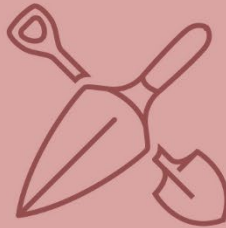




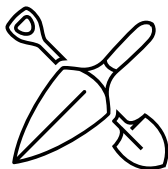
THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

NEW BEGINNINGS: REBUILDING LIFE AFTER RUIN



TAYLOR HARTLEY

**NEW BEGINNINGS:
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AFTER RUIN**

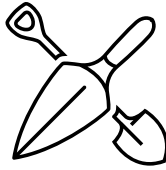


TAYLOR HARTLEY

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INTRODUCTION

“Taylor! Get out here now! I need help!” I’ll never forget hearing my dad scream those words at me. I was ten years old. We had just gotten home from Cleveland with a new-to-us endure dirt bike. This was big news for me because I had a four-wheeler, and I was elated that my dad was going to join me terrorizing my grandma’s woods. When I last saw my dad, he was hooking the bike up to a battery charger in the garage. I had run inside to call my friend Evan and tell him the news. While I was inside, my dad had kick-started the bike, jumped on, and taken a lap around the yard. That’s when things went horribly wrong. As he was rounding the front of our house, his front tire caught the sidewalk and sent him one way while the bike went the other. That’s when I heard him scream, “Taylor! . . .”

When I came outside, I found my dad lying on the driveway, unable to get up. He instructed me to go inside and call my mom right away. Before I knew it, my mom, grandpa, and grandma were all there in our driveway along with two EMTs who were absolutely intent on taking my dad to the hospital pronto. The best day ever quickly became the worst. Shortly after arriving at the hospital, we learned that he had broken his tibia in two and shredded three of the major ligaments in his left knee. That single dirt bike accident resulted in eight surgeries, \$250,000 of medical bills, foreclosure on our home, eventual bankruptcy, and years of emotional trauma for my mom and dad and, therefore, for my sister and me. In a very real sense, then and especially now, that day stands as the day when our family was ruined. We definitely would never be the same.

What about you? Have you experienced any kind of ruin? Of course, ruin doesn’t always come in a one-size-fits-all container. It’s proportionated to our experience. My twenty-month-old son, for instance, thinks he is

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experiencing ruin when he reaches the bottom of a box of Cheerios and his mother has forgotten to order more. Adults, on the other hand, rarely equate ruin with running out of cereal. For them, ruin looks more like the loss of something (or someone) that can't be replaced; or the receipt of a diagnosis that will change life forever; or the experience of pressure that feels like it's only escape is through personal implosion. You may be searching for Bible verses about strength or finding hope in hard times when everything feels lost.

I return to the question: what about you? Have you experienced ruin? If so, this life skill guide is for you. In fact, if you're at all beyond ruin such that you have gained perspective, I wish you could be with me and chuck your insights into this guide even as I write it. I'm sure you've got lessons to share that would make it better. If you've not yet experienced ruin, I fear I must be the bearer of bad news, and the news is this: at some point in your life, you likely will. My grandma used to always say, "You're either in trouble, coming out of trouble, or probably heading into it." I think that's the nature of life in a fallen world where things get lost, people get sick and die, and pressure builds without escape. So, if you've lived a life that ruin hasn't touched, stick around. You just might gain something here that will be useful to you in the future. At the very least, I hope you gain insight that will help you be a source of comfort and wisdom to your friends whose lives feel as if they're in ruin and in need of spiritual healing during a difficult time.

With all that registered, let's begin.

1

WHY LIFE FALLS APART

Before we get into what to do after ruin arrives, we need to get to the why behind ruin. Why does life tend to go pear-shaped at some point or another? To answer that question, I want to borrow a form from a very old guy you've likely heard of, Aristotle. Aristotle observed that why questions can typically be answered in four ways, by considering four different "causes" of something: material, formal, efficient, and final. Hang with me if you're feeling confused. I promise old Aristotle did us a favor here.

Material Reasons for Ruin

What are the material causes of ruin? Well, material means what the thing (in this case, ruin) is made from. Most generally, we can say that ruin is made out of the stuff we least want to happen—the bad stuff. When someone utters the phrase, "My life is ruined!" it's typically because they've lost something or someone they love. Now, what the thing lost is could vary widely. The point is that ruin is made out of suffering something thought to be unfortunate, costly, often permanent, and undesired. In such moments, people often search for Bible verses for starting over to find a path forward.

