

THE DIFFICULT WILL OF GOD

Acts 12

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We have been in the third of six sections in the Book of Acts. I've called this message, "The Difficult Will of God." The first section is chapters 1–5, which is "The Birth of the Church." The second section, 6:1 through about 9:29, is "Persecution Leads to Expansion." Then, from the end of chapter 9 through Acts 12 is "The Acts of Peter and The Beginnings of Gentile Christianity." We're in the last section of that, chapter 12, which begins with this statement, "It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also" (Acts 12:1–3, NIV). The Herod that's spoken of here is the third Herod of the New Testament. The first Herod being Herod the Great, the second Herod being Herod of Galilee, who killed John the Baptist. This is now the nephew of Herod of Galilee and the grandson of Herod the Great, and he is king over a very limited territory. He did not have the power of his predecessor Herods.

I want to take a moment to talk about Peter's release and then zero in on James' death, the difficult aspects of living out the will of God.

There is an unpredictability to what it is the Lord does. This is why, perhaps more than any other reason, I object to people who try to put the Christian life within some kind of formulized package, sort of like taking your vitamins. "If you take these three vitamins every day, everything's going to turn out ok." "If you do these set duties or obligations to the Christian life, you can be sure that you're going to go to heaven all wrapped up with a nice bow tied around you and you won't get there until you're at least seventy years plus a day; everything's going to

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work out all right.” As matter of fact, as we see in the Book of Acts, there’s an awful lot of unpredictability to God’s sovereign dealings, and certainly the unpredictability we see here is the fact that we have two of the three of the inner-circle of apostles who are arrested. One of whom is released and the other of whom is executed. We are never told why one is released and the other is executed. There appear to be no human reasons for that at all.

There also is the fact that there’s a death in the Book of Acts, the first believer’s death being that of Stephen, executed at a very young age. Then there is Dorcas, who doesn’t have nearly as strategic a position as Stephen or James, yet Dorcas is raised from the dead. It would seem to me, if I were God and planning things, I would have chosen to leave Dorcas dead and raise Stephen or James; they’re in a higher position, after all, in the chain of command in the church and their services are more vital. Whereas Dorcas, what she was doing was important; basically she was making clothes for a number of people. Whereas, Stephen and James were having an influence upon the whole body of Christ and it would seem only proper conservation of resources to raise them and not Dorcas if you were planning strategically. God seems to really foul things up in terms of letting some things happen and other things not happen. This is why, when you look at what God is doing in life, you simply can’t lay something alongside something else and say, “This is the way it’s got to fit.” There are a lot of things that happen to us that simply don’t fit in to anything that we could observe on the human scene. God’s hand in the matter remains hidden. That’s certainly the case with James and Peter. Although with Peter’s release we are treated to a marvelous moment of humor in the text of Scripture, and that is when he shows up at the home of John Mark. He knocks at the door and Rhoda, who is a servant girl, comes out. Verse 14 says, “When she recognized Peter’s voice, she was...overjoyed” (NIV). She ran back without opening it. She said, “Peter is at the door!” And they told her, because they were believing, charismatic

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and filled with faith, they said, “You’re out of your mind!” (verse 15, NIV). They’d been praying, “God, release Peter.” And now that he’s there, they’re saying, “You’re out of your mind.” It’s really one of the nice touches in the Scripture. It’s also tremendous credit to the authenticity of Scripture, to let us see the naturalness with which people respond to events. We’d probably do the very same thing. Their faith at times appears to have a frailty about it. Their faith in praying also appears to have some of the same dimensions that ours does in praying. While we’re praying for God to do something, we probably don’t really believe He’s going to do it. And when He does it, we’re all the more surprised.

How many of you have had a situation in life your personal experience that has been very hard for you to take? Most of us have had an experience like that. The first thing we want to do, probably, is say, “Why?” We want to make some sense out of what has happened. As a pastor, I faced that question in dealing with people in critical moments of life—life and death moments, divorce moments, tragedy moments. I always try to resist the temptation, as pastor, to offer a reason why, because I realize when there’s a lot of emotional and spiritual pain in our life, we’re really not able to process things on an intellectual basis. It is not the time for the teacher to come in at that moment and say, “Now there are five possible reasons to explain what is happening.” If I do that, everybody is going to get sick. It isn’t going to help anybody. Although I know from the Scripture I have come to that opinion, that there are really only five ways to answer the question, “Why did this difficult thing happen?” yet, when actually facing that moment of tragedy and grief, that’s not the time to try to explain God’s ways or to figure them out. For one thing, we often do not know at that particular moment which of the five God is employing and then secondly, the best we can do in time of grief is come alongside the person and establish our humanness and our concern and empathy for them. A hug and a soft shoulder

