

THE CRISIS

The symbols you see on this page are the Chinese symbols that combine to form our word “crisis.” The top symbol represents the word “danger,” and the bottom symbol is the word “opportunity.” Together they form a very powerful word picture.



Every crisis has within it the possibility of great danger but also brings with it the opportunity for positive change. Our goal in a crisis must be to escape the danger of the situation and seize the opportunities.

A wonderful reality about life under the Creator God is that He can rescue us from the dangers of anger and bitterness, despair and hopelessness, or fear and anxiety. He can

then turn the situation into an opportunity for our good and for His glory. This is what the apostle Paul was talking about when he said,

There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not [allow]¹ you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it (I Corinthians 10:13).

The word “temptation” means simply a test God sends to expose something good or bad about a man’s heart. Every test of life—every crisis—has within it a danger that we cannot “escape” if we respond wrongly and an opportunity to show how great God is if we respond correctly.

A CRISIS PRIMER

The Bible is full of instructions for handling hard times. It presents many accounts of people who suffered. As you may know, the Old Testament patriarch Job faced many excruciating problems. In just a few hours he lost his entire farm—all of his livestock and grain fields. In addition, all of his children died when the house collapsed on them during

a violent storm. Shortly thereafter, he lost his own health, and his body was covered with painful boils (Job 1:1–2:7).

Life was so difficult that his wife urged him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9). His friends were not much help either. They tried to convince him that God was trying to judge him for some hidden sin. The facts, however, revealed that Job was more righteous than any other man on the earth. When his suffering did not end, he became very discouraged.

During a conversation with his unhelpful friends, Job said, “Man is born [for] trouble, as the sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). He realized that just as surely as sparks from a campfire will ascend with the smoke, so a man will surely experience much trouble in his life. By the end of the book that bears his name, Job had learned how to handle his trouble skillfully and joyfully.

Many of the psalms were written by David, the king of Israel, during very difficult times of his life. The prophets in the Bible faced much opposition from their audiences. Even Jesus Christ is called “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3).

New Testament Christians endured much persecution from the unbelieving world around them. In fact, two whole

books of the New Testament—James and I Peter—were written specifically for suffering people. So there is much help for us in the Bible about how to handle times of crisis and suffering.

THE MANY FACES OF TROUBLE

Think with me about the kinds of trouble that come our way today. Trouble comes from many sources and affects us in many ways.

- A husband is diagnosed with terminal cancer. Within months he leaves his wife a widow and his children fatherless.
- An unmarried daughter tells her parents that she is pregnant, and she runs away with her boyfriend.
- A teenage son is arrested for shoplifting and is subsequently expelled from school.
- A wife announces to her husband that she is leaving him for a man at work with whom she has been having an affair.
- A wife discovers that her husband has been heavily involved with internet pornography or that he has been abusing their ten-year-old daughter.

When Trouble Comes

- A young couple loses their first child through a miscarriage. A second child is born two years later but has multiple birth defects, which make his daily life—and the lives of his parents—very difficult.
- A business partner finds that his associate has cheated him out of profits that should have been equally divided between them. The misdeeds were covered by obscure legal language but were, nonetheless, ethically wrong.
- A husband discovers his wife's gambling addiction when all their credit cards have been charged to the limit. She refuses to admit that it is a serious problem and insists that if he were a better provider for the family, the bills would not be a problem.
- A college student, whose father promised to pay for his room, board, and tuition, finds out that his dad has just been laid off from his job. The young man is left with an unexpected debt of thousands of dollars.
- A family that is already financially strapped wakes up one morning to find that their sewer line has backed up, flooding the first floor of their home. The sewer repair bill and replacement floor covering will cost

thousands of dollars. Their minimum insurance will not cover the loss.

- A fifty-year-old factory worker is fired from his job for his contentious spirit. His wife and children are quite fearful that he won't be able to get another good job because of a history of poor job performance.

Of course, this list could go on and on. We can easily see from the scenarios above that problems can come in various "flavors." Some of life's problems are temporary; others are permanent. Some problems are caused by other people; other problems are of our own making.

We must realize that each of these troubles has a built-in danger and an accompanying opportunity to watch God at work and to show His greatness to others.

We must also understand that if we respond wrongly to any of these crises, the situation can become even more complicated. Financial problems can increase even more if wrong choices are made. Strained relationships can be further damaged if the parties react in a selfish way. Friends and family members with life-threatening diseases can degenerate further if they refuse to cooperate with their doctors.

So it is important that we accurately diagnose our trouble and respond correctly. Thankfully, God has graciously

given us much help for handling trouble the right way. The following chapters will outline the basics for us.