Formal Reason for Ruin

The formal reasons or causes of ruin are numerous, but for our purposes, we can simply say it's that which causes us pain. Ruin or suffering may arise from loss, pressure, sickness, or death, but we reel from these things because they're painful. They hurt. We don't like them. We imagined one thing, but got the opposite, and to articulate to others how awful it is, we call it ruin.

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My friend, there are all kinds of strands of Christianity out there that struggle to account for suffering. Some Christians feel like admitting weakness is the same as lacking faith. Other Christians believe that experiencing weakness results from a lack of faith. Neither is the case. God invites us to admit that we are afflicted and that we don't like it. In fact, before we can even say such things out loud, he already knows it is the case. The Psalmist writes, "As a father shows compassion to his children, so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers we are dust" (Ps. 103:13-14). If you're reeling from the pain caused by your life having fallen apart, don't hesitate to admit it to God in prayer. He knows your weakness, and he shows you compassion if you fear him. This is a central part of the christian life coaching approach: recognizing that overcoming life's challenges begins with honesty before the Creator.

Efficient Reason of Ruin

Aristotle's efficient cause refers to that which brings a thing into being. For example, the efficient cause of a painting is its painter. In the case of a ruined life, I think there are two major causes: personal sin and involuntary suffering due to life in a broken world.

Let's start with personal sin. I don't think I'm saying anything earth-shattering here, but just to make sure we're all on the same page, I'll say it anyway: sin can ruin your life. In fact, it definitely will. The pursuit of sin will pay out ruin every time until eventually you receive what your sins deserve—separation from God in a place of torment called Hell (Mk. 9:43-48). Sobering but true.

I think we must identify personal sin as an efficient cause of ruin because otherwise, we're tempted to think that it's always someone else's fault. "I was fired because I have a horrible boss." "My life is terrible because my husband is the worst!" "I can't pay my bills because the wrong politician won that election." "My child died because. . . God let it happen!" To be clear, I am not denying that others often play a role in our experience of ruin. In fact, sometimes we suffer without any sign that our sin is involved at all! (More on that in a minute). And yet, before we look to what role others play in our sufferings, we need to ask ourselves what responsibility we bear. My friend, my personal sin against God and others has cost me

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jobs, relationships, opportunities, my reputation, and these are just to name a few! It does me no good to go around blaming others when, in fact, I often get what my sins deserve.

A brief word to the one suffering because of their own sin: run to Jesus. You need forgiveness, and he freely offers it. In fact, you can be forgiven of all your sins today! The Bible teaches that “If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Don’t ignore your wrongs or the ruin they have brought you. Don’t blame others for the mess you’ve made. Instead, confess your sins and receive from Jesus full and final forgiveness. He died as a perfect sin-bearing sacrifice so that if you trust in him, you won’t have to bear the final penalty which your sins require. I urge you, trust in Jesus today. This is the first step of overcoming past mistakes and finding God’s grace when you fail.

The second efficient cause of ruin is involuntary suffering brought on us by this world. Sometimes life falls apart because of no discernible fault of our own. We live in a world that is broken by sin, and so things break—including the stuff that matters the most to us. A paradigm example for involuntary suffering in the Bible is Job. Job “feared God and turned away from evil” (Job 1:1). And yet, Job suffered the loss of almost everything he held dear. He lost his wealth, his children, and his health. In Job’s case, the devil, as well as this broken world, was the efficient cause of his suffering. It’s often the same case for us.

Do you ever feel like Job? You’re trying to be a good spouse, but your husband or wife keeps flying off the handle in rage. You tried to be a good employee, but your boss still fired you. You tried to raise your children in the fear and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), but since leaving the house, they want nothing to do with you or Christianity. There are also those things that touch us that have nothing to do with our efforts. Your day is going fine when the phone rings and you learn that your loved one passed away. Your world gets rocked when an unexpected expense crops up and you have no idea how to pay for it. You show up at school only to learn that your friend group has betrayed you.

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Here's the thing about Job: he never used his sufferings as a reason to curse God. In fact, despite everything he had lost, Job maintained that God was in the right and would vindicate him in the end. That is precisely what happened. Whether you are rebuilding after rock bottom or wondering how to rebuild your life after losing everything, Job's story is essential.

