

## BEING IN ANGUISH

### GETHSEMANE

No one makes it through life unscathed. Someday, somewhere, and somehow something bad will happen in your life. Sometimes you know hard times are coming; most of the time you don't. But one thing is for sure – pain will find you.

On Friday, December 5, 2003 my wife and I attended a 50th birthday party for a church friend. We were having a wonderful time when suddenly I felt some weight on my shoulder. I looked over to find my wife slumped over and leaning on my body for support. I laid her on the floor, looked into her eyes, and knew something was terribly wrong. She slipped into a coma from which she never recovered.

Out of the blue, without warning, she had suffered a massive, catastrophic stroke. Three days later our family made the difficult decision to remove life support. Surrounded by family and friends she passed into glory at 10:31 p.m. on Monday, December 8. Incredibly, it was our son's 24th birthday.

Pain had found me and my family. But it didn't stop. Over the next 3 years my mother-in-law, father-in-law, mother, and two close friends all passed away. If it wasn't for the love and support of my couple's small group I honestly don't know if I would've made it through those dark days.

At one point I remember thinking, "Come on, Steve, this isn't the worst thing that has ever happened to anyone." Then I sensed God's whisper, "That's true, Steve. But it's the worst thing that has ever happened to YOU."

As you considered my story, I'm sure some of you were triggered to your own pain from some tragic events. In fact, some of you are going through your own dark days right now. Like me, perhaps a loved one died. Or you went through a painful divorce. Maybe you were laid off. Or you had to declare bankruptcy. It might be a wayward child. Or a doctor gave you some bad news. There are an infinite number of scenarios, but they all lead to pain, heartache, bewilderment, desperation, and a broken heart.

How do you handle hard times - bad news – difficult situations? Gratefully, Jesus knows what you're going through. "He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help" (Hebrews 4:15 Msg).

After the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples went to the Garden of Gethsemane to spend the night. Jesus was fully aware that very soon He would be arrested, put on trial, beaten, and crucified. The Lord got alone to pray and asked His Father if He might forego the coming events. But He also added, "... Yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42b).

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The Father then sent angels to strengthen His Son for what lay ahead. But Jesus was still grappling with the reality of His impending death. The Bible says, “And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44 emphasis added).

Scientists agree that it is possible to sweat drops of blood. But the person must be in serious distress for such a phenomenon to take place. It’s clear that Jesus was in serious distress because the verse begins, “And being in anguish ...” How did He handle the situation? What can we learn from His example when pain finds us? What do we do when we are in anguish? There are answers, and we will discover them together.

## PRAYER

Bad things happen to good people. Christians are not exempt from tragedy and hardship just because we are believers. The Bible says, “[God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).

When my wife died unexpectedly, it was like my world turned upside down. After 4 other people I love died within the next 3 years, I thought my future was irrevocably shattered. I couldn’t imagine ever being happy again.

Now fast forward almost 9 years. After much prayer, I was convinced that God wanted me to remain single. Then He brought a wonderful, godly woman named Connie into my life. Over time, I began to see that God had a different plan. On October 6, 2012, Connie and I will be married and I couldn’t be happier.

Most Christians have read Romans 8:28 - “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). In the midst of our anguish, we typically struggle to believe this truth. We think, “How could God love me when He’s hurt me so badly?”

As I look back at the years since my first wife died, I can see how God worked all things together for good. Although I never expected life to turn out the way it has, I also never expected God to bless me in so many ways. I not only met, and will soon marry, Connie, but God has given me multiple opportunities to minister overseas. Twice I’ve been to Angola, Africa. During one of those trips, I visited a village so remote that not even the oldest resident had seen a white man. I also was the first American anyone in the village had met. What an honor!

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I also have ministered in Germany, Zambia, and Honduras. Most incredibly, God gave me the opportunity to teach about spiritual gifts at a Russian seminary for a month. None of these events would've happened without the tragedies in my life.

