

POWER IN PRAISE

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The Power in Praise
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The Power in Praise

Jim's father had been an alcoholic for thirty years. All those years Jim's mother, and later Jim and his young wife, had prayed that God would heal him, but with no apparent result. Jim's father refused to admit that he had a problem with alcohol, and stalked out in anger if anyone ever mentioned religion to him.

One day Jim heard me speak about the power that is released when we begin to praise God for everything in our lives instead of only pleading with Him to change the circumstances that hurt us. It struck him that he had never tried praising God for his father's condition. Excitedly he shared the thought with his wife.

"Honey, let's thank God that Dad's alcoholism is part of His wonderful plan for Dad's life!"

For the rest of that day they gave thanks and praised God for every aspect of the situation, and by evening they felt a new sense of excitement and expectation.

The next day the parents came over for the usual Sunday dinner visit. Always before, Jim's father had cut the visit as short as possible, leaving right after dinner. This time, over a cup of coffee, he suddenly asked a pointed question.

"What do you think about this Jesus Revolution?" He turned to Jim. "I saw something about it on the news last night. Is it just a fad, or is something happening to those kids?"

The question led to a lengthy and open discussion about Christianity. The elder couple didn't leave till late in the evening.

Within weeks Jim's father came to admit his drinking problem, turned for help to Jesus, and was completely healed. He now joins the rest of the family in telling others what praising God can do!

"Just think," Jim said to me. "For thirty years we prayed for God to change Dad. We spent only one day praising Him for the situation and look what happened!"

The phrases "Praise the Lord!" or "Thank God!" are used so glibly by many of us that we tend to lose sight of their real meaning.

Praise, according to *Webster's* dictionary, means to extol, laud, honor, acclaim, express approval. To praise, then, is to give positive affirmation, expressing our approval of something. Giving our approval means that we accept or agree with what we approve of. So to praise God for a difficult situation, a sickness or disaster, means literally that we accept and approve of it happening as part of God's plan for our lives.

We can't really praise God without being thankful for the thing we are praising Him for. And we can't really be thankful without being happy about whatever we're thankful for. Praising, then, involves both gratitude and joy.

The very fact that we praise God also means that we are accepting the fact that God is responsible for what is happening. Otherwise it would make little sense thanking Him for it.

"Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (1Thes.5:16-18).

I've met many people who are able to praise God for their circumstances simply because they accept the word of the Bible that they are supposed to praise God in everything. Praising Him, they soon experience the results of an attitude of consistent thanksgiving and joy; and in turn, their faith is strengthened.

Others find it a little more difficult. "I just don't understand," they say.

We're not supposed to push our understanding out of the way, grit our teeth, and say, "It doesn't make sense to me, but I'll praise the Lord if it kills me, if that's the only way I can get out of this mess!"

That's not praising, that's manipulating. We've all tried to manipulate God, and He loves us too much to let us get away with it. We are to praise God with our understanding, not in spite of it.

Our understanding gets us into trouble when we try to figure out why and how God brings certain circumstances into our lives. We can never understand why and how God does something, but He wants us to accept that He does it. This is the basis of our praise. God wants us to understand that He loves us and that He has a plan for us.

"We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom.8:28).

Are you surrounded by difficult circumstances right now? Have you been struggling to understand why they have come to you? Then try to accept that God loves you and has allowed those circumstances because He knows they are good for you. Praise Him for what He has brought into your life.

One couple heard me speak on praising God for everything and went home quite disturbed. For months they had grieved over the condition of their daughter who had been committed to a mental institution and had been diagnosed as hopelessly insane.

Prayer groups across the country had been asked to intercede for her, and daily the parents had pleaded with God on their knees to heal their daughter. Her condition remained unchanged.

Their initial response to the challenge that they should praise God for the condition of their daughter had left them distraught and unhappy.

But finally they decided, "We have nothing to lose, do we? Why don't we try it?"

They knelt together. "Dear God," the husband began, "we know that You love us and that You love our daughter even more than we do. We're going to

trust that You're working out in her life what You know is best for her; so we thank You for her sickness, thank You that she's in the hospital, thank You for the doctors who haven't found a way to help her. We praise You for Your wisdom and love toward us ... "

The longer they prayed that day, the more they became convinced that God was indeed doing what was best.

The next morning the hospital psychiatrist called.

"Sir, there's been a remarkable change in your daughter," he said. "I suggest you come and see her."

Within two weeks she was released from the hospital.

A year later a young man came up to me after a meeting. He introduced himself as the girl's brother and told me that she was married, expecting a baby, and "is the happiest girl in the world!"

A mother came and wanted prayer for her daughter who was a go-go dancer in a nightclub. I told her I would be glad to pray with her and thank God for her daughter's situation. She looked at me in horror.

"Don't tell me I'm supposed to thank God that my daughter mocks common decency and laughs at religion."

The mother was faced with a difficult choice. All her life she had been conditioned to thank God for everything good and blame the Devil for everything bad. Together we searched the pages of my Bible for verses stating that God is able to work all things for good for those who love and trust Him, and that He wants us to be thankful in everything, regardless of how bad our situation appears.

"You can go on thinking that your daughter's situation is controlled by the Devil--and by your lack of faith in God's supreme power make it difficult for Him to work out His perfect plan for her--or you can believe that God is at work, thank Him for everything, and thereby release His power to work in her life."

At last the mother agreed to try.

"I don't understand why it has to be this way," she said, "But I am going to trust that God knows what He's doing and I'm going to thank Him for it."

We prayed together, and the mother went away with a new peace in her heart about the whole situation.

Later she told me what happened.

That same night her daughter was dancing nearly nude on her little platform when a young man came into the nightclub. He walked up to the girl, looked straight at her and said, "Jesus really loves you!"

The go-go dancer was used to hearing all kinds of remarks from young men, but never anything like this. She came down from her platform, sat down with the young man at a table and asked, "Why did you say that?"

He explained that he happened to be walking down the street when he felt that God was urging him to go into that particular nightclub and tell the go-go dancer that Jesus Christ was offering her the free gift of eternal life.

Stunned, the girl stared at him; then tears filled her

eyes, and quietly she said, "I'd like to receive that gift."

And she did, right there at the table in the nightclub.

Praising God is not a magic formula for success. It is a way of life that is solidly backed up in God's Word. We praise God not for the expected results, but for the situation just as it is.

As long as we praise God with an eye secretly looking for the expected results, we're only kidding ourselves, and nothing will happen to change us or our situation.

Praise is based on a total and joyful acceptance of the present as part of God's loving, perfect will for us. Praise is not based on what we think or hope will happen in the future.

We praise God not for what we expect will happen in or around us, but we praise Him for what He is and where and how we are *right now!*

It is, of course, a fact that when we honestly praise God, something *does* happen as a result. His power obviously flows into the situation, and we will notice, sooner or later, a change in us or around us. The change may be that we come to experience a real joy and happiness in the midst of what once appeared to be a miserable situation, or the situation may change. But this is a *result* of praise and must not be the *motivation* for praise.

Praise is not a bargaining position. We don't say, "I'll praise You so that You can bless me, Lord."

To praise God is to delight ourselves in Him, and the psalmist wrote, "Delight thyself also in the Lord; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart" (Psa.37:4).

Notice the order of importance here. We don't make a list of our heart's desires and then delight ourselves in the Lord in order to get them. We're first to be delighted, and once we've experienced being really delighted with God, we'll discover that everything else becomes secondary. Still, it is true that God does want to give us all our heart's desires. If we could only learn to be delighted with the Lord in everything first!

God has a perfect plan for our lives, but He cannot move us to the next step of His plan until we joyfully accept our present situation as part of that plan. What happens next is God's move, not ours.

Some people would like to deny that fact. They look at the transformation taking place in the lives of people who have learned to praise God for everything, and they insist that the explanation is a simple one.

"A changed attitude brings about changed circumstances," they say. "It is simple psychology. When you stop complaining and start smiling, you feel different; others treat you differently, and your whole life can undergo a dramatic change for the better."

I will agree that the formula, "Smile and the world will smile with you; cry and you cry alone," is a reasonably sound piece of advice--up to a point. But praising God is something more than a change in our own attitude.

When we sincerely accept and thank God for a situation, believing that He has brought it about, there is released into that situation a supernatural, divine

force that brings about changes beyond what can be explained as an unfolding of natural events.

While I was serving as a chaplain at Fort Benning, Georgia, a young soldier brought his wife to my office for help. She was suffering with horrible flashbacks from LSD, and the doctors had been unable to prescribe a cure. Fear and pain had etched deep lines into her pretty face.

"I can't sleep," she said. "I can't even close my eyes for a minute without seeing horrible animals rushing at me."

Her husband explained that whenever his wife fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, she would begin to scream almost immediately.

"I try to shake her awake, but sometimes it takes as long as ten minutes to bring her back to consciousness, and all that time she screams with an anguish that is driving me to despair as well," he said.

I listened to their tragic story and said, "I have only one suggestion. Please kneel with me, and let us thank God that you are like you are."

They both stared at me. Carefully I explained how I had learned that God wants us to be thankful for all things.

"Everything that has happened in your life so far has served to bring you to this very point," I said. "I believe God loves you and is going to do something very wonderful for you. Now He wants you to thank Him for everything that has brought you to Him."

I leafed through my Bible and showed them the scriptures I had underlined.