The Bible makes it clear that we live in a broken world, a world ruined by sin and death. Paul wrote to the Roman church, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—" (Rom. 5:12). Do you see the connection between sin and death? The former begets the latter and touches everything under the sun. We shouldn't be surprised, therefore, when we suffer in this life, nor should we blame God. Instead, we should find our hope in God, who uses even our worst sufferings for our good and his glory, which leads us to the final cause of ruin.

Final Reason for Ruin

Okay, last up is the final cause of ruin, and this one may surprise you. We learn from Scripture that God himself is the final cause or reason for everything that happens in this life—your suffering included! Depending on your theological background, such a statement might not simply surprise you; it may downright offend you! Don't jump ship just yet. Take a look at the following list of passages that teach God's sovereignty over everything that happens in life:

- Isaiah 45:7 – "I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things."
- Lamentations 3:37–38 – "Who has spoken and it came to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and bad come?"
- Amos 3:6 – "Does disaster come to a city, unless the LORD has done it?"
- Genesis 50:20 – Joseph to his brothers: "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good..."
- Acts 2:23 – "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men."

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- Acts 4:27–28 – Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles, and Israel do “whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”
- Proverbs 16:33 – “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.”
- Romans 13:1 – “There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”

So God is the final cause of everything that happens—including our suffering. The question then becomes why? Why does God allow for our suffering in the first place? What does he get out of our hardships? What do we get? To answer those questions, let’s consider the time when Jesus healed a man who had been born blind. Jesus and his disciples were walking one day when they came upon this man. The disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2). Jesus responded, “It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him” (9:3).

Jesus’s response to his disciples may be set over the set of God’s activity in this world. He acts so that he might be seen and understood correctly by those he made in his image. He acts so that he be viewed as the great and glorious God he is. In the case of that blind man, blindness created a stage on which God walked out and performed a miracle that no one else could. What impression must that have left on onlookers that day? God is great and worthy of praise for all his marvelous deeds, including healing that blind man. This reveals new beginnings in faith even in the darkest circumstances.

But what’s in it for you? Is it really a good thing for God to allow suffering into your life in order that he might get glory? The short answer is yes, and the reason is because you get God as your very own. In Jesus, he has given himself to you. He has adopted you into his family. He has promised you heaven. As we have already learned, this world is broken by sin, and that is the efficient cause or reason for so much of our sufferings. And yet, we too often love this world as though it were ultimate, even though in reality, it is passing away. Through suffering, God reminds his people that he is their ultimate reward and that he alone is ultimately sufficient for them. This is the foundation of God’s plan for restoration. Paul shows us as much when he describes himself and his companions as “sorrowful yet

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always rejoicing; as poor yet making many rich; as having nothing yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:10).

So our suffering and experience of ruin is caused by bad things which are painful and are brought about by our sin, and the brokenness of this world, and all this is ultimately for God’s glory. Got it? Good. We now need to assess how severe the ruin is so we can begin applying Biblical principles for starting over to our situation and grow stronger through it. This journey involves steps to spiritual renewal after a crisis as we learn how to trust God with a fresh start. Whether you are finding purpose after failure or seeking new beginnings, remember that starting over is part of the Christian life journey toward recovering from personal crisis.

Reflection Questions:

1. What sufferings are you experiencing now? What have you suffered in the past? Share with your mentor.
2. Which of the reasons for suffering do you find most confusing or difficult to reconcile yourself to?
3. How have you seen suffering help you treasure God more?

2

DAMAGE CONTROL

Admittedly, this section will be short. In fact, I've thought about cutting it multiple times! However, I think it's worth delving a bit into what to do immediately following life falling apart. We will tackle this scenario by asking three questions: 1. What have you lost? 2. Who has been hurt? 3. What can be saved?

What Have You Lost?

Part of responding to suffering is accounting for what you've lost. On January 6th, 2025, a tree fell through my parents' home, basically splitting it in half. By God's grace, no one was hurt. That said, it took weeks to assess the damage and sort out a plan for the next steps. In fact, it's been thirteen months (at the time of writing), and they still aren't back in their home. They had to work with structural engineers, contractors, and electricians to determine what could be salvaged and what was lost.

What have you lost? Maybe you recently lost a job that you loved, or a friend you were close to, or a home that you raised your family in, or a friend group at school. Regardless of what it is, it's important to reckon with the loss rather than ignore it as though it didn't happen. This can be painful, especially if what you lost can't be replaced. Sometimes our losses feel permanent, but really aren't. On the day you're let go from your job, it feels like you'll never get another opportunity that good, but that isn't necessarily the case. More on that in a minute. Losing a loved one to death, however, is a loss that can't be undone, no matter how much you wish it were otherwise. If you're struggling with loss, let me encourage you to be honest about it with your friends, pastors, and most importantly, with God. Bearing loss is difficult, but it can feel impossible when you try to bear it alone. For those wondering how to start over, this honesty is the first of several practical steps to rebuild life after ruin.

