

## **His Presence in Problems**

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### **Introduction**

Commercials are incredibly expensive. According to CBS News, a 30-second TV commercial during the Super Bowl costs a staggering \$7 million. This figure doesn't even account for the production costs, such as the salaries of directors, writers, producers, and others.

Sometimes, advertising messages that resonate in one culture don't translate well into another language or culture. For example, the original Mercedes-Benz advertisement in China translated the brand directly to Chinese as "Bensi," which means "rush to your death." Fortunately, Mercedes recognized and corrected this error. There are many other instances of similar "loss in translation."

The point is, words that are meaningful in one culture or context may not directly translate into another. Sometimes, things that make sense from an eternal perspective—to God—don't make sense to us here on Earth. Human problems and suffering, such as the loss of a child, a terminal illness diagnosis, and extreme poverty, are prime examples.

I've certainly faced my share of problems and suffering, starting with growing up in poverty in a crime-ridden neighborhood in Nigeria. I lost many close to me over four years, including my father when I was barely ten years old. In the darkness of my life, God shone His light. John 1:5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (NIV). My older brother was the first to see the light. A few years later, we all came to Christ, one by one. However, I only experienced God as my Heavenly Father after my earthly father passed away. David said in Psalm 27:10 (NIV), "Though my father and mother forsake me, the Lord will receive me." Indeed, the Lord lifted me up.

We've all been there or experienced a variation of my childhood struggles. No one is exempt from life's storms. You're either emerging from a storm or heading into one.

### **Problems are Inevitable.**

If you live long enough, you are going to experience hardship, heartbreaks, losses, and tribulations in life. In fact, the tragic loss 12 years ago of our first child and the near loss of my wife and the heartbreaking circumstances that surrounded that, was another reminder that so long as we are in this flesh, we will experience tribulation. If you haven't experienced problems and pain, rejoice! But I hate to break it to you, if you live long enough, there is going to be a time when it's going to hurt.

There is a saying in my culture which describes a baby's first cry as "uwaa, uwaa!" which roughly translates in Igbo language as "oh, this world, this world!" highlighting the challenges that this newly minted human is already facing – the temperature of the room compared to the womb is very uncomfortable; the world's humidity is different; lights and sounds are much harsher, and she doesn't get to swim in amniotic fluid and suck on his thumb all day long.

I would never forget the day my 8-year-old daughter told me, in response to seeing me pay bills on the computer, , "sucks to be you...I don't have to worry about that."

The point is: life is full of troubles and challenges. Job 5:7 "Yet man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward" (NIV).

Jesus did not promise us a world without crisis; he promised his peace in our crisis (John 16:33 NKJV "These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.").

### **Why Does God Allow Evil, Problems and Pain in the World?**

Remember, God created perfect humans, Adam and Eve, and placed them in the idyllic Garden of Eden. Their sole command was not to eat the forbidden fruit, for in the day they did, they would surely die. They brought death and destruction into the world on the day they ate the forbidden fruit, disobeying God. Romans 5:12 (NIV) states, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned."

Before we cast aspersions on Adam and Eve, consider that we might have done the same in their shoes. "No, Collins, I would never do such a thing!" you might say. The truth is, if you have ever sinned, then you have partaken of the forbidden fruit. This, however, leads to another question:

### **Why did God Make man Capable of Disobedience?**

Why doesn't God make us incapable of rebellion? Answer: God is not a puppeteer; He is a Creator who bestows the gift of free will. God created a "Chuck," not a "Chucky" (like the murderous doll from Hollywood). Chuck is capable of both love and hate, whereas Chucky is a one-dimensional, demon-possessed doll that is lifeless except for the malevolent force driving it to commit murder.

God took a significant risk by giving us free will because He desires us to choose Him of our own volition. He wants us to have the capacity to love Him. Without the possibility of

hate, there can be no true love. Without the option to reject, there can be no genuine acceptance.

Every parent gambles on love when they have children, knowing well that their child will grow up capable of both good and bad. Yet, we love them all the more for it.