They both accepted what they heard and knelt to thank God for everything in their lives, particularly for the flashbacks from drugs. I could feel the presence of God in the room.

"The Holy Spirit is making it clear that He is healing you right now," I said. I placed my hand on the girl's head and prayed, "Thank You, Lord, for healing this girl right now."

She opened her eyes and looked amazed.

"Something has happened to me. When I closed my eyes to pray, I didn't see anything!"

"Jesus has healed you," I said. "Now He wants to come into your life as your Savior. Will you accept Him?"

Both the girl and her husband eagerly said, "Yes!" Still on their knees, they asked Jesus to come into their lives. Then they walked out of my office rejoicing.

The girl's healing was permanent. Never again did the flashbacks return. The power of the drug over her mind had been broken by the power of God.

This kind of change cannot be brought about by a new attitude or a determined effort of self-will. This is God's power at work in human lives.

Any form of sincere prayer opens the door for God's power to move into our lives. But the prayer of praise releases more of God's power than any other form of petition. The Bible gives examples which demonstrate this fact again and again.

"But Thou art holy, O Thou that inhabitest the praises of Israel," we read in Psalm 22:3. No wonder

God's power and presence is near when we praise Him. He actually dwells, inhabits, resides, in our praises!

A remarkable example of how God works while we praise Him is found in 2 Chronicles 20.

Jehoshaphat was king of Judah, and one day he discovered that his little kingdom was surrounded by the powerful armies of his enemies--the Moabites, the Ammonites, and the Edomites. Jehoshaphat knew that little Judah didn't have a chance in its own might, and he cried out to God:

"O our God, ... we have no might against this great company that cometh against us; neither know we what to do: but our eyes are upon Thee" (2Chron.20:12).

An important step in the act of praising God is to take our eyes off the threatening circumstances and look to God instead. Notice that Jehoshaphat wasn't just closing his eyes to the threat against his kingdom or pretending the enemies weren't there.

He took careful stock of the situation, recognized his own helplessness, and turned to God for help.

We are not to be blind to the very real threats of evil in our lives. Seeing them for what they are only gives us greater cause to praise and thank God for working in them with perfect control and authority. But we are not to be preoccupied with the appearance of evil around us. See it, admit our helplessness to cope with it in our own strength, then turn to God.

God said to Jehoshaphat, "Be not afraid or dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours, but God's" (2Chron.20:15).

Now that is a tremendous statement, I think. We don't have the power to deal with the circumstances of our lives, so obviously, the battle isn't ours, but God's!

"Ye shall not need to fight in this battle: set yourselves, stand ye still, and see the salvation of the Lord..."

The next morning Jehoshaphat gave the orders to his army. "He appointed singers to sing to the Lord and praise Him as they went out before the army, saying, Praise the Lord, for His mercy endureth for ever!" (2Chron.20:21).

This scene took place right in front of the massed ranks of the enemy--armies ready to slaughter the men of Judah. Can you imagine the reaction of their captains as they saw the small band of singers coming out on the battlefield against them?

I've been a chaplain in the army for many years and I've seen men prepare for many battles. But I've never seen a commanding general order his troops to stand still right in front of the enemy lines while a special band of singers went out ahead singing praises to God.

It sounds like a pretty far-fetched idea, doesn't it? It is in this kind of situation that our understanding is most likely to balk.

"It's all well and good to praise the Lord when we're in a tough spot," we may say, "but let's not be ridiculous. God helps those who help themselves. The least we can do is go out there and fight as valiantly as

we know how. Then we'll leave the rest to Him."

But what happened to Jehoshaphat and his men?

"And when they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments against the men ... who had come against Judah, and they were slaughtered" (2Chron.20:22-23).

I think it is safe to assume that if Jehoshaphat had decided that "he'd better play it safe" and had ordered his men to fight, the outcome would have been very different.

Many of us are constantly defeated by the circumstances around us because we aren't ready to accept that the battle is God's, not ours. Even when we realize our own powerlessness to cope with the enemy, we are afraid to let go and trust ourselves to God's power. This is where we've allowed our own understanding to assume the wrong position in our lives. We say, "I don't understand; therefore I don't dare believe."

God's Word makes it clear that the only way out of that dilemma is the step of faith on our part. Believing that God's promises are valid, accepting them, and daring to trust in them leads to understanding. The principle in the Bible is very clear here: Acceptance comes *before* understanding.

Jehoshaphat would never have dared follow God's plan for the battle if he had insisted on understanding it. God's proposal and promise undoubtedly staggered and went beyond Jehoshaphat's understanding. But Jehoshaphat, we read in the account, was a man who believed and trusted God.

Joshua was another leader who received battle orders from God that must have staggered his understanding and challenged his willingness to accept what must have seemed absurd to many who watched.

The city of Jericho was a fortified stronghold, and the Israelites who had wandered for forty years in the wilderness certainly didn't have the weapons or the power to take the city. But Joshua believed God when He promised to deliver the enemies of Israel into their hands.

God told Joshua to march around Jericho six days in a row. On the seventh day they were to blow their trumpets and shout. "And the wall of the enclosure shall fall down in its place, and the people shall go up [over it] every man straight before him" (Josh.6:5).

Joshua trusted God, but I wonder what you or I would have thought and said if we'd been among his followers. Would we have grumbled and balked at his foolhardy suggestion? I wonder what the inhabitants of Jericho thought as they stood on the sturdy fortified walls of their city and watched the Israelites march around them.

At one time I used to think that the story of Joshua and the battle of Jericho was a mixture of myth, exaggeration, and fairy tale. But archeologists have located the ruins of old Jericho and found ample evidence that the walls of the city did collapse at a time in history corresponding to the biblical record. The walls of Jericho *did* come tumbling down. The power of God was at work while His people showed their trust

and confidence by praising Him with trumpets and shouts.

The examples of Jehoshaphat and Joshua clearly demonstrate that God wins our victories by means and principles that look utterly foolish and contradictory to our human wisdom and strategies.

We are told to trust Him, praise Him, and watch Him work. This is essentially how Jesus operated during His time of ministry in Israel. He openly admitted that of Himself He could do nothing; His part was to submit to His Father's will in perfect obedience, trust, and faith, so that God's power could meet the needs of the people. Let's look at a couple of Jesus' prayers concerning a difficult problem.

There was the case of the 5,000 who had followed Him out of town to hear Him preach. They were hungry. The only food available was one little boy's lunch--five loaves of bread and two fishes.

How did Jesus pray? Did He plead with God to perform a miracle?

"When He had taken the five loaves and the two fishes, He looked up to Heaven, *and blessed*, and brake the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and the two fishes divided He among them all. And they did all eat, and were filled. And they took up twelve baskets full of the fragments, and of the fishes" (Mark 6:41-43).

Some of us may object here and say, "But that was Jesus; He *knew* what God could do. It wouldn't work for *us!*"

But Jesus told His followers, "He that believeth on Me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto My Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:12-13).

Jesus said we could do even *greater* things.

When Jesus was confronted with the death of Lazarus, He again prayed a simple prayer of thanksgiving. When the stone was rolled away from the grave opening where Lazarus had been buried for four days, Jesus lifted His eyes and said, "Father, thank You for hearing Me" (John 11:41). Then He commanded Lazarus to come from the grave. And the man who had been dead four days walked out!

The Bible says that Jesus came to earth to make it possible for us to praise God. Isaiah the prophet foretold Jesus' coming and said that He would come "to preach good tidings unto the meek ... to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound ... to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; ... to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; ... that He might be glorified" (Isa.61:1-3).

You may recognize your own condition on the list. Are you brokenhearted? Bound by physical limitations, sickness, spiritual limitations? In physical prison, or imprisoned by your own spiritual blindness? Are you mourning? Unable to rejoice, be thankful, or praise

God? Is your spirit heavily burdened and failing?

Perhaps it is because you haven't fully accepted and understood the Good News Jesus came to bring.

Praise is an active response to what we *know* that God has done and is doing for us in our lives and in this world through His Son Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

If we doubt in our hearts what God has done and is doing, we cannot wholeheartedly praise Him. Uncertainty about the Good News will always be a barrier to praise. If we want to be able to praise God in everything, we need to be sure our foundation is solid and without cracks of doubt and uncertainty.

Count It All Joy!

"My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into diverse temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing" (James 1:2-4).

God brings certain people into our lives just to show us how incapable we are of loving others in our own strength. He doesn't do it to make us feel bad; He does it to give us an opportunity to experience His transforming love in our life and in the lives of the people He has called us to love.

Do you thank Him for the people in your life who are difficult to love? Do you have a cranky neighbor? A difficult boss? Praise God for them, because He loves you and wants to make your joy full by making it possible for you to love them. He loves them too, and wants to use you as a channel for His love to them.

I think perhaps the most wonderful and most challenging opportunities to love come in our own homes, right where we live. Does your husband or wife have certain qualities that rub you the wrong way? Are your parents difficult to live with? Your children rebellious?

Love one another, Jesus said. Accept one another; thank God for one another.

It isn't easy to thank God for an alcoholic husband or for an indifferent, rebellious child. It isn't easy to love someone who says he doesn't want our love.

It isn't easy to admit that beam in our eye, the self-righteousness, the self-pity, the role we've played as a long-suffering martyr. Can we thank God for bringing the people into our lives to show us the beam in our eye?