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to cry on, an “I am praying for you” and an honest expression of love is far more meaningful when we’re going through difficulty than a kind of rationale or handing people books to read to understand the crisis they’re going through or whatever. The fact is we have so many tears in our eyes that we can’t read anything, and so many tears in our hearts that we can’t understand anything that is being said to us. So we just have to go alongside. And people too, when we’re going through that time in our life, will say the stupidest things that will kind of act as a burr to us. Like a couple that loses a baby in death, someone comes along and says, “Oh, that’s ok, you’re young enough to have another one.” I guess there are a lot of times we give advice that is akin to Job’s friends’ advice. We mean to do well, but we’d be just as well not to say anything. That was the problem with Job’s friends. They tried to theologize to him while he’s sitting with all these boils and scabs on his body. He’s itching like crazy and they’re trying to discuss weighty issues. He’s not into that. But there will come a time when we’ll be able to, in a reflective sense, sit back and look at what God might possibly be up to.

To come out with the five things that are happening in regard to the difficult will of God, I can do all of this within Acts or all the Scripture.

One thing that may be happening to us when we’re going through a really hard time in our life, a tragedy, something we didn’t expect, it could be the loss of a child, it could be a divorce, a financial reversal—there are a lot of kinds of things that can happen to us that can devastate us.

What’s going on in a time like that?

I. One thing that may be happening is that the loss that we’re experiencing is simply allowed in order for us to appreciate and value more greatly the corresponding victory that is immediately around the corner.

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It's the night-and-day principle. The night is given so that we might more adequately appreciate the day. Therefore, there may be some adversities we go through whose sole purpose seems to make sweeter the victory. This is generally the case when there's not a death involved, when it's maybe the loss of an employment or some other kind of setback. Because death itself is so final, it doesn't seem appropriate to use this in respect to the death of a loved one.

But there are occasions when indeed we have a setback and it is not meant, at that moment, to be one that is permanent but it simply illustrates a victory. In the Gospels, in Mark 4, the storm at sea is the classic example of this. The disciples are in the middle of the night and they're scared out of their minds, and the greatness of the storm only helps them more adequately appreciate the power of the Lord over the storm. Were it not for the severity of storm, they would never have known the corresponding depth of peace and the power that Christ's presence brings in life.

There are many occasions we find a similar thing.

One of the funniest things that ever happened to me that illustrates this principle: In the early days of pastoring this church, we brought about our first missions convention. I had been preaching through Leviticus and, somehow, got into the sin offering—which is different from the trespass offering. The trespass offering is for deliberate, intentional sins. The sin offering is for sins of omission, not intentional sins. In dealing with that, the Holy Spirit began speaking to my heart saying, “You haven't emphasized missions in the congregation. That has been an unintentional oversight on your part. But you need to correct it now, and get with the program. Get people to start being involved with the cause of Christ worldwide.” I am a person of action when I am convinced that something needs to be done, so I got on the phone, I contacted a speaker, I called six different missionaries. I said, “All come in on this particular day.” I'd never planned a mission's convention before. I wasn't working with a committee. I was just doing it all

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on my own. At that time, we had about three hundred people in the congregation; a hundred in the eight thirty service and two hundred in the eleven o'clock service. I didn't know what I was going to do with six missionaries on the same Sunday. That is a little bit overboard. How, in an hour service, do you have time for any of them to say anything? Let alone have a keynote speaker.

One of the things I made a mistake in doing was scheduling a Saturday night meeting. We had a Friday night banquet, about a third of the church turned up, a Saturday night meeting and then a Sunday one. I'd told the missionaries we were going to try to believe God for thirty thousand dollars in faith promises, although I had been afraid to say that to the congregation, because I thought that was unrealistic. We'd only been giving five thousand dollars a year, and here I was, talking about thirty thousand dollars. So we publicly set a twelve thousand dollar goal. Privately, I had said to the missionaries "thirty thousand dollars." Friday night, we had about a third of the congregation out. Saturday was a disaster. It's the only time in seventeen years I've had a Saturday night service. I've never repeated that mistake. And all six missionaries and their wives came, plus a keynote speaker, and Jewell and I; fifteen of us from the program. There were about twelve people that showed up from the church.

