

Make Life's Valleys An Opportunity to Grow

It happens from time to time. In fact, it's can't always be great.

M. Scott Peck put it best in his book, *The Road Less Traveled*: "Life is difficult. . . . Once we truly know that life is difficult-once we truly understand and accept it-then life is no longer difficult. ... Most do not fully see this truth that life is difficult" (page 15-this is not an endorsement of Mr. Peck's book or his teachings).

Sooner or later we have to go through another "valley experience." Now, I don't know about you, but I would much rather "climb the mountain" than spend time down in the valley.

But more about that later. You see, a few weeks ago, my employer decided that they no longer wanted me-no warning; no idea it was coming at all. Now, at 37, I've been working for 20 years. I've seen others go through this kind of thing, in fact I came close just a few years ago, but I "dodged the bullet" that time. This time, I wasn't so fortunate.

Being a man, I realize that a job can be very important to us in terms of our self-esteem and self-worth. Thankfully, being a Christian, I realize that a job is "just a job," and that having a relationship with the Giver Of Life is what ultimately matters. In fact, several other things are more important than work: Family, for instance. Friends. Ministry. Health. Come to think of it, a lot of things are more important than work.

You want to know the really cool thing about all this? I didn't cry; I didn't lose my temper; in fact, I was surprisingly calm.

Yes, I was shocked and upset. But I was able to handle it all gently and diplomatically. I'd like to think that God is pleased with the way I've handled it so far. Here's a guy who worked full-time while going to graduate school to get an MBA so he could be a CEO someday, and he's losing his job.

Let me tell you, just a few years ago my reaction would have been quite different. But Jesus had warned me that something like this might happen: *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33)

Look at Job. Now, here was a guy who had it rough. First, he lost his children and his wealth. (He was a very prosperous farmer, you know.) But Job's faith in God was not shaken.

Next, he was covered from head to toe with boils, and his friends, even his wife, were convinced that it was related to sin, and that God had abandoned him. But Job never gave up even though, for lack of a better way to put it, his life was the pits!

Job continued on, never losing his trust in God. *"Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. ... "* (Job 13:15). It's funny, for a year-and-a-half I had been witnessing to a guy at work who's certainly had his share of trials and tribulations. Many times I shared the story of Job with him. Little did I know I would be applying it to my own situation.

Fortunately, I've been through enough "valley experiences" over the last several years to know God is faithful, and He is always in control, with a plan that is infinitely better than mine. *"`For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, `plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.'"* (Jeremiah 29:11-12)

You see? He wants the best for us! His love for us is greater than we can comprehend! *"And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, – may have power, together with all the*

saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” (Ephesians 3:17-19)

God has ministered to me greatly in my quiet times, through these and other verses. I had already begun to work on starting my own business and now, thanks to a little thing called “severance,” I have the next six months or so to give it my best shot.

I had not been happy in my job for nearly two years, but I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. It’s awesome how God takes care of things sometimes! He’s given me a rare opportunity to devote myself full-time to my venture, with no worries about income (at least for awhile.) How often does that happen?

I am truly grateful for the peace that God has given me so far. *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:6-7)*

It makes such a difference when we let go of things, and allow God to work through many times I find myself unable to let go, often praying, “Lord, please take this from me, because I’m having trouble letting go.” But he usually tells me, “Jim, if you can’t let go, I won’t take it from you. Trust me. Abide in me. Have I not told you that I love you ... more than anything?”

It’s encouraging to know that God uses these trials in our lives to build character and to remind us about how much we need Him. I think men, more than women, need these “loving reminders” to keep us from believing that we can do things on our own—without God.

Be glad when you go through tough times. Remember that God loves you, and He wants the best for allows us to experience

these trials so that He can continue the work in us. So hang in there *"... being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 1:6)

Charles Stanley puts it this way: "The way of greatness is also the way of adversity. Anyone wishing to be used greatly of God will face suffering at some point in his or her lifetime. Suffering is not something that can be counterfeited or manifested to lift one up to a higher spiritual level." We are "work in progress." Never really complete until that day when we are in the presence of God.

Remember the story in Matthew 14, where the apostles were at sea and the weather got rough, and Jesus walked on the water to meet them? Here's a little insight, found in verse 22: *"... Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to the other side..."*

It was no coincidence that these guys were in that place at that time! Jesus put them there. Sometimes God puts us in rough seas, so He can demonstrate His sovereignty, and His divine power. The story goes on with Peter saying, "Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water." (verse 28)

So what happens next? *"'Come,' he said. Then Peter got down out of the boat, walked on the water and came toward Jesus. But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, 'Lord, save me!' Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. 'You of little faith,' he said, 'why did you doubt?'"* (verses 29-31)

Peter apparently took his eyes off of Jesus, because we read that he saw the wind (probably in the choppy seas caused by the wind.) But, even then, Jesus lifted him up. Thank God, that even when we take our eyes off of Jesus and worry about things that we should just turn over to God, even then God demonstrates His love for us and either lifts us up and out,

or sees us through the rough seas!

It would be easy to get down on myself, be bitter or dwell on the past but, with God's help, I have been able to put it behind me and now I'm looking ahead to see what God might have in store for me. *"Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* (Philippians 3:13-14)

I find encouragement in this quote from Charles Spurgeon, a powerful preacher from the past: *"Many men owe the grandeur of their lives to their tremendous difficulties."* And also in this verse: *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."* (James 1:2-3)

"Heavenly Father, thank you for your love, which I not only don't deserve, but I can't even fully comprehend. Please help me to learn and grow from this experience, and to handle it in a way that pleases and honors you. I know you have a plan for me; a plan that is infinitely better than anything I could come up with. Help me to 'feed the faith and starve the doubt.' You are an awesome God, and I know that you are in control of all circumstances. Truly your love is wide and long and high and deep. Thank you for helping me to see that. In Jesus' sweet name I pray, Amen"

All scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version* (NIV) except as noted.

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