Can we thank God for them, just as they are, and especially for the things that make them hard to love? Can we confess our inability to love them for their irritating habits? Can we tell God we *want* to love them and then submit ourselves to Him to be remolded, remade, so that we can love them perfectly, according to His will and plan for us?

Then we can confidently expect God to work a miracle in us. It may happen instantaneously; we feel a wonderful spark of love, and of course we rejoice and praise the Lord for that. But watch out and don't become dependent on feelings. That first spark may die down, and we may sit around waiting for a second

touch without doing anything in the meantime.

To love, deliberately and intentionally, as Jesus loves us, always requires the setting of our will. Whether we *feel* any love to begin with or not doesn't change the fact that we *do* love. God will show us practical and specific ways to communicate that love to the person He has placed in our life, and soon we will experience and sense a deeper love than any we've ever felt before. Our love will be stable and consistent, because it flows from a source beyond our own limited resources. It is God's love filling us to overflowing, spilling over to others through us. This is what it means to be rooted in God's love; and in that fertile soil, our own ability to love will grow and grow.

A Christian woman had been married to an alcoholic for many years until finally he got into trouble with the law and ended up in prison. The wife had struggled to raise their children on the meager welfare allowance they received from the state. Faithfully she had brought them to church and enjoyed the sympathy and respect of her community.

"Poor Edna," her friends would say. "She's raised those kids alone, never missed a Sunday in church, and never a word of complaint. While that good-for-nothing husband of hers never has been able to hold down a job, lying drunk most of the time to the disgrace and shame of his fine family..."

While her husband was in prison, Edna felt justified in getting a divorce. Now at last, she would be free to raise her children in a better environment.

One day a friend brought her a copy of *Prison to Praise*.

It seemed an almost impossible task to thank God for all the years of misery she had suffered, but she read how praise had changed the lives of others, and she decided to try it.

"Thank you for Al and his drinking," she prayed. "Thank you for the years of poverty and fear and loneliness."

Soon she heard that her former husband had been released from prison and had gone back to his old drinking habits. Still she continued to thank God for her circumstances.

Slowly she became aware of some things in her own life that she had never seen before. As she continued to thank God for her ex-husband, asking God to help her love him and accept him just as he was, she began to realize that for years she'd been guilty of something far more serious than drinking.

She'd been looking at the mote in her husband's eye and been totally unaware of the beam in her own. She had judged him for his drinking, feeling self-righteous and worthier than he was, and at the same time she'd lived each day steeped in self-pity, depression, and joyless martyrdom.

"Oh, Lord," she finally cried out one day, "I see that my sin has been so much graver than Al's. You gave us the commandment to love one another and to rejoice in our trials, and I didn't love or find any joy. Forgive me, Lord, and thank You for putting Al in my life so I could see myself. Now make it up to him. Heal

the hurts he's suffered, and touch him with Your love."

From that day on, Edna found it easy to rejoice in her circumstances. She *knew* God had brought them about as a part of His plan to fill her life with love and joy. As she continued to praise Him, all the old feelings of self-pity and depression rolled away; each day became a new, joyous experience, and she was aware of the presence of Jesus in a new, exciting way.

Before long her former husband stumbled into a church service, accepted Jesus as his Savior, and was completely healed of the alcoholism which had held him bound for fifteen years. Edna and Al remarried, and Al enrolled in college to start a brand-new life of serving God.

A difficult relationship or a trying set of circumstances may be God's loving way of providing us with an opportunity to grow, to exercise our spiritual muscles, or it may be His loving way of exposing a particular weakness or error in us.

Whatever the reason, we have grounds to rejoice. Any weakness, however well hidden, is like a crack in the foundation of a building.

Sooner or later, a crack in the foundation will cause the entire building to fall down. The cracks we are aware of, we can do something about. We can confess all our known sins and weaknesses and be assured that once they are confessed, they are also forgiven, and God's love covers and heals the scars and the memories. But what about the hidden cracks, the hidden sins that come to the surface only as a vague sense of restlessness, insecurity, confusion, resentment, or any number of such symptoms we all know from experience?

Self-reliance and self-assurance are always serious cracks in our foundation. If God brings us into circumstances that reveal an area of life where we've been relying on ourselves, shouldn't we thank Him for our helplessness and rejoice in the power He can give us?

A young man in officer's training at Fort Benning, Georgia, found himself in circumstances he couldn't cope with.

"I need help, or I'll go out of my mind," he told me.

He had always been sure he could face every circumstance in life with success. His self-assurance bordered on cockiness. But since coming to officer candidate school, he had found himself unable to function as before, and his self-image and entire outlook on life was shattered.

The rigorous training for officer candidates is designed not only to teach the young men their duties as army officers, but is also meant to expose any weakness in the candidate that might endanger the lives of his men in combat. A certain stress is deliberately put on the candidates to test what "stuff" they are made of; if any are going to crack under pressure, it is better to find out before they are put in charge of troops.

The instructors had sensed that this particular candidate was unsure of himself under the mask of self-sufficiency he wore. The pressure had been put

on. From early morning until late at night he was under surveillance. Every move he made was criticized.

"Can't you move faster, candidate?"

"Are you too dumb to follow instructions?"

"Do you want your mother to help you?"

"Run around the building once more, candidate-- maybe you'll learn to pick up your feet!"

The confidence the candidate had felt in himself was rapidly diminishing. Humiliated and helpless, he was at his wit's end, ready to desert the army and leave the country if necessary to get away from his persecutors.

As we talked, he told me that he'd never really believed in God, and the Bible had never made much sense to him. But if there was a God who could help him, he wanted to believe.

I shared with him what the Bible had to say about his circumstances, that God had a perfect plan for his life, that the trials he was going through were part of that plan, and that God would relieve all the tension and stress if he would only turn over the reins of his life to Him and thank Him for everything.

The candidate looked drawn; his face and eyes showed the strain and lack of sleep.

"I've never been in this kind of spot before." He shook his head. "I'm at the end of my rope, and now you're telling me that God placed me in this predicament?"

"Let's say that God allowed it to happen," I said. "I'm sure He would rather have had you turn to Him and accept His provisions for your life without having to go through all this suffering. But since you kept insisting you could handle your life without help, God chose the most direct, most loving way to show you that you needed Him."

The candidate looked thoughtful, and agreed to let me pray for him, although he wasn't at all sure it would do any good.

I placed my hand on his head and began to praise God for the situation, asking God to give the young, candidate a new understanding of His love and concern for every detail of his life. As I prayed, he began to tremble; then tears began to flow. After a while he began to laugh out loud.

"Praise You, God," he cried. "Thank You, God; I see You care; I believe You love me."

He turned to me, his face beaming.

"God really did bring me to officer candidate school, didn't He?" he said. "He knew this is where I'd find the answer. I feel like a new person."

And indeed he was. He accepted Jesus as his Savior and went on to complete OCS with excellent standing.

The crisis point in his life had revealed a serious crack in his foundation. When he could acknowledge and thank God for His hand in the circumstances, the crack was healed.

Circumstances that rip out the walls of our own self-sufficiency are God's blessings in disguise. We can truly thank God for them and praise Him for every blow that removes more of the illusion that we have the

ability to handle our own situation. The more we praise Him, the easier the transition will be. Our joy will increase, and the pain will hardly be noticeable. We'll also discover that the more trying the circumstances, the more we will realize the real strength and power of Christ dwelling and growing in us.

Each challenge, each trial or opportunity for growth makes us better equipped to be channels for His love and power.

One young woman lost her husband suddenly. They had no children, and she felt indescribably lonely. When she went to seek comfort and sympathy from her own family, they refused to speak to her, and behaved as if she didn't exist.

She couldn't understand this total rejection. Her family had never treated her like this before, and the anguish of being alone and unwanted was more than she could bear. Her body was in pain, she was unable to sleep, and she began to lose weight rapidly.

Day and night she cried alone in her house, until she began to lose track of time. She realized that her mind was slipping.

Then one day she saw *Prison to Praise* in a local bookstore. She read on the back cover that the author was an army chaplain and put the book back on the counter. Her husband had been in the army when he died, and she was afraid of a fresh flood of memories. She went home empty-handed, but the title of the little book stayed in her mind all day, and one thought persisted: *Read it! Read it!*

She'd never felt such an urge to read anything before, and puzzled by the sense of urgency, she went back to the bookstore and purchased the little volume.

At home she began to read, and soon her tears started flowing. She was certain that God was speaking directly to her through the book, yet the message was an incredible one. Was He actually telling her to thank Him that her husband was dead? How could God be so cruel? Everything in her seemed to rebel against the idea. Yet, as she read on, her sobs became more quiet and a new peace entered her heart. Slowly her thoughts began to take a new turn.

God has been in everything to help me, she thought. He knew that with my husband alive I would never have sought Him! If my brother and his family had comforted me with kindness and love, I would have clung to them. Now I'm completely alone, and I'm coming to God. Oh, Jesus, I feel Your presence! You are here with me, and I praise and thank God for everything that brought me to You!

The peace she felt in her heart was greater than anything she'd ever known before, and for the next several days her life radiated with a joy that astounded her friends and neighbors who had watched with growing concern how she had been broken down by grief.