I like to begin services on time, as you know, but that time I waited for a while. I finally got up and started leading the hymn. I couldn't even look at the people; I had the hymnal right in front of my face. I was red and embarrassed. It was just that day I had told these missionaries my dreams and goals, and they were sitting there thinking, "I gave up speaking in this church and that church this weekend to be here and there is not anybody here."

As I'm leading the hymn, I'm thinking, "Lord, I thought You wanted me to do this!" In the midst of that, I felt the Lord speak to me, between the second and the third verses, saying, "Remember

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the storm at sea and remember that the purpose of the trial is to illuminate the coming victory. So why don't you tell these twelve people what you've really got in mind for tomorrow?" I said, "Lord, I don't want to be humiliated again," but before we sang the last verse, I remember stopping the singing and saying, "This is a real defeat for me tonight, this small crowd. But I felt God was in this thing. I want to say tomorrow, before it happens, that I believe that when the faith promises come in tomorrow, we're going to have a major victory. We're going to have thirty thousand committed in faith promises." I don't know what people were thinking. I was thirty years of age at the time, had been in the pastorate one year. I'm sure people chalked that up to a lot of innocent naiveté. I'm sure the missionaries were squirming with embarrassment. But the next morning, the first hundred people committed eighteen thousand dollars without any pressure. Then two hundred people showed up and they committed twelve thousand dollars. There was the thirty thousand dollars.

It was the most wonderful thing. It put this church on a course of missionary involvement on which we've stayed steady and true to for sixteen years. That's exactly what was involved in the trial. It was meant to illuminate a victory.

When I was a kid in China and Dad was out killing chickens, my dad thought I was a little bit wimpy and one of the things I needed to do to test my mettle, as a male, was to watch him slaughter animals. So he had me watch him kill chickens, butcher sheep—I was put through all of that. I remember one day he was out there, killing chickens with an ax; my dad was having me watch him. I got real curious. I noticed the chicken jerked a lot after its head was chopped off. Since we had dirt floors and everything was dirt that we lived in, I said to dad, "I'd like to see you let go of that chicken after you chop its head off." So he did. I have never seen so active a chicken in all my life. Then all that activity was through and—bang!—it was over.

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I think a lot of our trials are like that. The enemy has already gotten a mortal wound. What we're seeing is a whole lot of feathers flocking around, but there's no real substance to what's going on. If we hang true, the thing will drop dead at our feet and we'll go on, and we'll say, "That was marvelous."

That's one thing that's happening to us in trial. Don't be surprised, the fiery trial is going to establish your faith.

II. What if after the trial there is not this wonderful time but instead, real trouble? And trouble seems to come in waves. Something else may be occurring. That is, there is a possibility that a reversal may be an act of discipline from the Lord.

Hebrews 12:7 says, "Whom the Lord loves, He disciplines." I'm not in the punishment wing of Christianity. And I've grown out of the baseball bat image of God, that He was up there in heaven, waiting for us to do something wrong to swing at us. I've grown out of the bad Father aspect of God. Unfortunately, many people, perhaps because of their own parental upbringing, have never been able to focus on the fact that God is a good Father in Scripture. The heavenly Father we pray to is different than a poor earthly father you may have had. There is so much abuse and bad fathering in our culture, we almost have to redefine it when we talk about God—what we mean by God as Father. But there are occasions where God may chastise us. And certainly, in the Old Testament, you see this with Israel, where they were made to wander in the wilderness for forty years because of clear disobedience. Punishment does visit us because we have done wrong.

I'd say don't overly look at your life introspectively. There's no use picking at scabs. There's no use picking at spiritual scabs. I find, too many times, as Christians we pick at the scabs in our life and we keep wanting to know, "Is God punishing me again? Did this thing get healed or not?"

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and we open up the wound all over again. Let God go ahead and heal and keep on going. But there may be, in some situations, a discipline from God. We need, therefore, to correct the behavior that produced the discipline.

As a general rule, I think it is the case from the New Testament that God does not use extreme measures to punish people. For example, if on the human level I drove down the street at 45 miles an hour and the speed limit was 20, I don't think it would be an appropriate penalty for the government to have the power to take me, line me up against a wall and shoot me. The penalty would be disproportionate to the crime. Some people have the viewpoint of "The reason why you lost your husband..." Or, "The reason why you lost that child is that you were disobedient to God and He's punishing you." What kind of God are you serving, that exacts that kind of disproportional punishment upon people? That doesn't add up and doesn't fit with what Jesus taught us about God, our Heavenly Father. So be careful we don't get extreme on that.