Think about your own life story. When times were bad, didn't you experience the most spiritual growth? That's because during crisis we turn desperately to the Lord for comfort, encouragement, and guidance. Our desire for the Lord, and dependence upon Him, are never greater. It's in the good times that we start to become more self-reliant and allow our relationship with Christ to cool off.

Tragedy is like the ingredients in many medications. By themselves some ingredients might harm us. But when combined with other ingredients, the medication heals us and makes us whole again. Individually, life events can devastate us; but in combination with other life events God takes our sorrow and turns it into joy.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus asked His Father to spare Him from His coming suffering. Basically, Jesus asked His Father to find another way to accomplish the mission. But He qualified His request by submitting Himself to whatever God chose to do. Ultimately, the Father chose to send His Son to His death on the cross and Jesus accepted His Father's decision. And because Jesus obeyed, He paid the price for our sins and He was resurrected from the dead – as we will be someday.



When Jesus was in anguish, He prayed. In fact, after an angel strengthened Him, Jesus prayed “more earnestly” (Luke 22:44). When the unthinkable happens - and it probably will - your first response should be prayer - prayer that comes from your heart. Pray persistently for relief, but pray with a submissive heart. You can't see God's Larger Story for your life, but by faith you can trust that He is working things out for your good.

This may be a good time for you to reread the famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3:1-8. It begins, “To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Ecclesiastes 3:1ff KJV).

## EMOTIONS

Jesus Christ was born fully God and fully man. He exhibited the characteristics of both divinity and humanity.

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The Gospels describe times when Jesus expressed emotion. He felt righteous indignation towards the moneychangers. In His anger He overturned their booths and drove them out of the Temple (Matthew 21:12).

At one point Jesus sent out 72 followers to conduct ministry. As He prayed for them, Jesus was “full of joy through the Holy Spirit” (Luke 10:21).

When the Lord fed the 5,000, “[He saw the] large crowd, [and] he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34).

Finally, when his close friend Lazarus died, Jesus felt grief. The shortest verse in the Bible says simply, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35).

I love that verse because it’s what I did when my late wife passed away. I cried buckets of tears. Many of you have experienced the same thing.

Most women, though not all, have a well-developed emotional system that allows them to feel the full spectrum of emotions. As a result, they view life in spectacular Technicolor - vibrant and alive.

In general, men see life in black and white with a more limited range of emotions. Although men have the same emotional capacity as women, they’re taught from childhood that “big boys don’t cry.”

Like many men, my Dad was stoic man. I only saw him cry once when we visited his Father’s grave and it scared me because Dad was always in control.

When we’re in anguish, crying is not only normal, but healthy. Grief triggers tears. Tears release pent up sorrow and ultimately brings healing. So let the tears fall freely. Grief will express itself either positively or negatively. Stuffing your grief is unhealthy and will eventually lead to physical and emotional damage.

Tears often flow unexpectedly and often long after a traumatic event. Years after my late wife died, I was driving from Denver to Colorado Springs when I caught sight of the Rocky Mountains. I started crying uncontrollably because she loved those mountains so much.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed for deliverance. In fact, He prayed so hard that he sweated blood. Although it doesn’t say this, I’m sure Jesus let His tears fall freely. After all, He’s human as well as divine.

When anguish comes, pray AND cry. For there is joy in the morning and life does goes on.

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### DELIVERANCE

In the late 1800s John Paton and his wife were missionaries to a cannibalistic tribe in the South Pacific. One night the tribesmen surrounded their house ready to set it on fire and kill the family. Paton and his wife, filled with fear, spent the night praying that God would deliver them. When dawn broke, they were astonished to see their attackers had left.

A year later the tribe's chief accepted Jesus Christ. Paton asked the chief why he hadn't carried out his murderous plan. Surprised, the chief replied, "Who were all those men surrounding your house?" Paton asked, "What men?" Confused, the chief answered, "I decided to leave when I saw hundreds of men wearing shining clothes with drawn swords guarding your house." \*



In this instance God chose to deliver the Paton family from certain death. But that's not always His will. Sometimes He chooses not deliver His children from tragedy.