Soon her brother came to see her with a tearful confession:

"Can you forgive me?" he said. "There's been a terrible misunderstanding. Someone told us that you had told your neighbor that we had refused to give you

any help when your husband was dying. We were foolish enough to believe them and felt so shocked and hurt that we didn't want to see you or talk to you." The brother was overcome with shame. "Today we heard that the people had been talking about another widow! And to think that we left you alone when you needed us the most."

"Don't be sorry," the young widow cheerfully replied. "Be thankful you made the mistake!"

"What do you mean, Sis?" The brother was not sure he'd heard right. "I let you down when you really needed me; do you want me to thank God for that?"

"That's right," she laughed, "If you hadn't turned your back on me, I wouldn't have discovered just how much God loves me!"

"This is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? But if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God" (1Pet.2:19-20).

A Christian officer candidate at Fort Benning received word that his wife had been committed to a mental hospital after a severe breakdown. The doctors gave a poor prognosis for her recovery and said that she would have to be in the hospital for an indefinite time.

When John came into my office, he could not speak at first. I watched his tall frame shake with sobs and tears coursed down his grief-lined face.

"Why, oh, why did it happen?" He fought to utter the words. "My wife and I have tried to live good Christian lives; why has God deserted us now?"

"God hasn't deserted you," I said. "He has a real purpose in letting your wife go to the hospital. Why don't we kneel and thank Him for it?"

John stared at me. "Sir, I'm a Lutheran, and I've never read anything like that in my Bible!"

"What about this verse?" I suggested. "Always give thanks for everything to our God and Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph.5:20).

John shook his head. "I know that verse," he said. "I've always thought it meant to thank God for good things. Thanking Him for bad things just doesn't seem scriptural. I always thought Paul was a little extreme when he wrote about taking pleasure in infirmities."

"I used to think so, too," I said. "But I've become convinced that Paul is right. When he speaks about rejoicing in infirmities, he obviously doesn't mean we are supposed to find pain pleasurable in itself. But Paul had come to see his suffering from a different perspective. He had learned that his pain served a higher purpose and was part of God's loving plan for him."

John looked thoughtful. "I just don't know," he said slowly.

"Paul learned his lesson the hard way, too," I went on. "Remember his 'thorn in the flesh'?"

John nodded.

"Three times Paul asked to have it removed. He was obviously not rejoicing in his pain right then. And

three times God answered him, 'No. But I am with you; that is all you need. My power shows up best in weak people.' Now I am glad to boast about how weak I am; I am glad to be a living demonstration of Christ's power, instead of showing off my own power and abilities" (2Cor.12:9).

"Paul wasn't happy about his infirmities for their own sake," I continued. "He went on to tell the Corinthians, 'Since I know it is all *for Christ's good*, I am quite happy about "the thorn," and about insults and hardships, persecutions and difficulties; for when I am weak, then I am strong--the less I have, the more I depend on him'" (2Cor.12:10).

John leafed thoughtfully through his Bible.

"I have faith that God is working in all things," he said at last. "But the rejoicing part is really hard for me."

"If we say we have faith but can't rejoice, doesn't that mean we haven't really committed ourselves to trusting that God is doing what is best?" I suggested.

John sat in silence, then he nodded with determination.

"I believe you're right," he said. "I want to try it."

We knelt together, and John's tall frame shook with sobs as he prayed, "Lord, I know You love my wife more than I do. I believe You're working out a wonderful plan for us."

The tears were flowing freely down his face, but his eyes shone with a new confidence.

"God is doing the right thing, Chaplain," he said. "I know it."

A few days later John applied for compassionate transfer so that he could be near his wife. The request was eventually granted, and he came to say good-bye.

"Wait till you hear the best part," he said excitedly. "God has promised to heal my wife the moment I see her if I place my hands on her head and say, 'In Jesus' name be healed.'"

I felt a twinge of doubt. What if John in his eagerness was jumping ahead of God? Then I, too, felt the assurance of the Holy Spirit, and placed my hand on John in a parting prayer.

"Father, you say that if two agree on earth concerning anything we ask for, You will do it for us [Mat.18:19]. So now I agree with John that the moment he touches his wife, You will heal her."

Two weeks later John's letter came.

"It happened just like Jesus told us it would. My wife was standing in the psychiatrist's office when I first saw her. She looked terrible. The lines in her face and the fear in her eyes almost convinced me she was beyond help. But I knew I had to obey what God had told me, and so I walked over and put my hands on her. The moment I touched her, something like a shock went through her, and I knew she was healed. I told the psychiatrist that she was healed, and he looked at me as if he thought I needed to be admitted. But they called me the next day, and the psychiatrist said, "I don't know how to account for it, but your wife seems to be well!" My wife is home now, happier than she's ever been before. She has been strengthened by the

afflictions she suffered, and she now joins me in being thankful for all things. We've learned how much of Jesus' healing power is released when we praise Him."

God's strength can replace our weakness when we come to Him, recognizing and admitting where we fall short. But so often we're ashamed to confess that we are weak, afraid that others and God will not accept us as we really are. This kind of thinking is rooted in the wrong idea that we must earn or deserve God's love.

A Christian general came to me one day and confessed that the strain of presenting a perfect image before his men was about to kill him. As we talked, I realized that this man, whom I'd often admired for his outward poise and confidence, had never been able to accept himself as he really was. He was obsessed by the fear that if he should ever relax, he would grievously disappoint his family and his men.

I suggested that it would ease his tension if he would thank God for having created him exactly as he was.

"You mean, as I am today? Filled with fear and tension?" he asked, and I nodded.

"Do you think the God who created this universe and placed the stars in the heavens was any less careful when He created you? Nor has He been careless with the circumstances He has allowed into your life in order to show you how much He loves you."

The general came to several sessions in my office. Gradually he came to accept that God had a perfect plan for his life and that the continual stress he'd felt was serving the purpose of bringing him to trust God.

He began to praise God for his anxieties, and a sense of peace slowly replaced the old habits of fear. For the first time in his life he was happy to be himself.

"As long as I thought that God couldn't love me with my weaknesses, I tried to hide them and consequently drifted farther and farther from the truth," he told me.

"As soon as I was able to admit I was weak, and thank God for having made me that way, His love began to transform me, and He began to fill me with His peace."

The paths of God are the paths of praise!

All Things Work Together for Good

When we refuse to see God's hand in every situation around us, we are like the pot arguing with its maker. We say, "Now if I were God, I certainly wouldn't do it *that* way. I wouldn't send an earthquake to Peru or let that little girl die of leukemia or allow that preacher to thunder untruth from the pulpit!"

God knows how we feel about these things and how limited our understanding is. He spoke through the prophet Isaiah:

"My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall My word be

that goeth forth out of My mouth: it shall not return unto Me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isa.55:8–11).

Acceptance of God's will and plan must come before understanding. We must deliberately set aside our own desire for knowledge and comprehension of what God is doing, and throw the weight of our will into a decision to trust His Word. His plan for us is good. Can we trust His Word for that?

His plan for Job was good, but it was a plan that tested Job's faith to the utmost and staggered his understanding.

Job was a good man. In fact, God said of him, "There is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man" (Job 1:8).

So what happened to Job? He lost everything he had. His cattle, his crops ... and one day the roof fell in and killed all his children.

If that happened to you or to one of your neighbors, would you say it was God? Or Satan?

In Job's case it was Satan. But how did it come about? Satan came to God and asked His permission to bring the troubles on Job.

Satan may be the actor who acts out his role in the drama of our life, but God is still the Director.

So what was Job's response? He fell down on the ground before God and tore his clothes in grief.

"He said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; *blessed be the name of the Lord*" (Job 1:21). He still praised.

But that wasn't the end of Job's troubles. Satan came and asked permission once more to torment Job, and God gave it.

This time Job was struck with boils all over his body, until he became so disfigured that no one could bear to look at him. His own wife told him to curse God and die, and his neighbors mocked him and turned away. Three of his best friends, who came to tell him that his suffering was caused by his sins, advised him to repent.

Yet Job trusted God. "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15).

In the end, after Job had learned his lessons, the Lord restored his wealth and happiness! In fact, the Lord gave him "twice as much as before" (Job 42:10).

God had a perfect plan for Job. His trials were executed by Satan, but permitted by God to give Job greater faith and wisdom, and to show him just how great and loving God is.

God had a perfect plan for Ruth, the Moabite. Yet it looked for all the world as if misfortune followed her. First she lost her husband. Then she went with her mother-in-law back to Bethlehem and they were so poor that Ruth had to go into the fields of the rich farmers and glean whatever was left after the harvest. But Ruth trusted God, and there in the field she met Boaz, a rich relative of her dead husband. Boaz fell in love with Ruth and they were married. God's plan had worked, and Ruth became the grandmother of King

David.

Or what about God's perfect plan for Joseph? God planned that Joseph would become Pharaoh's right-hand man in Egypt, because God intended to use him, at just the right time, to save the nation of Israel from famine.

Joseph was sold by his brothers as a slave to a caravan of merchants on their way to Egypt. It was the first step in God's plan, but Joseph's brothers had no idea that they were serving God's purpose.

Later Joseph became the trusted servant of an influential Egyptian, and it looked as if he was on his way up the ladder. But he was falsely accused of attempting to rape the Egyptian's wife and was thrown in jail. If that happened to you, would you have accepted it as part of God's perfect plan?