III. A third thing that can be happening is that what is occurring to us is allowing us to become a resource, a help and an example to other people, that out of our own pain and out of the tragedies of our own life we're in turn able to turn around and encourage others.

Why, for example, was Corrie ten Boom, when she was living, such a tremendous resource to the body of Christ? It's because she knew what it was like to walk in hell's darkest night and be tried in the fierceness of that furnace and emerge. She had a ministry of hope. Why is it that people who have themselves been through the personal trauma of divorce and have recovered can best then turn around and minister to other people going through that? Because they know, they have walked through that, and they have found God real to them in the valley of the shadow of death. Why is it we have support groups? For example, parents of children who have had cancer. Those

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parents can minister to other parents whose children have cancer, because they've been through it.

Paul basically sets us this example. When writing to the Romans, he says, "I am writing to you, praying that in God's will I might come to you in order that I might impart to you some spiritual gift to the end that you might be strengthened" (Romans 1:10–11). Three years after writing that letter, he finally gets to Rome, but he's a prisoner when he gets there. Certainly, he came in a different guise than what he thought when he prayed the prayer "I want to come to you." But it was his imprisonment for the first three years, and then a succeeding two years in Rome, that proved stabilizing to the Roman church, which would shortly be undergoing the terrible persecutions of Nero. When Paul arrived in Rome, it was 61 A.D. He's in prison in Rome for two more years, to 63 A.D. One year after his imprisonment ends, the Christians in Rome undergo a terrible holocaust. Whose example was it that strengthened them and showed them that just because you're suffering, you're not out of God's will? In fact, it may prove the opposite—that you are in God's will. And why is it he's able to say to the Corinthians, "We are able to comfort you with the comfort with which we ourselves have been comforted from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). So there can be gain that comes to others because we ourselves have walked through a dark night.

In whatever valleys I face in my own life, I think with the amount of public ministry I do, those valleys have made me much more sensitive, and hopefully more effective, to minister to people who find themselves in similar crises, because I myself have been comforted by God in those times and found that His grace is sufficient. I love the phrase that Paul uses to the Philippians "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). We have to remember that when he spoke those words, he was in prison and could do very little. But being in prison

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was the hardest thing God ever asked him to do. He found that, if Christ was with him, he could do even that. So there is that encouragement and consolation; when we're going through a dark time, that experience need not be lost. What we gain from that, in terms of stability and strength, can be passed on as a resource, as an example to someone else. As Paul said in Romans 5:3–4, "For we know that our suffering produces staying power and staying power produces character and character produces hope." It's a four-step process that brings one out on the other end purified and whole and alive, as a contributing member of the body of Christ.

So when we look at adversity, we can say it precedes a victory and it's meant simply to be in sharp relief. It could be a disciplinary measure. It could be that our lives, out of this, are going to be deepened and we're going to become a resource to others.

IV. A fourth thing that can be happening in our tragedies in life is that God maybe using them to get us going in another direction in which we would not of our own volition travel.

Now that this has happened, we are going to go a direction we would have never have found ourselves going.

There are umpteen ways to illustrate that from Scripture. Two out of the Book of Acts, Stephen's death being case number one. It was certainly a terrible thing that happened. But we know the aftereffect of that was that the church was kicked into a mode of expansion. They got out of Jerusalem, they got out of Judea, and they started going to Samaria and witnessing to an Ethiopian eunuch, and up to Caesarea, and then ultimately beyond that, the gospel jumped to Antioch. It would not have done any of those things had there not been the persecution surrounding Stephen. But because of that persecution, because of that terrible tragedy, the church got going in a whole new direction, a positive direction, a dynamic direction.

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That's so often the case in life. I think Joni Erickson Tada is perhaps the best example in the contemporary Christian scene. It's no fun at all to be a paraplegic, as she has been forced to be. Yet out of that, she found a direction she otherwise would not have gone. She has been not only a tremendous encouragement, which fits point number three, but her ministry has been expanded in ways that probably she would have never had if she had full use of her limbs. That was an occasion whereby God wrought a deeper and wider purpose in her life. Not that God sent the tragedy so that would happen to her. I'm unable to see that from Scripture. I think Christians, like non-Christians, are subject to the law of cause and effect. Whether it's the cause and effect of our own decisions or the cause and effect of others' decisions. We talked about that a few Sunday mornings ago. We're not just in a special cocoon of plastic protection. We're subject to the same vicissitudes other people are. But in that application of the law of cause and effect, we find that in the tragedies of cause and effect, God can still use those to further His honor and His glory.