In 1956 Jim Elliott was one of five missionaries seeking to contact the Auca Indians in Ecuador. This tribe of forest dwellers had killed many people who had attempted to conquer them. The missionaries made numerous attempts to communicate their friendly intentions to the Aucas. Finally, they landed their plane on a crude landing strip. As the group stepped out of the plane, the Aucas greeted them with spears. All five men were killed.

Stories of God' deliverance are scattered throughout the Bible – both His will to set aside or allow suffering.

God delivered the Israelites from the Midianites with 300 men, torches, and rams' horns. He guided Esther to save the Jewish people from genocide by revealing her ancestry. The Lord chose to release Peter from jail due to an earthquake. And the Father delivered Paul from drowning through a shipwreck.

But God also allowed Joseph to be buried by his brothers, sold into slavery, and sent to prison for false accusations. He also permitted Bathsheba's firstborn son to die despite the desperate pleas of David, the baby's father. The Lord decided not to rescue Stephen from a fatal stoning by a mob. Finally, although Paul prayed for deliverance, God's will was for Paul to endure his thorn in the flesh.

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One month after my late wife died, my mother-in-law, whom I loved, also passed away from a catastrophic stroke. My life was turned upside down in just 30 days, and I was in shock and despair. A consultant to our district, a believer, took me to lunch and asked, "How are you doing." I replied, "I suppose as well as can be expected."

He asked, "So what are you going to do?" I told him I planned to stay as School Superintendent and handle my grief the best I could." He paused, looked me in the eyes and asked, "Steve, what do you really want to do?" In a moment reflexive vulnerability I answered, "I'd leave tomorrow if I could." He negotiated my severance package with the School Board and I left my job – and career – just two weeks later. God delivered me from a likely emotional implosion.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus begged His Father to find another way to accomplish salvation. But Jesus added a key phrase, "Yet not what I will, but what you will" (Mark 14:36). Of course, the Father chose not to deliver His Son from the Cross; and because Jesus obeyed, deliverance is possible for all people who personally accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.

What anguish are you facing in your life right now? Like Jesus, pray for deliverance. But also like Him, be sure to add, "Yet not what I will, but what you will." God has a plan for your life. Jeremiah 29:11 says it's a good plan that will not harm you, but will lead to a beneficial future and a sure hope. Trust God to do whatever is best – to deliver you or allow you to go through the trial.

\* Today in the Word, Moody Bible Institute, October, 1991, p. 18

## STRENGTH

In 1944, a pastor's wife in Switzerland looked in her pantry and found it empty. Susie Ware prayed, "God, I need five pounds of potatoes, two pounds of pastry flour, apples, pears, a cauliflower, carrots, veal cutlets for Saturday, and beef for Sunday." A few hours later, there was a knock on the door and a young man, "Mrs. Ware, I am bringing what you asked for." The basket he gave her contained exactly what she'd prayed for; in fact, the pastry flour was the same brand the woman used. As Susie watched out the window, the man just disappeared before her eyes as if he had never existed. \*

Years ago I'm convinced that I encountered an angel when I preached to a men's group on three consecutive Saturday mornings. The first week I spoke on life events that bless us so much we wish we could relive them. The next week I talked about tragedies that were so painful that only the tears on our pillow sustained us. I used the example of the unexpected death of my wife and mentioned that I was still healing emotionally. The last week discussed how God uses the scars and stars of our life to lead us to our calling.

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During the second week, a stranger was in the audience who hadn't attended the week before, and didn't return the following week. At the end he approached me and said, "I'm here to tell you to read the book *The Precious Present* by Spencer Johnson." \*\* Then he turned and, without another word, walked out of the room. I stood there in stunned silence before asking the others who the stranger was. No one had ever seen him before.