It was in jail that God arranged for Joseph to meet Pharaoh's butler and interpret his dream. Joseph asked the butler to mention him to Pharaoh, and the butler promised, but forgot all about it. Joseph spent another two years in jail, and that surely looked like an unfortunate quirk of fate. But God's timing was perfect. Pharaoh dreamed a strange pair of dreams that no one could interpret. Suddenly the forgetful butler remembered the fellow he'd met in jail a couple of years before. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh, and God told Joseph the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams. Seven years of bountiful harvests would be followed by seven years of severe famine. Pharaoh accepted the interpretation of his dreams, and appointed Joseph to be in charge of the gathering and storage of grain during the seven rich years, and in charge of the distribution of food during the seven lean years to follow.

When Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy grain, he revealed his identity, and they fell down before him, stricken with fear and remorse. But Joseph said, "Don't be angry with yourselves that you did this to me [sold me into slavery], for God did it! He sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives ... It was God who sent me here, not you! ... As for you, you thought evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring about that many people should be kept alive, as they are this day" (Gen.45:5, 8; 50:20).

God meant it for good! We often will admit that God is able to make all things work out to good for us, the way the Bible says, but we sometimes think that God takes whatever happens to us and makes the best of it, sort of a secondhand blessing. But God isn't limited to making the best out of a bad situation. *God has the initiative!* We need to remind ourselves of that.

God had the initiative when Stephen was stoned to death (Acts 7). Stephen was a man full of the Holy Spirit, who served the Lord faithfully. When he was stoned to death, Saul of Tarsus, an angry young persecutor of Christians, was among the spectators.

Would you be able to thank God for the murder of the most Christlike Christian man you know and believe He was using the seeming tragedy for some great good?

Saul of Tarsus became Paul the apostle after a

remarkable conversion experience on the road to Damascus. He experienced his share of what looked like mishaps in spreading the gospel.

Once when Paul and Silas came to Philippi, they were accused of corrupting the city and were stripped and beaten until the blood ran from their bare backs. Then they were put in the inner dungeon of the prison with their feet clamped in stocks. (Acts 16:20–24).

But Paul and Silas didn't think that God had deserted them. They were convinced that God had called them to preach in Philippi, and that He was working in everything to bring about His perfect plan for them. So they didn't whine or complain. They sat there in the dungeon with the blood stiffened on their sore backs and they were praying and singing songs of praise to God.

Suddenly, at midnight, there was a great earthquake, the prison doors flew open, and the chains fell off every prisoner. The jailer was horrified, thinking they had all escaped, and drew his sword to kill himself. But Paul yelled out, assuring him that all the prisoners were there, and the jailer came and threw himself down before their feet. "What must I do to be saved?" he begged.

Beginning with the jailer and his entire family, the people of Philippi received the Gospel (Acts 16).

God had a perfect plan for the city of Philippi. He sent Paul and Silas to be His witnesses there, and they had faith to believe that God was working out His plan, even if He used circumstances they could not have anticipated.

Paul suffered many afflictions. He was stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, bitten by a snake, suffered disease and persecution ... but never did he think that God had stopped directing every incident of his life. He counted it all for joy and an opportunity to praise God. Paul knew that his suffering was working *for* him.

For years I suffered with excruciating headaches. I clung to God's promise of healing, but I couldn't find a clue to the reason for my agony, nor did it go away.

In the meantime, I was tormented with doubts. Over and over I allowed myself to speculate *why* this particular suffering had come my way. The thoughts whirled in my head. "*Why doesn't God do something about your pain? You're praying for others who get healed, but your own pain is still with you.*"

As I suffered and tossed through long, sleepless nights, the thoughts persisted. These thoughts can sound very reasonable when you are racked with pain. But of course, they are a bunch of lies, invented by the master deceiver, Satan himself, who comes near only by permission of God.

Our accuser and tormentor must flee when we draw near to God and take our stand on His Word of truth.

My headaches didn't suddenly go away, but I determined to believe that God wouldn't permit anything to happen to me unless it was for my good. Therefore, the headaches had to be for my good, and I began to praise and thank God for them every time they came. As I did, something wonderful began to

work for me. The more I hurt, the more thankful I became, and with the thanksgiving I experienced a new depth of joy radiating through my entire being.

"As for God, His way is perfect," said the psalmist: "the word of the Lord is tried: He is a buckler to all those that trust in Him" (Psa.18:30).

The way may lead through fierce battles, through raging storms, or fire or flood; yet everywhere, God's presence goes with us, and His hand guides us, says the Bible.

How can we doubt it? All things are under His perfect control.

Why did God cause a storm on the lake when Jesus was there in a boat with His disciples? Only so that His power and authority over the storm could be demonstrated (Mark 4).

Why did God cause a man to be blind from birth? Jesus and His disciples were walking along when they saw a man blind from birth. "Master, His disciples asked him, 'why was this man born blind? Was it a result of his own sins or those of his parents?' 'Neither,' Jesus answered. 'But to demonstrate the power of God.'" Then Jesus went on to heal the man (John 9:2–3).

The disciples looked at the blind man from the viewpoint of human reasoning and understanding; Jesus saw the situation under the perfect control and power of God. Our viewpoint makes all the difference.

I've received hundreds of letters from people who've read *Prison to Praise*. Seventy-five percent of the letters come from people who tell me how they've started praising God for a difficult situation, with amazing results. Twenty-five percent of the letters come from people who tell of the same kinds of situations, but they are not able to believe that God is at work and can't praise Him for it. They are defeated, discouraged, and desperate.

The difference is not in the situation, but in the viewpoint, and consequently in the outcome.

Many write about the death of a close friend or relative.

"Tom suffered so terribly," wrote one lady. "We had taken him to healing services and prayer groups all over the country. He seemed better for a while, and our hopes soared. Then the cancer came back, and after months of agony he died. I can't believe it was God's will that Tom die so young. He was a Christian and wanted to serve God. If God did it all just to teach the rest of us a lesson, why did Tom have to suffer? I can't believe I'm supposed to praise God for what has happened."

Here is another letter:

"Charles accepted Jesus less than a year ago. He was a radiant witness for the Lord. After six months he developed cancer. He had two operations, but the growth in his lungs returned. He called the elders of his church; they anointed him and prayed for his healing. When he went back for his checkup, the growth had disappeared. Charles rejoiced and praised the Lord. Then a few months later he had severe headaches. He went into the hospital for a checkup and was dead in

two days. Brain cancer.

"A pastor friend of the family flew in to preach at the funeral. On the plane he sat down next to a youth. They began to talk; the pastor shared Charles's story and the young boy gave his life to Jesus before the plane landed. In new Orleans the pastor changed flights. On the next leg of his journey he sat next to a young woman. She, too, inquired where he was going, and he told her the story about Charles. Before the plane landed, she had accepted Jesus. The funeral was an occasion to praise the Lord for all He had done in Charles's life. After the funeral, two men accepted Christ on the sidewalk outside the chapel. Charles's body was flown to his home town for burial. During the ceremony, I couldn't take my eyes off the face of the young widow. She was radiant with an inner peace and joy. During the past year she and Charles had come to know the joy in praising God for all things. She told me, 'Death is swallowed up in victory' (1Cor.15:54). I have no reason to weep. Praise God!"

The two letters told of similar circumstances, but what a difference. One is a story of defeat, the other of victory. One sees from the human viewpoint, the other from the heavenly viewpoint.

The Bible tells us that we *can* have the viewpoint of Christ. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil.2:5). "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph.4:23).

Praise releases the power of God into our lives and circumstances, because praise is faith in action. When we trust God fully, He is free to work, and He *always* brings victory. It may be a victory that changes circumstances, or a victory *in* the circumstances. Death may be turned away, or made to lose its sting.

Praise is a permanent acceptance of what God has brought into our lives. We enter this attitude of praise by an act of our will, by a decision to praise God regardless of how we feel.

"What time I am afraid, I will trust in You," wrote David. [By the help of] God I will praise His word, in God I have put my trust" (Psa.56:3-4).

"My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise" (Psa.57:7).

Good-bye Grumbings

Are you in the habit of thanking God only for what you want? And are you in the habit of grumbling a little when things don't go the way you like?

So what's wrong with a little complaining? It's no big thing. What difference does it make?

It makes all the difference in the world. *Everything* depends on how we respond to the little things in life.

A marriage counselor will tell you that a marriage usually breaks up over little things. It takes only a small nail to puncture a tire. A small mistake by a mechanic can cause the crash of a giant airliner. A misunderstanding can start a war. One angry word leads to a shooting. Little things mean a lot, because this is the level where we live, down at the nitty-gritty of our attitude at the breakfast table, or in the long check-

out line at the supermarket on a Friday afternoon.

Grumbling comes so easy to all of us that we often don't realize what we're doing. But grumbling is the very opposite of thanksgiving; a complaint is the opposite of trust; a murmur is the opposite of loving acceptance.

The dictionary defines a complaint as an accusation. By complaining and grumbling you are actually accusing God of mismanaging the details of your day. The attitude of praise releases the power of God into our lives, and the attitude of murmuring and complaining blocks that power.

"Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come" (1Cor.10:10-11).

Forty years the Israelites wandered, and every time something went wrong, they complained bitterly and wanted to go back to the fleshpots of Egypt. Not one of the complainers lived to set foot on the Promised Land.