No rational person would prefer a robotic child, controlled by a remote to exhibit desired traits. This is the issue with those who claim animals are their best friends because “they don’t talk back,” leading some to bequeath their fortunes to pets. An article in the NY Post dated January 27, 2024, reported that in 2020, a wealthy businessman in Tennessee left \$5 million to his eight-year-old border collie, Lulu. What can an eight-year-old dog, or any dog, do with \$5 million? A colleague once said that if faced with a burning house containing a dog and its owner, she would save the dog. While I love animals, they are not our best friends—humans are.

I understand that people can be difficult and cause pain. But I also know that people can be wonderful, and we cannot survive without the love and support of others. Just as you shouldn’t despise dogs because of an incident like the one reported in USA TODAY, where a dog in Tennessee mauled two young children and injured their mother, you shouldn’t hate all 8 billion people—or anyone, for that matter—because of a few who have hurt you.

Now, let’s consider how Joseph dealt with hatred, problems, and suffering.

### **Joseph: The Poster Child of Problems**

Genesis 37-41

Chapter 37: We learn that Joseph, a young man favored by his father, found himself targeted by his envious brothers at the age of 17. Without any wrongdoing on his part, they plotted to kill him, but God had other plans. Initially, they cast him into a pit, leaving him to die. Later, they changed their minds and sold him into slavery.

Chapter 39: We discover that Joseph, now a slave in Egypt, was bought by an Egyptian official named Potiphar. Joseph quickly gained Potiphar’s trust and became the steward of his household. However, when Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce him and he refused, she falsely accused him of rape. As a result, Joseph was unjustly imprisoned, where he spent the entirety of his twenties.

Here are principles to remember when facing life’s challenges:

#### **1) Problems are not Pretty**

I haven't seen anyone pray to God to go through trials and tribulations. Even our Lord Jesus in his temple for prayers thought us to pray that we don't fall into temptations in Luke 11:4.

No number of wise sayings makes suffering pretty.

Sometimes, God reveals the good in what we went through immediately, other times, he reveals them much later.

### Do not try to Lecture People in Pain

We learn precisely what not to say to someone in pain and suffering from the Book of Job:

Job lost his possessions, children, and health within a matter of hours or years, depending on which commentary you consult.

People attempted to offer words of encouragement and sometimes rebuke, with varying degrees of success.

His wife suggested in Job 2:9 that he curse God and die.

His three friends adopted a different approach. Initially, they sat with him in silence for seven days, sharing in his mourning. The trouble began when they started to speak:

Eliphaz delivered an esoteric and somewhat confusing rant about a spirit gliding past his face.

Bildad dismissed Job as a windbag.

Zophar insulted him by calling him an idiot, but amidst his speech, he inadvertently said something profound: "God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts."

The lesson here is that sometimes the best thing we can do is sit quietly with a friend who is in pain.

## **2) Problems can be Your pulpit**

Joseph's time as a slave and prisoner prepared him for the ministry of leading Egypt during one of the most tumultuous periods in the region's history. As a teenager, he dreamed of the sun, the moon, and the stars bowing to him (Genesis 37:9), but it wasn't until his 30s, while in prison, that he learned service to others is the hallmark of true leadership. He served the butler, the baker, and later, Pharaoh, the king, during his imprisonment.

Our personal experiences with loss propelled my wife and me into the medical profession. Examine what you have endured or are currently facing and ask the Lord how He might use that as a platform for His glory. Don't waste your pain!

### **3) Problems can bring promotion**

Genesis 41:1-12: two years after the butler left prison, Pharaoh had a bad dream.

Genesis 41: 13-36: the butler put in word for Joseph who came by the palace and interpreted Pharaoh's dream, which meant that famine was afoot and required emergency preparedness.

Genesis 41: 39-40: Pharaoh made Joseph the governor of Egypt and he began to prepare and in subsequent chapters, steered the country out of a major economic hardship.

While tests may be challenging and often unwelcome, they serve as the necessary trials that confirm one's readiness to advance to the next level.