I immediately purchased the book and sat in my car reading the book over and over as I cried uncontrollably at its profound message about healing. That book was just what I needed to cope with the overwhelming grief I felt over my wife's death. I am absolutely convinced that the stranger in the audience was an angel.



The Old Testament mentions angels at least 108 times, while the New Testament refers to them 165 times. God has given them many different responsibilities, including strengthening those in need. In 1 Kings 19 Elijah fell into such a deep depression that he wanted to die. God sent an angel who twice gave him food and water to strengthen him.

Before the start of His ministry, Jesus spent 40 days and night in the desert being tempted by Satan. After failing to get Jesus to yield to temptation, "... the devil left him, and angels came and attended him" (Matthew 4:11). Angels strengthened Jesus for the work ahead.

Towards the end of His ministry, Jesus prayed in anguish that somehow He could avoid going to the Cross. Yet He also said that He was willing to go if that was His Father's will. Immediately afterwards, "An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him" (Luke 22:43).

Typically, being in anguish completely depletes your strength. In the midst of the storm every ounce of energy goes to protecting yourself emotionally from being overwhelmed by grief. In the depths of despair any activity requires more strength than you possess. You don't want to see anyone, go anywhere or do anything; instead, you just want to crawl in a hole and pull the manhole cover over your head.

There's only one answer to be strengthened in despair. Ask God to carry you because you're too weak to go on in your own power. Rely on His strength to refresh and renew you, and you will – over time - emerge on the other side of anguish.

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Finally, don't be surprised if the strength you need comes from a source you least expect. In your time of trial, if someone knocks on your door, do what Hebrews 13:2 (CEV) says, "Be sure to welcome strangers into your home. By doing this, some people have welcomed angels as guests, without even knowing it."

\* Anderson, Joan Wester. *Where Angels Walk*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1992, pp. 60-62.

\*\* <http://amzn.to/bl64cT>

## COMMUNITY

Over the centuries no group has faced more persecution than the Jews. In the Old Testament alone, biblical scholar Raymond Schwager "... has found 600 passages of explicit violence [toward the Jews]."

\* He concludes that violence is easily the most frequent activity in the Hebrew Bible.

The modern Holocaust is the most famous historical attempt to exterminate the Jewish people. In just 4 years over 6 million Jews died at the hands of the Nazis, comparable to the extermination of everyone in Houston, TX, the nation's 5th largest city.

According to legend, King Christian X of Denmark took decisive action when the Nazis ordered Jewish Danes to wear yellow armbands with the Star of David. The King sent a message to his people that he expected all loyal Danes to wear the armband, too. The next day, every citizen of Denmark wore the Star of David, with the King setting the example. The Nazis had little choice but to rescind the order.



Although the story isn't true, it symbolizes the selfless efforts of the Danish people to help the Jews. Throughout the war many Danes, at great personal risk, hid their Jewish countrymen and helped them escape to the other countries. Through their heroic efforts the vast majority of Jewish Danes were spared the horrors of the concentration camps. \*\*

This story illustrates the importance of community. Paul wrote in Romans 12:5, "... So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." Christianity is not meant to be lived in isolation. We are one in Christ and called to love one another.



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Christian community was very real to me the night my late wife was stricken with a catastrophic stroke. It occurred at friend's 50th birthday party and most of the people present were from our church. The tragic events of that night, and the week that followed, all took place in the context of community.

About 50 people came with us to the hospital, and stayed with us while my wife underwent surgery to relieve pressure on her brain. I was in a state of shock, yet grateful that I didn't have to face the trial alone. My brothers and sisters in Christ stayed with me until close to 2:00 a.m. when we learned that the surgery had been successful. Their presence and prayers made the heartbreak of that night more bearable.

About 1,500 people came to my late wife's wake and over 800 people attended her funeral. Throughout these events I drew strength and comfort from this Christian community. As the days turned into weeks, and the weeks into months, fewer and fewer people walked alongside me - but that's to be expected as life moves on. I soon learned that it didn't matter how many people were there, it's the fact that someone was there for me.