Our complaints and murmurings against God in the little things can keep us from entering into the perfect plan He has for our lives.

"Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God" (Heb.3:12).

The cause of the Israelites' murmuring was unbelief, and unbelief is at the root of every one of our little complaints.

Webster's dictionary defines unbelief as a "withholding of belief: incredulity or skepticism: a rejection of what is asserted."

If unbelief is a deliberate withholding of belief, then we are responsible for our action, and we must do something about it.

For years I had proudly told myself that I rarely grumbled; that is, I rarely grumbled out loud. I had cultivated and maintained a smiling façade, but I was a habitual grumbler inside. Of course, as long as I didn't think I was guilty of grumbling, I never improved.

I thought *my* kinds of complaints were legitimate. I grumbled when I didn't get enough sleep and had to get out of bed in the morning without feeling rested. I grumbled under my breath if the bathroom was messed up by another member of my family, and I grumbled over my hurried breakfast. I grumbled when things went wrong at the office, and when people didn't do what I expected of them. I grumbled over bills, and when my car wouldn't start, or when I hit a red light on my way to anywhere. I grumbled when I had to work late at the office and didn't get to be on time; and the next morning I started all over again.

When finally the Holy Spirit began to show me what the Bible had to say about thanking God in everything, I began to realize that I'd been doing the opposite for years and never thought a thing about it.

The first step toward rehabilitation was to admit to myself that I was a habitual grumbler.

I believe that the most effective way to deal with our sins is to be specific about them. We admit them,

confess them, ask God's forgiveness, and make a clear-cut decision not to fall into that sin again. We then ask God to remove the sin from us and to give us increased faith and strength to withstand temptation. At last we thank Him for it and proceed on faith, knowing that it has been done.

One of the things I'd grumbled about for years was my lack of musical talent. Whenever I heard beautiful music, I failed to enjoy it fully, because it always made me wish I could play an instrument or sing beautiful solos.

Then one day I was listening to a concert, and the question came into my mind, "Are you thankful that you can't play a musical instrument?"

I recognized the source of the question as the Holy Spirit and squirmed in my seat.

"No, Lord, I guess I'm not."

"Are you willing to be?"

"Yes, Lord, I'm willing. You could have arranged to give me a musical talent and have it trained if you wanted to, so I thank You for how I am, just as You wanted me to be."

As I said it, a great peace flowed into me, and I realized that I was actually happy to be as I am.

"What I wanted you to learn is this," the Holy Spirit said: "If you could make beautiful music, you would please some people, but when you give praise, you always please God."

My lack of musical talent was never a shortcoming in God's eyes, only in my own. I was the one who was dissatisfied with the way God had made me. He was never dissatisfied.

Do you have a favorite grumble about your own life? Do you say to yourself that if you could only have a chance to live it over again, you'd do it differently?

Can you accept that God has you right now exactly where He wants you? That He hasn't overlooked a thing? That He wasn't helpless to interfere back when you made what you think of as your wrong choice?

Sure, there is such a thing as a wrong choice. But the promise of God is that He makes all things, including our own wrong choices, work out for good when we trust Him.

If the Lord shows you that you made a wrong choice years ago when you deliberately chose to go against what you then knew to be God's will for you, confess that wrong choice to Him now, ask His forgiveness, thank Him for it, and ask Him to guide you in making right anything you may have done to wrong others. Then turn the rest of your life, as of this moment, completely over to God's hands and trust that He is now in complete charge. Now praise and thank Him for your *present* circumstances exactly as they are in every detail.

You may discover God's power going to work to move you out of your present circumstances very quickly, or you may find that God's power is transforming you in the midst of the circumstances. Whatever happens, continue to thank Him. For He is in charge.

A Christian businessman made a deeper

commitment of his life to Christ, and shortly thereafter found himself laid off from his highly paid job as an executive. The man searched for another job, but cutbacks in the industry made positions scarce. His family suffered from the financial stress, and his anxieties increased as the bills mounted and his prayers seemed unanswered.

He had been unemployed for a year when he heard me speak one Saturday night about being thankful for all things. It suddenly dawned on him that God probably had a good reason for not having led him to a job, and he began to thank God for his unemployment.

All day Sunday he continued to praise God, and he discovered that his fears and resentments concerning the situation were decreasing. In their place, he felt genuine joy.

Early Monday morning the phone rang. Another executive wanted to know if he could go to work for him.

"Yes, I'm available," said the man.

"How soon can you start?"

"Tomorrow."

"Then be here at 9 a.m., ready to start."

His new job gave an excellent salary, but more important, he was in direct contact with groups of businessmen daily. His witnessing led one man after the other to accept the Lord.

The businessman told me, "As long as I carried resentment over my situation, I was blocking God from doing what He wanted to with my life. As soon as I was able to trust Him and praise Him for my life exactly as it was, He was able to take over and place me where He wanted me."

A young teacher was spending her summer vacation in the mountains when a letter was mailed from the superintendent's office telling her to report for a conference concerning next year's assignment. She didn't get the letter, and when she didn't show up for the conference, her job was given to someone else.

When she returned from her vacation, she discovered that she was unemployed.

Her first impulse was to panic and go home to her parents in another state. School was to start in two weeks; there were no job openings in the district; and she had heavy financial obligations from her college days.

This young lady had just read *Prison to Praise* and recognized her present situation as an opportunity to practice what she'd learned. She quenched the impulse to panic, thanked God that He had allowed her to lose her job, and thanked Him for His perfect plan for her life.

For two days she praised God, fighting back every temptation to despair. On the third day a neighbor talked to her across the back fence.

"You know, you really ought to be teaching in a Christian school," she said. "Why don't you call the principal of the school where my son goes?"

The young teacher did, and discovered to her surprise that a position as first-grade teacher had been left suddenly vacant. She was interviewed and got the

job.

"I know that God was able to take over the situation because I trusted Him enough to praise Him," she said. "If I'd pulled my usual old trick of panicking and running home to Mom and Dad, I might still have been unemployed and fussing at God for not looking after me."

Her new job suited her far better than the old one. She was able to freely share her faith in the classroom, and could openly pray with several of the children who had behavior problems.

God had a perfect plan and a perfect place for the young teacher and for the Christian businessman. He closed the doors to the jobs they had held and thought they wanted, and He opened the right doors when they trusted Him and praised Him for their unemployment.

Resentment and fear, grumbling and complaining, cause delays in the unfolding of God's plan for us. He has a perfect time plan, and we must realize that His timing doesn't always coincide with ours.

The consequences of our failure to be thankful in the little things are not always apparent to us, but once I was taught a stern lesson.

It was a busy morning in our chaplain's office at Fort Benning, and everything seemed to go wrong. The senior man in charge had not shown up for work, and none of the others seemed to know what to do. Telephones were ringing, work was piling up, and I began to feel impatient with the man who had not reported for duty. Of course, my attitude didn't make him arrive, nor did it improve the situation. I grumbled under my breath through most of a miserable day.

The next day the man returned and explained that he had gone to the hospital where he was told that he had a cancerous growth in his sinus. Overcome at the news, he had gone home to spend the day in bed, not caring if he ever got up again.

I was overwhelmed with remorse. I'd fussed over the insignificant delays at the office, instead of thanking God for the man who was absent. My grumbings had effectively put me out of commission as a channel for God's love and power flowing toward the sick man that day.

One man heard me speak about praising God for everything and promised God from that moment he would be thankful for everything that happened to him.

He and his family drove home from the meeting through a snowstorm in below-zero weather. They arrived home late at night, and the moment they stepped in the front door, they knew something was wrong. The house was ice-cold, and the furnace was dead.

The family huddled upstairs while the man walked down to the basement to check the furnace. He knew nothing about furnaces and had no idea what might be wrong.

He stood staring at the cold, silent furnace, and his first impulse was to pray that God would help him get it going again. Without heat in the house, He would have to take his family to a warm shelter for the night.

Then the thought came to him, "Are you thankful

now?"

"I'm sorry, Lord, I forgot," he prayed. "But I know You must have planned this for our good, so thank You for this furnace, just as it is."

At that moment a very distinct suggestion came into his mind: "Check the fan."

"The fan? I don't even know where it is!"

"Look behind the plate on the right side," came the thought.

He found a screwdriver and began removing the plate. The whole scene suddenly struck him as ridiculous. Was he just imagining things? Was the fan really behind that plate? But if God was really at work giving him this direct kind of help, he couldn't stop now, he reasoned.

His fingers were numb with cold, but the plate came off--and there was the fan.

Now what? he thought.

"Look for the fan belt; it is off."

It was too dark to see inside the furnace, so he got a flashlight and directed the beam down the small opening in the furnace. There was the fan belt, lying loose. He slipped it over the drive shaft on the fan and removed his arm from the narrow opening. The furnace remained cold and silent.

"What now?" he prayed.

"Turn the furnace switch," came the suggestion.

As soon as he turned the switch, the furnace came alive with happy dancing flames, and the man ran upstairs to share with his family how God had blessed them with a cold furnace. The cold furnace was a God-given opportunity to learn in practice that praise releases the power and guidance of God.

Following the furnace incident, that man's life was changed. He began to listen for the voice of God in all situations, and today has developed a rare sensitivity to it. His open ear to the guidance of God has made him a channel for God's power in the lives of others also.