THE TEST OF JOY

As I mentioned before, the New Testament letters of James and I Peter were written to hurting, suffering people. They provide much direction about trouble. One of the first things we see in both books is that it is possible to have great joy in the midst of great trouble. Notice these passages.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which according to his abundant mercy hath [caused us to be born again] unto a [living] hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. . . . [It is in this hope that] ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through [various trials] (I Peter 1:3, 6).

My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into [various trials]; knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her [maturing] work, that ye may be [mature] and [complete], wanting nothing (James 1:2-4).

The joy and rejoicing spoken of in these passages is not a giddy silliness in the midst of tragedy. Neither is it the same as having a positive outlook on life. Scriptural joy is the enjoyment and delight that comes from greater intimacy with God Himself in the midst of the sorrow and trouble. It is a direct result of increased fellowship with God. It is called the “fruit of the Spirit” because it is produced within us supernaturally by God’s Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). It is not something we can generate on our own.

The presence or absence of this joy shows us whether we are handling the trial in the proper way. Our example is Jesus Christ, who experienced great delight in doing His Father’s will, even though He was physically tortured by crucifixion. The Scriptures say,

Let us run with patience the race [of life] that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame (Hebrews 12:1-2).

He looked forward to the joy of once again being in the Father’s “house” awaiting the coming union with His bride, the church, whom He was dying to redeem. That coming

day of blessing was a “blessed hope” to Him, as it is to us (Titus 2:13).

Because Jesus Christ endured all of the agonies of living on a fallen planet, He can be our best Comforter when trouble comes. He not only feels the afflictions we are experiencing but is also ready to help us in our time of need. The Bible says,

For we have not an high priest [speaking of Jesus Christ] which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly [through prayer] unto the throne of grace [where Jesus Christ sits right now in heaven], that we may obtain mercy [forgiveness for our sins], and find grace to help in time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16).

These verses mean that because Jesus Christ experienced every possible problem that we can encounter, He is very sensitive to the difficulties we are experiencing. And since He is a loving God, He will use His power to come to our aid in times of need. He does not promise to deliver us from our negative circumstances, but He does promise to deliver us from the wrong responses—the dangers—that will

destroy our joy and obscure His own glory (I Corinthians 10:13).

With these opening thoughts in mind, let's begin by looking at the danger that our trouble can pose to us. What dangers may lurk in our trouble? How can we be rescued from those dangers?

¹Throughout this book all italics are mine unless specifically noted. Anytime words are bracketed in a Scripture text, it means that I have added or substituted some words to further explain the meaning of the verse.

THE DANGER

PEGGY'S PROBLEM

Peggy was waiting outside my office when I arrived one morning. Her puffy eyes told me she had been crying quite a bit. She burst into tears as I invited her in and asked her to tell me what was wrong. Peggy proceeded to tell me that the night before she had found evidence on their family computer that her husband, Bill, had been visiting pornographic sites. ¹

She had not spoken to Bill about it yet. She said that ten years ago, shortly after they were first married, she had discovered pornographic magazines in the car trunk and had almost destroyed their marriage by the way she had handled the situation. She didn't want to repeat her failure of a decade ago. Both of them had made significant spiritual

Jim Berg

progress since that awful time, so this discovery really took her by surprise. She wanted direction about how to make sure that she was responding rightly to God before she approached Bill. Peggy's concern that she have the right response was vitally important.

That brings us to the first truth on our “emergency checklist.”

Truth #1: The greatest danger is always the flesh.

The term “flesh” may be unfamiliar to you. The Bible uses the word “flesh” to describe the sinful part of every one of us, which tries to make life work on our own—without God. When a man is living “after the flesh” (Romans 8:5), he is handling life the way *he* wants to handle it, instead of handling life the way *God* wants it handled. The result of such self-centeredness is *always* destructive (Galatians 6:7-8).

DON'T INFECT THE WOUND!

In December 1998 I had quadruple by-pass surgery. As I was wheeled into the operating room, I looked around and saw two workers opening packages of sterilized instruments. They laid them out carefully on two carts next to the operat-

ing table. The anesthesiologist was getting me ready for surgery. All of them wore sterilized surgical gloves, gowns, and masks. Every precaution was being taken to insure that my surgery would not be further complicated by an infection from contaminated instruments and people.

In the same way that contamination infects a wound, a fleshly—selfish—response to any crisis of life further complicates the situation. Peggy was naturally hurt and fearful after discovering her husband’s pornographic indulgences on the internet. But she knew that if she responded in self-centered anger and bitterness, she would further alienate her husband and complicate any reconciliation between Bill and God and between Bill and herself.