On the night of His arrest, Jesus faced the ordeal in community. The disciples were with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus prayed. Although they all fell asleep, it's important to remember that they were still there. In fact, they were fully awake when Judas, the religious leaders and the temple guards came to take Jesus into custody.

Although Peter's use of the sword was misguided, at least he attempted to defend and protect the Lord. The presence of the Eleven formed a community of believers that stood by Jesus in his moment of need. Jesus didn't face his arrest alone; he stood in the midst of a band of brothers.

Someday – when you least expect it – something bad will happen that throws you into the depths of anguish. In that moment, you have a choice. You can be like the Lone Ranger and face the situation alone, or you can follow Jesus' example and face it in community.

Remember that even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. So when tragedy strikes, deal with your anguish surrounded by other believers

\* [www.religioustolerance.org/god\\_cana](http://www.religioustolerance.org/god_cana)

\*\* <http://www.snopes.com/history/govern/denmark.asp>

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### ACCEPTANCE

After my wife died, I held a daily personal pity party complaining about the unfairness of it all. “Oh, woe is me. How could God do this to me?” Eventually, I’d had enough of God, the Bible, and organized religion. So I stopped going to church ... for a year!

Looking back, my response was like a two-year old throwing a temper tantrum. “OK God ... you want to hurt me? Well two can play that game. I’m going to hurt you right back. I’m not going to church anymore. Take that!” I’m pretty sure my temper tantrum didn’t rock God’s world, but it sure did mine. I grew increasingly sullen, self-absorbed, and isolated.



One day my friend Debbie sat me down and said, “Steve, I’m tired of you mumbling and grumbling about how terrible life is. So I’m going to ask you 4 questions:

- \* Is there a God ... or not?
- \* Does He love you ... or not?
- \* Does He have a plan for your life ... or not?
- \* Will you trust Him ... or not? It’s your choice.”

Ouch! Her words hit home, convicted me of my sin, and led me to accept the reality of the situation. I asked God to forgive me, repented of my sin, and returned to my church.

One of the most difficult things in life is to accept the things that bring us deep anguish. Instead of facing things head-on, we tend to make a quick u-turn and run the other way.

The prophet Jonah is a great example of this tendency. In Jonah 1:2 God told him, “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” Jonah had good reason to be terrified of the Ninevites; they were exceptionally cruel to their enemies. So Jonah pivoted 180 degrees, and headed towards the ends of the known world.

Before Jonah finally obeyed God, his ship almost broke apart in a violent storm; he was forced to admit that he was the cause of the storm; the sailors tossed him overboard; and he spent three days and nights in the belly of a great fish. In his final humiliation, the creature spit him out onto dry land.

We also are at risk when we run away from the unthinkable. Although our disobedience doesn’t always result in harsh discipline, it will lead to inner turmoil and anguish.

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The Eleven found this out the hard way when they refused to accept Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion, death, and burial. Although the Lord repeatedly told them of these coming events, the disciples refused to believe – much less accept. Now to be fair to them, God, in His sovereignty, kept them from understanding the situation until His appointed time. Nonetheless, at face value, the Eleven were sure stubborn and dimwitted.

When the worst happened, they ran away, wept bitterly, feared for their lives, and barricaded themselves behind closed doors. Their anguish continued until Jesus appeared to them after His resurrection.

By contrast, the female believers accepted Jesus' fate throughout the tragic events. They watched from a distance during the crucifixion; they went to the tomb early Sunday morning; and they ran to tell the others when Jesus appeared to them.

How will you choose to react when the storm hits? Will you run and hide like the Jonah, the disciples, and me? Or will you accept the trial as part of God's divine plan for your life?

Hard times are painful and filled with anguish, but acceptance is the only way out of torment. In the midst of distress, cling to the promise in Psalm 35:18. "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."