1 Corinthians 10:12 GNT Every test that you have experienced is the kind that normally comes to people. But God keeps his promise, and he will not allow you to be tested beyond your power to remain firm; at the time you are put to the test, he will give you the strength to endure it, and so provide you with a way out.

While tests may be challenging and often unwelcome, they act as essential trials that confirm our readiness to ascend to the next level. Sometimes, we witness advancement in this life after enduring hardships, as was the case with Job and Joseph; at other times, we don't see it until we meet the Lord face to face in His magnificent glory.

### **4) Problems promote spiritual maturity**

Joseph was probably pampered. To get to the next level that God intended for him, he needed to develop a backbone to preside over the superpower of their time, Egypt in tough economic times.

God doesn't want to have snowflake kids who melt in heat. He wants us tough.

Psalm 105:17-18

"17 and he (God) sent a man before them—

Joseph, sold as a slave.

18 They bruised his feet with shackles,

his neck was put in irons. “ This last part was translated in an old English translation as “iron entered his soul.”

When Joseph left prison, he became “Iron McJoseph.” He was ready for the hardship of famine, because he was prepared under the hardship of prison.

Romans 5:3-5:

- 3) We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. 4) And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. 5) And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

## **5) Problems Prove Integrity**

Problems don't change you; they reveal the real you. Joseph was a man of great character. Every problem he faced simply unveiled more of his true self. Nothing proves who you are as well as tough times do.

If you're married to someone who was wonderful when you met them, but they become an absolute terror when things get tough, then they weren't truly wonderful to begin with. Trials and tribulations may shake you to your core, but it is at your core where your true character resides.

Character is often mistaken for reputation. Your reputation is what people think you are; your character is who you really are—who God knows you to be. Like diamonds, your character doesn't perish in heat; it is revealed by heat.

Consider Joseph: through slavery, servanthood in Potiphar's house, and the temptation of Potiphar's wife, to his time in prison, he remained true to his character—a man of integrity who feared God.

## **6) Problems produce a sense of dependency**

A story was once told about Muhammad Ali, arguably the greatest boxer to ever live, who had used many monikers to describe himself, including “Superman.” He was on an airplane when the pilot announced that there would be turbulence and advised everyone to fasten their seat belts. Everyone complied except Ali. Amidst the rattling and commotion, a flight attendant approached him and said, “Sir, please put on your seatbelt.” Ali looked up at her and replied, “Superman doesn't need a seat belt.” The flight attendant retorted, “Superman doesn't need an airplane either.”

You use the seatbelts; you depend on seatbelts to offer some protection in turbulent times on air. Consider God our safety seatbelts. We depend on him to keep us safe and centered in turbulent times.

Many Christians, particularly the younger ones, understand God through intellectual knowledge. We recognize Him as the Savior who has delivered us from sin and prepared a place for us at the end of eternity. However, it is not until we face a crisis that we gain a true experiential knowledge of God.

We seldom perceive God as the Rock of Ages until we reach our lowest point. We don't acknowledge Him as the author and finisher of our faith until we are at our wits' end. It is in these moments that we hear His promises and genuinely discern His presence. Problems act like radio tuners, adjusting our focus to the right frequency, and heighten our awareness of God's presence and love during times of crisis. Joseph experienced and recognized God's presence throughout his trials. He said to his brothers in Genesis 50:20 (NLT):

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people.” As a new Christian, I never related to God as my Heavenly Father until I lost my earthly father. Suddenly, I was exposed to the poverty, crime, and destruction that plagued my city. There isn't enough time to recount all of God's dramatic healings in my life—like the several instances when I nearly died from malaria, or the time He saved me from an assassination attempt. I learned very quickly that He never fails, and I can always depend on Him.

### Benediction

Jeremiah 1:5 (NKJV) God said to Jeremiah, “Before I formed you in the womb, I KNEW you; before you were born, I sanctified you; and I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”

Luke 12:7 (NKJV) But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows.

Isaiah 46:4 (NLT) I will be your God throughout your lifetime – until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you.