems overwhelming. We may not be able to see through it at the time. We might not be able to feel deliverance. But however deep our distress, God can take us beyond the

pain. He can work something good out of it.

Several of the psalms in the Bible emphasise this point clearly. We find heart cries from people who are suffering and are overwhelmed with pain.

Psalm Forty-two is a good example. The writer describes how his tears have been his food day and night. He cries out to God, *"Why have You forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy? As with a breaking of my bones, my enemies reproach me"* (Psalm 42:9,10).

The psalmist uses the analogy of excruciating pain, that of broken bones, to describe his feelings of sadness and oppression. But even in the midst of pain and tragedy of this magnitude, he makes a wonderful resolve. He determines that with God's help, he will discover what lies beyond this pain.

"Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God" (Psalm 42:11).

This man determines that with God's help, he will rise above his pain and will find reason to praise Him. He clings to this hope and belief in the midst of tragedy.

He doesn't do this because he feels less, but because he determines to see more. This is what can save us when the pain seems interminable, when we feel shut in by it. At a certain point, the temptation may be to shut everything off, just to escape, even to end it. But God promises that beyond this tragedy and pain, we can find healing, strength and intimacy with Him.

Contemporary life can try to cocoon us from discomfort. Our surroundings can appear at first glance to be rather like a comfortable, climate-controlled lounge,

with nicely padded leather seats and push-button controls.

Complete industries are dedicated to eliminating our every discomfort. New technologies have developed to cater for our every whim. We're consumers. We're surrounded by an array of products and gadgets that promise to make life perfectly pleasant and carefree.

In this kind of world, it's natural to come to regard any kind of pain as an unwelcome interruption that must be eliminated immediately. We must find the right pill to take, the right button to push, the right gadget to manipulate, simply to make it go away.

It may be, however, that God is speaking to us through the pain. Perhaps we are doing something wrong to our bodies, our hearts or our souls. There may be a problem that desperately needs fixing.

If we resort too quickly to taking a pill,

pushing a button, or manipulating a gadget, we may lose the opportunity to deal with the fundamental problem.

The writers of the New Testament understood this basic principle. God can use suffering to teach us, to mould us, and to make us stronger. He can work good from the tragedies of our life. This is where a true closeness with God can transform our lives and our suffering.

With good reason, the New Testament writers point to Christ's sufferings on the cross. Before His arrest, Jesus agonised in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was tempted to turn away from the terrible ordeal that lay before Him. He was tempted to shut out the pain.

But He knew that this was the only way to deal with the tragedy of human sin once and for all. So, He allowed that sin to crush His life from Him at Calvary.

The apostle Paul reminds us that even though Jesus was equal with God,

He *"learned obedience by the things which he suffered"* (Hebrews 5:8). Paul also tells us that the *"captain of our salvation"* was made *"perfect through sufferings"* (Hebrews 2:10).

The apostle Peter adds to this argument by describing how Jesus' suffering has resulted in blessing:

Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sin, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed (1 Peter 2:24).

Peter was writing to believers who were experiencing intense persecution. They were suffering unjustly for their faith. Peter tells them that this experience can work for their benefit. He reminds them of Jesus' attitude to his suffering, and recommends they follow His example: *"For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps"* (1 Peter 2:21).

Adopting Christ's attitude means submitting to the circumstances God permits, and using these as opportunities to develop character qualities of trust, patience and hope.

In this particular situation, Peter was writing to former pagans who had led very self-indulgent lifestyles. They had just come out of what the apostle calls a "*flood of dissipation*" (1 Peter 4:4).

The hardships they now faced might be unjust and unfair, but Peter pointed out that they could serve a useful purpose as an antidote to self-indulgence. The trials could strengthen the believers' resolve to live unselfishly, to live completely for the will of God.

In God's hands, suffering can be redemptive; it can help us grow. That is one of the principles of the New Testament. God can work good out of tragedy.

However, it is very important to remember that God is not the author of suffering. He doesn't bring pain into the world. Pain is the result of evil.

As humans, we cannot determine the reason for suffering. We cannot say that someone is being "punished" for their sins. While it is true that transgression of God's laws brings unavoidable consequences, God is not vindictive. The Bible reveals that "*He doth not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men*" (Lamentations 3:33). And much of the pain and suffering we experience is the work of an enemy that hates us (Matthew 13:28).

What we can say is this: whatever its cause, suffering can be redemptive. God can work through it to build us up. There is always more to a bad experience than just pain.

The Bible does not deny the reality of pain, but the Bible encourages us to work through that pain and suffering.

This is what Paul meant when he wrote:

"Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory" (2 Corinthians 4:16,17).

While we may be suffering intense pain, God can use this experience to renew us. He is building in us lasting qualities that will be part of the glory of eternity. As sharers in Christ's sufferings now, we will ultimately share His glory (Revelation 3:21).

Let us return to Job and consider the final outcome of his story. After the lengthy discussion between Job and his friends about the justice of his sufferings, the Bible presents one conclusion: the overwhelming nature of God's power and glory. That is the answer.

Job bows in awe before the majesty of

his Creator and can only utter the words, "*I know that you can do everything*" (Job 42:2).

The Bible reveals that we can find God in the midst of pain. That is what matters most. Job, Jeremiah and Ellen found God there. You can also find God in your pain, no matter how intense it may be. Inner healing, strength and courage are yours for the asking. And you can certainly find closeness with God.

I encourage you to believe and hold on to that certainty. God's Word assures us that there is a broader perspective than personal tragedy. Rather than giving up, surrender yourself to God. Let Him use your terrible experience for good. Pray with the psalmist, "*I have trusted in thy mercy; my heart shall rejoice in thy salvation*" (Psalm 13:5). Only then will you discover the miraculous courage that God can give in the midst of pain.

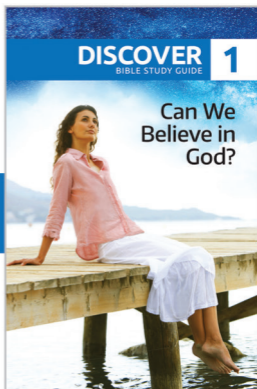
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Pastor Gary Kent is Speaker for The Incredible Journey ministry. He has produced and presented numerous documentaries on subjects including the Bible, Bible prophecy, world events and natural health. His passion is to share the good news of Jesus' imminent return.

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