We must remember that the crucifixion of Christ is meant to be an example to us. Crucifixion is never God's last word. Resurrection is God's last word. So when we face a tragedy in our life, we need to ask—and we need to expect—what is around the corner? This is not the end. This is not God's last word. In fact, there is a phrase in the Book of Revelation that really intrigues me, where Jesus identifies Himself with the church and He says, "I am He who was dead but am alive" (Revelation 1:18). For everybody else, the appropriate way of reading that is, "I was alive but now I'm dead." That's the way it's going to be. All of us, a hundred years from now, are going to be gone from the scene, whether you like it or not. They will be talking about us in the past tense. "We were alive, but now we are dead." But of Jesus, it is said, "I was dead but now I'm alive."

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I think that transfers into a spiritual application in our lives. When we follow Christ, we can find that same principle. We may have gone through a tremendous trauma in our life, which rendered us dead, but instead, we have found ourselves in Christ to be alive.

We have a gospel that emphasizes resurrection. So often we take the Scripture as physically dead. That there is a resurrection down the road. Yes, that's true, but I've also come to you today to talk, not about the resurrection of the dead, but also to talk to you about the resurrection of the living. When we go through trauma in our life, we become dead within. We become dead spiritually and psychologically, and what we need to experience in that moment is the resurrecting power of Christ, to give us strength to go on to live.

We need to watch for those wonderful open vistas of opportunity that the Lord will give us; now that we've had this tragedy, it allows us to go in a direction. Of course, that doesn't happen overnight. It may take us a while to understand how God is leading, but it's certainly a viable option of looking at tragedy.

Then we come to the fifth step, which is in Acts 12, James' death.

V. I submit to you that there are some things that happen in life to us that are of a negative nature that, on this side of heaven, we'll never know the reason why.

They remain hidden. The reason remains hidden. You fall back on Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God. But the things that He has revealed belong to us and to our children." There are a lot of things about God's dealings that are secret and hidden.

To me, James' death just doesn't add up. Jesus had invested three years in him. He had made the inner cut of three people, yet we never read of a sermon he preached, a letter he wrote, or a book he wrote. Bang! He's gone. And he's a young man. It seems to be premature, that he was cut off before his time. We are never, never told why. It remains a riddle. Why should he be killed and

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Peter released? I'm sure the church which prayed for Peter also prayed for James. It isn't a matter related to anyone's faith. It isn't a matter related to anyone's prayer life. It's a matter related to the sovereignty of God. For Americans who have this can-do approach—"We can fix anything," "We can microwave anything," "We can get instant *whatever*"—I have to fall back upon this understanding, that God is still God. His ways may remain mysterious and hidden to us. The death of James really hit me and came home to me.

Seventeen years ago, this Scripture really became real to me for the first time, that James was taken and Peter was left. I had just accepted the pastorate of this church and I was still at my post as Campus pastor at Evangel College in Springfield, Missouri. One of my college friends, Phil, and I, lived in the same dorm for three years together. He married his college sweetheart in his senior year. And after graduation, while I went to Fuller theological seminary, he went to another seminary and pastored two years, then received an assignment as army chaplain. Ultimately, he and Joanna had three children, we had two. I remember at homecoming, in 1970, Phil stayed in our home. It was so neat to have this wonderful, blond, curly-headed friend of mine who was the son of home missionary parents from Alaska; financially, he never had anything in life, and he worked hard for everything he ever got. From the day I met him at seventeen, it was his goal to become a chaplain and serve God as a chaplain.

I remember that after the homecoming, Phil was shipped out to Vietnam. He didn't have to be with his troops on this particular night, because chaplains did not have to walk out with the troops in that particular area, since there was a lot of danger. A helicopter would come and get him. But he radioed back that he would stay with his troops. Sometime during the course of the evening, one of the men tripped over a wire and all ten men, including Phil, were killed. Phil

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became the first Assemblies of God chaplain to ever be killed in war, in all the wars—the only chaplain of the Assemblies of God that ever lost his life in war.

We were heart-stricken when we received the news. I remember that the college asked me to represent it and fly to Montana to be one of the speakers at Phil's funeral. I didn't know what to say and I really dreaded going. In the face of such tragedy, what do you say? I remember meeting with his wife and seeing his children, who were all of tender age, and asking God, "Why?" And I don't have an answer to this day. I never have worked that out. I remember flying in. My mind, over and over again, was running through the Scripture. This Scripture kept coming to me from Acts 12:2. "He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword" (NIV). It seems so unjust. They were both young men. Phil, my friend, and James, both in their prime, both with a lot to offer, both cut off suddenly.