The first step was an act of faith, believing that a cold furnace on a dark, snowy night was an expression of God's loving concern for his and his family's welfare. He could have passed up that first opportunity, and I am sure that God would have provided other challenges. You and I are confronted with opportunities to recognize God's hand in every situation of our daily lives. How many opportunities do we pass up?

The results of our reactions are cumulative. With each positive step of faith, it becomes easier to believe. In the same way, each time we allow unbelief to deny God's presence and love in a difficult situation, the negative results heap up, and it becomes increasingly difficult to muster our will to exercise any faith at all. The more we grumble, the more we become entangled in the web of defeat. Many little grumbles add up to overwhelming mountains of depression.

Whether you are surrounded by what seem to you like mountains of accumulated misery, or just irritating little molehills, the turning point is the same. Confess your complaining and murmuring as a sin, and promise God that you'll be thankful from now on.

it " You make the decision and determine to stand on it in faith; God will furnish the strength to do it. Once you've made your commitment, the opportunities to thank God may come in little or big packages, but they'll come.

At a retreat near Fort Benning, several young people made a promise to thank God for all things. The next day one of the soldiers was notified that a favorite uncle had been killed in a tractor accident on the farm. Immediately the thought came to the soldier, "Now see what happened! You made that silly commitment to praise God. Your uncle wasn't even a Christian!"

The soldier recognized the source of that thought, and resisted the temptation to complain to God about his uncle's death. Instead he prayed, "Lord, You know how much I loved my uncle, but You loved him more, so You must have had a good reason for letting him die. I'll just thank You and praise You for doing what was best."

The soldier felt a peace about his uncle's death, but was unable to shake off a concern for his cousin who had just recently accepted Jesus. How would he take his father's death? The soldier wanted to go home for the funeral in order to encourage his cousin, but he was unable to get leave.

"Okay, God," he prayed. "You know all about my cousin, so I'll just thank You that I can't go." He thought he would call home and ask his parents to convey a message to his cousin, and stepped into a phone booth to make the call.

When a voice answered at the other end, he immediately recognized his cousin. "How are you?" he blurted out in surprise.

"I'm praising the Lord," came the answer. "We're all so glad that Dad accepted Jesus several days before the accident. He had time to tell everybody what God had done for him, and we know it was God's will that he go to heaven now."

Others are drawn to Jesus when we praise God. If we grumble and complain as bitterly as our non-Christian friends over the many little upsetting incidents of our days, others conclude that our faith does no more for us than having no faith does for them. Unless they can see, in the nitty-gritty of our daily lives, that Jesus makes a difference, how can we expect them to believe when we say they need Jesus?

It isn't what we say, but what we are and what we do that draws others to Jesus in us. Nowhere is this more apparent than in our daily lives. How do we react to delays and difficulties on the job, in emergencies, in everyday encounters? Do we react in such a way that no one sees anything different about us? Or does our reaction cause them to stop and say, "Something is different about that person. He's got something I need"?

One couple read *Prison to Praise* and were convinced that God wanted them to be thankful for everything. One night they were awakened at 2:30 a.m. by the sound of breaking glass. The man looked outside and saw that all the windows in his car had been smashed by a group of kids who were fast

disappearing around the corner.

The couple agreed that God had given them an opportunity to praise Him, and they knelt by their bed, giving thanks for what had happened.

The next morning the man took his car to a garage and explained what had happened.

"Thank God," he said. "I'm sure He has a wonderful purpose behind it all."

The owner of the garage shook his head.

"If something like that happened to me, I'd see to it that those young punks were made to pay," he said.

The customer smiled. "That isn't necessary," he explained. "God is in charge of the situation; I don't need to be upset about it."

The garage owner stared at him for a moment, then said, "I've been a Christian for years, but I never heard about praising God for vandalism."

They talked on, and the customer told the garage owner about the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the power of God released through praise.

"I've heard about the baptism of the Holy Spirit till I've gotten sick of it," the man replied. "I have one customer who talks about nothing else. But tell me more about praising God. That sounds interesting."

The customer explained that he thought the two subjects were one, since both had to do with complete trust and commitment to God. Finally the garage owner accepted an invitation to attend a meeting of Spirit-filled businessmen, and at the meeting he experienced the baptism in the Holy Spirit for himself.

Next he committed himself to praising God for everything, and the first item on his list was his business. It had been sliding toward bankruptcy for two years.

The next afternoon one of his employees came with bad news; he had been in an accident, wrecking their truck. This could be the last straw, toppling the business.

The garage owner looked at his young employee, who stood pale and trembling, obviously expecting an outburst from his boss. Instead the garage owner smiled, put his arm around the young man's shoulders and said, "Let's praise God for this accident and believe He will work it out for good!"

A routine insurance claim was submitted, and to the garage owner's amazement, the settlement enabled him to pay urgent bills. The accident marked the turning point in his business, and his profits began to show a marked increase. It marked an even more important turning point in the life of the garage owner, who now experienced increasing joy and peace in every area of his life. In turn, a steady stream of customers came to know Jesus as their Savior because they were impressed with his obvious joy.

When the joy of Christ is released in our lives, others are drawn to Him.

Once, after a late meeting, I walked into a restaurant and asked for a glass of milk. The waitress smiled and went to the kitchen to get my order. A moment later she reappeared with an angry frown on her face.

"I'm very sorry, sir, but someone has locked the refrigerator, and I can't get any milk for you."

"Thank the Lord!" I responded automatically. The waitress looked puzzled.

"Why did you say that?"

"I have learned to be thankful for everything, because I believe that God works everything for good if you let Him."

"I've never heard of being thankful for things like that," she said

"Are you a Christian?" I asked.

"Well," she hesitated, "I think I am, but I've never been sure."

"You can be absolutely sure," I said. "Jesus came into the world to give us eternal life as a free gift. All we have to do is ask Him to forgive our sins and receive Him. I'd like to pray with you and ask God to give you this free gift if you want it."

The waitress nodded eagerly. "Yes, sir, I would like that!"

I touched her shoulder with my hand, we bowed our heads, and there in the empty restaurant, a few minutes after midnight, I prayed with her.

Tears were running down her face. "I've never felt like this before in my life," she said. "I feel as if a great burden has rolled off my back. I really do believe I'm a Christian now."

It may seem inconsequential to make a point out of being grateful for not getting a glass of milk when you want it, but as you learn to thank God for every little thing, God will use your praise to draw unhappy, weary people to Him. And He can turn their burden of worries and anxieties into pure joy and peace.

Let's quit our grumblings and praise the Lord for every dark and crooked thing we see around us. Do it, and watch God's light penetrate the darkness.

The Joy of the Lord

"The joy of the Lord is your strength," said Nehemiah (Neh.8:10).

Jesus was concerned that His disciples would understand that He had come not only to purchase their salvation through His sacrifice on the cross, but also to provide them with the sustaining power of His joy.

"Hitherto have you asked nothing in My name," He told them, "[but begin now] and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full" (John 16:24).

The joy of the Lord is ours for the asking!

Jesus prayed for us: "That *My joy* may be made full and complete and perfect in them--that they may experience *My delight* fulfilled in them, that *My enjoyment* may be perfected in their own souls, that they may have *My gladness* within them filling their hearts" (John 17:13 *Amplified Bible*).

If joy has already been given us by Jesus, why do most Christians live such joyless lives?

Jesus prayed that His joy would be perfected in us. What He means is that we can't make ourselves joyful any more than we can save ourselves, give ourselves

peace, or make ourselves more loving. What we *can* do is to choose to accept and trust what Jesus has done for us and allow Him to perfect His joy in us.

In practice, this means that we deliberately set out to practice joy, regardless of how we feel, trusting that God then goes to work, transforming our sorrows into pure joy, just as He has promised.

Love, joy, and peace are all part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in us. Jesus told his disciples how they were to cultivate this fruit.

"As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in My love. If ye keep My commandments, ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments, and abide in His love. These things have I spoken unto you, *that My joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full*" (John 15:9-11).

The source of joy was not to be found in happy circumstances, but in knowing Jesus' commandments, obeying them, and abiding in Him.

An elderly woman who had been filled with the Holy Spirit and had been an active Christian worker for years became crippled with arthritis. Years of pain had robbed her of any joy in living; the smallest household chore was an agony, and she experienced increasing depression.

She believed that God could heal, and had gone to healing meetings, but her condition only grew worse. One day she heard about the power in praising God for everything, and made up her mind to try it. Her task wasn't easy, since now every moment of her days and nights was filled with pain. But she was willing to be genuinely thankful for every part of her life, including her pain.

One day she moved slowly across her kitchen floor, carrying a tray of utensils. Suddenly the tray dropped, scattering items over the floor. Her painful back and stiff fingers made it impossible for her to bend over to pick anything up from the floor. Her usual reaction to dropping an object was to break down in tears of self-pity. But this time she remembered her promise to praise God.

"Thank You, Lord," she prayed, "for letting me drop everything on the floor. I believe You're working it to my good."

In a flash she became aware of other beings in the kitchen besides herself. She had been alone--yet now she sensed others present. Startled, she realized she was surrounded by angels. The angels were laughing and rejoicing, and she knew their joy was for her. Suddenly she understood.