She, of course, could nag him, treat him with disgust and contempt, or gossip about him to her friends. Or she could ignore his indulgence, hoping it would go away. (In another similar situation, the bitter wife retaliated by running credit cards up to the maximum limit. She reasoned, “If he can have his indulgence, I can have mine!” Her selfish response further complicated the problems in their marriage.)

Peggy knew that she could neither ignore the problem nor attack the problem with “unclean hands.” She wanted to be sure she handled it the right way—*God’s* way.

The apostle James gives specific instructions for handling suffering. He calls us to self-examination. In James 4:8 he says, “*Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.*”

Jesus Himself tells us to do some “spiritual lumberjacking” to get the logs out of our own eyes before we try to remove the splinters from other people’s eyes (Matthew 7:3-5). The apostle Paul reminds us as well that when people have treated us wrongly we are not to be “overcome [by] evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). We cannot expect to help the situation by pouring more evil into an already “nasty stew.” If we do so, we can make it only worse.

If we do handle the situation with “unclean hands,” we can expect that the “infection” will produce a “fever.” Certain symptoms reveal that our heart has been contaminated by the flesh. They include the things we have already noticed as danger signs:

- anger and bitterness
- despair and hopelessness
- fear and anxiety

They can be avoided entirely if the situation is handled properly at the beginning. If they arise, they can be remedied by following the plan outlined in the next two chapters.

THE GREATEST DANGER

The greatest manifestation of the flesh is the familiar toxin of *stubbornness*. Nothing will pollute a situation faster than a stubborn will. It is exactly the opposite of the humility of Jesus Christ. Though His earthly circumstances included rejection, ridicule, misunderstanding, torture, and eventually death, Jesus Christ submitted to His Father's will for Him. He was *never* stubborn.

Stubbornness is the greatest hindrance to Christian growth. In fact, the apostle Peter said that “God [fights against] the [stubborn], but gives [divine help] to the humble” (I Peter 5:5).

In Luke 8, Jesus compares the hearts of people to different kinds of soil. One unproductive soil is the stony ground (Luke 8:6, 13). Underlying a few inches of topsoil is a shelf of bedrock. The seed of truth falls into that ground and springs up quickly. It wilts just as quickly in the hot sun, however, because there is no depth of earth for the roots. I believe that the bedrock underlying the topsoil is stubbornness.

No matter how much good seed of truth is planted in our hearts, if we allow an underlying stubbornness in our lives, we will be unstable under pressure.

Stubbornness is referred to by several terms in the Bible. In James 1 it is called “double-mindedness,” and the apostle says that the double-minded man is like “a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.” He is “unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6-8). Our double-mindedness stubbornly returns to our *own* way even though we know it is at odds with *God’s* way.

When our trouble comes from other people, we often think that if we can just get the other person to change, everything will stabilize. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—we have no control over others. The only person we can control is ourself. It is crucial for us to understand that no decision of anyone else can destroy our inner man—our heart. We are the only ones who can destroy our hearts.

If we get bitter, angry, fearful, anxious, or hopeless, it is entirely our own doing. We have allowed self-centeredness to rule in our heart and contaminate it. Dealing with each of these “fevers” individually is outside the scope of this short study. What is important for us to understand initially, however, is that *the greatest danger is always the flesh.*²

Though other people may have created the wound, we are responsible for our reactions to it. There is no doubt that Bill has created Peggy's wound, but Peggy is responsible for her reaction to it. She can respond selfishly, thinking only of how Bill has betrayed her and made her life more difficult. Or she can respond like Christ and be concerned about the spiritual needs of other people—in this case, Bill's needs. It was Jesus who told us to love even our enemies. He said,

Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you (Matthew 5:44).

YOU'VE GOT TO BE KIDDING!

There is no doubt that responding to our trouble in a Christlike way is going to be tough to do. Loving, blessing, doing good to, and praying for those who mistreat us do not come naturally. In fact, they go against everything within our fleshly nature. But to give in to our selfishness will bring great danger into the situation.

Peggy knew reacting wrongly to the situation was dangerous. I hope by now you, too, see that to react in the flesh

is dangerous. I outlined for Peggy the plan we shall look at in the next two chapters. It is God's plan for cleansing our responses of fleshliness so that the danger is removed.

¹ Peggy and Bill are not the real names of this couple. Their names and some of the details have been changed to protect their identity.

²For an extended account of a man who suffered wrongfully and yet had the proper response, read Genesis 37-50. It is the account of a Hebrew boy named Joseph, who was mistreated by his brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of attempted rape, and unjustly imprisoned. His proper responses, however, allowed him to be a great blessing to two nations and even to be the deliverer of the brothers who had sold him into slavery.