Finally, my mind went back to Mark 3, where Jesus first called the Twelve. "He called twelve to be with Him, to cast out demons and to preach the good news" (Mark 3:14–15). My mind went over those three aspects of the call of a disciple, and suddenly it made sense to me in a way that it hadn't before. That is the first call of every disciple—to simply be with Him. It's a call of relationship. Then, after we're called to a relationship with Jesus Christ, the other aspects of our call are related to what we do—the "doingness"—casting out demons or preaching. Obviously, when we get to heaven, those dynamics to our call are non-effective. There are no demons in heaven to cast out. And there's no need to evangelize anybody. Those dimensions to our call fall off. That's why the first part of our call is so essential—to be with Him. That's the one aspect of every one of our calls that is fulfilled, both in this time and in that time, on earth and in heaven. The Lord reserves it within His sovereign judgment, in terms of when to allow or elect to have us come from His presence here to His presence there. "Not till the loom is silent and the shuttles

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cease to fly, will God unroll the canvas and explain the reasons why.” Faith serves God in the midst of mystery, in the midst of not-knowingness. Our faith gets anchored in God and we trust Him. That seems to me what faith is all about. Faith has accepted the credible evidences Christ has presented about Himself. The evidences that Christ has presented are His resurrection, based upon, not a subjective feeling. The resurrection has a stronger basis than whether I simply feel it in my heart. The resurrection is established by the testimony of credible witnesses whose motives and testimony are unimpeachable if you look thoroughly at the facts and the evidence. Christ lives. He lives because He’s risen from the dead. And because faith is based upon that platform of solidity, of rocklike quality, we can somehow weather these moments in life when there are a lot of questions we have about a lot of things.

I find I have a whole lot more questions about everything. But the essentials in life, I’m more certain of than ever before. The more mature I get, the more simplistic my faith becomes. Not simple, but simplistic. What is important is Jesus, who He says that He is. Is He the Lord? Has He risen from the dead? Have I received His grace and His forgiveness? Am I building my life on the rocklike principles He told me to? Those are the key things. And within that context of solid faith, we have a lot of things that happen to us that we maybe don’t have the answers to right now, but if we don’t have the answers to the “what’s” or the “why’s” of life, we know the “Who” in life. I can ask, “Why?” and not get the answer. But the most important answer is who you know, not what you know, and not why something happened. If your faith is in Christ, you can stand those terrible moments, when it looks like the adversities in life are like an ocean that’s run amuck at high tide and is beating against the wharf, threatening to destroy everything. Your anchor will hold if it’s in Christ. If it’s in a human personality, if it’s in a doctrine, if it’s in a church, if it’s in a pleasant frame of mind, if it’s in a subjective feeling, a state of feeling

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wonderful—if it's in any one of those things when you hit the time of adversity, you're going to plow under. But if your faith is in Christ, it'll stand the test and it will emerge from the test stronger, wiser and more supple and more vibrant, being more of a resource to other people. Those are the five things that I would look at and ask for when going through a difficult time. I suspect that in any difficult time we've had at least one of those factors present and maybe more than one. God is with us in those times.

Closing Prayer

Lord, I pray especially for those who in this season of life are in such a hard time. So many hands went up expressing, "Yes, I know what it is to be in a hard time." I think of that wonderful Scripture where You say that You have the stars of the church that represent the pastors of the church in Your right hand (Revelation 2:1). If You have the leadership in Your hand, You also have the individual members in Your hand. It's good to know that our faith does not depend upon our grasp of You, because that grasp at times gets somewhat tenuous and feeble. If we are a drowning person, which is so often how we feel when we're in tragedy, we have a weak hold on our rescuer. If our salvation depends upon our being able to hold on to our rescuer, we could be in a whole lot of trouble. We depend upon the strong arm of the rescuer, the strong grasp, the strong clutch of the Savior, to carry us in the moments when we do not have strength to carry ourselves. We count upon that this evening in our own life. We ask for Your strong strength to be upon us. We can count upon You not to let us go. We can count upon You not to abandon us. We can count upon You to be with us and to keep hold of us, lest we lose our step and fall. Help us, Lord. Strengthen us. We pray in Your name, through Christ, our Lord. Amen.