For years she had been filled with self-pity and complaint against God for letting her suffer. She had begged Him to heal her, and inwardly had felt that God had let her down. At last she had seen that her grumbling was rooted in unbelief, and there was rejoicing among the angels when she trusted God enough to praise Him for the mishap with the tray of utensils.

She stood in the middle of her kitchen floor and felt herself saturated by the joy that filled the room. With a

heart rejoicing, she could thank God sincerely for allowing the suffering that had brought her such joy.

A short time later she attended a service where they offered prayer for the sick. Confidently, she walked forward. Always before, the painful awareness of her disease had crippled her ability to believe. Now her faith was not anchored in her feelings. She was free to believe, no matter how intense her pain was. That night she was healed. All pain left, and the twisted joints became straight and whole.

When we fully submit to God's will, so that all obstacles in us can be flushed away, and we can be molded, transformed, and renewed for Him, then we'll also find that the joy of the Lord is complete in us.

For nearly twenty years I suffered with stomach trouble. Many foods gave me extreme discomfort. I'd gone the rounds of doctors and taken all kinds of medicines, but nothing helped.

I prayed and tried to believe that God would heal me, with no apparent result. Others prayed for me--Christian leaders well-known for their effective ministry in healing, prayer groups, and friends--but the problem continued.

I claimed the promise Jesus gave in Mark 16 that not even poison could hurt me, and frequently ate whatever foods were served to me. But again and again I would be miserably ill, unable to sleep, and feel extremely sorry for myself.

I finally decided to accept on faith the fact that I had been healed by Jesus' death for me, and to believe that the symptoms would go away when He was ready. For several years I rested on that assurance and thanked God for working in my life in this way for whatever good He wanted to accomplish.

Before I retired from the army, the doctors decided to operate on my stomach. They found nothing obvious to explain the years of pain I had gone through, and consequently could do nothing to improve my condition.

As I lay in my hospital bed after the operation, the pain increased in severity beyond anything I had endured before. Pain-killers or drugs had no effect. Hour after hour I lay without sleeping, feeling as if the darkness of the room was closing in on me. I fought against the temptation to give in to the terror I felt. I didn't want to die, but dreaded living in such misery.

At the moment when the blackness seemed darker than ever, I cried out, "Lord, I don't care what happens or how miserable I am, I thank You for this entire experience. I know You are going to bring something good out of it."

Instantly the darkness of the hospital room was shattered by a brilliant white light, brighter than the sun. It was as bright as the light I'd seen in a vision several years before. At that time, the Holy Spirit had explained the vision to me. There was a dark cloud hovering over a sunny meadow, and above the cloud was a bright, white light. Up above the cloud was the state of joy and blessing Jesus had already secured for us, but to get there, we had to climb on a ladder straight through the dark cloud of confusion and pain. Inside the cloud it

was impossible to know what direction to take through the use of our ordinary senses--sight, hearing or feeling. The ladder could only be climbed on faith, and by praising God each step of the way. Climbing through that dark cloud, we would be stripped of our dependence on our senses and learn to trust God's Word. The ladder of praise would lift us right up into the heavenlies, to take our place there with Jesus.

As I lay on my bed in the hospital room, my entire body flooded by that wonderful, brilliant light, I suddenly realized that what had once been a vision, now was a reality.

The years I had walked by faith, believing that God was using my pain for good, were years of climbing through the cloud of darkness and uncertainty. Without the cloud, I would never have learned to let go of my reliance on my senses and feelings. Now I could wholeheartedly thank God for every circumstance of my life that added to the dark cloud. How else could I have learned to utterly trust in Him? How else could I have come to experience this beautiful saturation of light and joy?

When I returned home from the hospital, I discovered that God had done something about the condition of my stomach as well.

The foods that had once sent me into hours of pain no longer bothered me. I rejoiced in my new freedom to eat strawberries, apples, bananas, ice cream--all the things I had tried to stay away from for years.

Over the years, others had been healed instantly as I prayed for them, but God had chosen to strengthen my faith by letting me trust in His Word.

For years I'd been afraid of one day losing my teeth. Then one day my dentist told me that my gums were badly infected, and the bones around my teeth were deteriorating. X-rays showed the sad picture; I would soon lose my teeth!

Downhearted, I left the dentist's office. Of course I knew that I ought to be thanking God for my condition, but I wasn't very happy about it.

"Thank You, Lord," I said. "I'm grateful that You've allowed my teeth to get into such bad shape. I'm sure You know better than I do what's best for me, so I praise You, Lord."

Even as I prayed I began to feel more thankful, and when a friend came along, I told her about my new occasion to praise the Lord.

"Have you prayed for healing?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I've just now realized that losing my teeth isn't anything to fuss over, since it can't happen unless God allows it."

"I think God wants you to have perfect teeth," my friend said, placing her hand lightly on my shoulder. "Dear Lord," she prayed. "Thank You for letting Merlin's teeth get in such rotten shape. We praise You and ask that You be glorified in this, so touch Merlin now and heal him completely."

Three days later I was back in the dentist's office and watched while he studied my new X-rays carefully. He had a concerned, puzzled look on his face, and once put the X-rays down to take another look in my

mouth. He shook his head and muttered under his breath, and I thought, *Maybe they're worse than he expected.*

Finally the dentist stepped back, looked me over from head to foot, and asked, "What in the world have you done to your teeth?"

"Not a thing!"

"Then I don't understand." He looked from my old X-rays to the new ones. "Your bones are perfect, your gums are no longer infected and swollen--in fact, your whole mouth looks perfect!"

The Bible says to "rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you" (I Thes. 5:16-18).

John Wesley wrote in his comments on that passage, '*Rejoice evermore--in uninterrupted happiness in God. Pray without ceasing--which is the fruit of always rejoicing in the Lord. In everything give thanks--which is the fruit of both of the former. This is Christian perfection. ... Our Lord has purchased joy as well as righteousness for us. It is the very design of the gospel, that being saved from guilt, we should be happy in love of Christ. Thanksgiving is inseparable from true prayer: it is almost essentially connected with it. He that always prays is ever giving praise, whether in ease or pain, both for prosperity and for the greatest adversity. He blesses God for all things, looks on them as coming from Him, and receives them only for His sake; not choosing nor refusing, liking nor disliking anything, but only as it is agreeable or disagreeable to His perfect will*' (*Notes on the New Testament*).

To live a life in uninterrupted happiness in God, looking on every circumstance as coming from God, and thanking Him for it--that is wonderful.

There is nothing haphazard about God's plan for our lives. Nothing, absolutely nothing, however strange, inconsistent, or evil it may seem to us, happens without God's specific consent.

One lady wrote me her amazing story illustrating that point.

She had been born with only one hand, and from the time she was old enough to realize that she was different from other children, she had worn a scarf or a stole over the stump of her arm to hide her handicap. She was always painfully conscious of her deformity, and as a young woman she began to drink to hide her hurt.

She was fifty-six years old at the time she wrote me:

"Six months ago I visited my sister, and she played a tape where you spoke about praising God for every problem or tragedy in your life. As I listened, I felt like someone had hit me in the stomach. I felt sick. After all the years I'd blamed God for my misfortune, I wasn't ready to thank Him for it. I said, 'Lord, forget it. I thanked You for freeing me from alcohol, but I can't thank You for this other thing.'

"But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the thought of thanking God off my mind. It bugged me day and night. Finally I said, 'Lord, why don't You get off my back--I'll do anything for You, but not that! I just can't.'

Still, I couldn't find any rest. At last I played the tape once more. This time I heard something I'd missed before. You said that when the young soldier and his wife found themselves *unable* to thank God for the terrible thing they were threatened by, they at last said they were *willing to try*. The rest seemed to come easy. About that time, I'd reached the point where I was willing to try almost anything, just to get some rest. So I told God I was *willing* to try, even if I was sure I wasn't *able*. As soon as I'd said it, it seemed like a load of many years just rolled off my shoulders. I started to praise the Lord--my tears flowed--and it was like the song says, 'Heaven came down and glory filled my soul!' In the middle of all this rejoicing, the Lord spoke to me and said, 'Wait a minute; I'm not through with you yet!' I sat up. What more could there possibly be? I'd just made the supreme sacrifice and thanked God for the deformity I'd hated all my life! But very clearly the words formed in my head:

"You are not to carry a stole or a scarf over the stump of your hand anymore!"

"I felt an instant tightening-up inside. 'No, Lord,' I muttered. 'That's going too far. Don't ask me to do that.'

"As long as you're hiding it, you're not really thankful; you're still ashamed,' came the gentle reproach. Tearfully, I conceded.

"I'm willing to try,' I promised. 'But You've got to make me able.'

"The next time I had occasion to leave the house was when I was called for jury duty. I dressed and automatically reached for my stole. Instantly the warning came. 'No!'

"I said, 'All right, God, I'll start out without it, but I am not going to promise I won't come back for it!'

"For the first time in my life I stepped outside the front door without the protective covering to hide my missing hand. As soon as I closed the door behind me, all embarrassment, the shame, and the sense of guilt were washed away! I knew for the first time in my life what it was like to be really free. I knew that God loves me just as I am. Praise the Lord!"

God permits every circumstance of our life for a good reason. Through it, He intends to bring about His perfect and loving plan for us.

The very thing you think is painful proof of God's absence from your life is in fact His living provision to draw you toward Himself--so that your joy may be full!

Look up and praise Him! He loves you, and He dwells in the praises of His people!