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Who Has Been Hurt?

We too often tend to think only of ourselves. This is no more often the case than when we're suffering. I want to encourage you, however, to look around you for others who have been impacted. You may have lost your job, but if it was a mass layoff, you likely have friends who were also affected. You grieve the loss of your family member, but you're not the only one. Your other family members are also hurting. You are struggling with significant financial pressure, and it feels like you're out of options, but you don't face that scenario alone. Your spouse also feels the squeeze. This shared pain is often a catalyst for rebuilding life after divorce or other relational fractures, as we realize we aren't alone in our grief.

I know it's hard to think about, much less try to serve others, when you're experiencing ruin, but I encourage you to make a good-faith effort to do so anyway. You should try to serve because: 1. Jesus sets the example and calls you to follow (Mark 10:45), but also 2. Because by serving others, you'll likely find your own burdens a little easier to carry. That last one may seem strange, but it's true. My wife and I had struggled with infertility for years when we found out that she was finally pregnant. We were overjoyed. The Lord had heard our cry and given us a baby! And yet, tragically, we lost that baby to miscarriage two months later.

I was offended, confused, and angry. Standing on Pennsylvania Avenue, I called my grandma, whose superpower was listening. She listened to me express all the things I was feeling, and then she made this suggestion: "You know, Taylor, you may think about looking around your church for some folks who are where you want to be and see if there are any tangible ways you might serve them in this season of grief." I fancied that strange advice and moved quickly past it. Not two weeks later, my wife and I met a couple who would become some of our most cherished friends. We quickly learned that they were expecting their first child, and her due date was basically the same as my wife's would have been. My grandma's advice came flooding back to the forefront of my mind. We should try to serve this couple, I thought. This was a form of faith based recovery guide in action—looking outward when the heart wants to turn inward.

Imperfectly but wholeheartedly, we began praying for them and looking for practical ways to help them prepare for their little boy's arrival. There

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isn't space here to share all the ways the Lord blessed us as we tried to bless them. In fact, I am sure we came out at the better end of the deal. Today, their son is like our nephew, and they all feel like family to us. The Lord used them to bring healing to the Hartleys, and we are so grateful.

Who has been touched by suffering around you? Ask the Lord for ways he would have you try to serve them, even as you struggle through suffering yourself. You never know all the good he may accomplish through you and in you by doing so. Often, this outward focus is the key to finding yourself again when your identity feels shattered.

What Can Be Saved?

Remember my parents' house? Though it was on the brink of being condemned, it looks like we're going to see them back in it sometime late this spring or early summer. The Lord has provided so much along the way and has made a way for most everything about their home to be restored and even improved.

The Lord is a master at restoration. After all, he took you and me from the miry clay of our sin and set us on the solid rock that is Christ (Ps. 40:2). To be clear, he may never give us back what we've lost. We are not made any promises that life will be easy. Even still, we can be like Job and say, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). And yet, we can know one thing for sure: the Lord has a purpose for us in our sufferings. He has promised to orient everything in our lives according to the heavenly good he planned for us before the foundations of the earth (Rom. 8:28). This biblical truth serves as a mentoring program for rebuilding life from the ground up.

Knowing that God has planned good for you allows you to look around expectantly in the midst of ruin. God is at work, and so ask, "What can I learn? What can be saved? What is his plan?" You may not gain immediate insight into these questions, but be patient. The Lord will show you in time something of his plan for you. In glory, you will know that plan in full, and you will say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord." If you will say that in glory, then start saying it now. It's surely true. Learning how to rebuild your life starts with this shift in perspective—trusting that starting over in life is

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possible with Him. Even when we study Biblical examples of people who started over, we see that God's grace is the common thread. What does the Bible say about starting over? It says that His mercies are new every morning.

One of my favorite poems is written by William Cowper. It's called 'God Moves in a Mysterious Way.' The last stanza goes like this:

*God's purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour.
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.
Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan his work in vain.
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.*

How true these words are. Even as the smoke rises to the sky at the scene of your life's demise, you can know that God's purposes are not thwarted. He rushes to do good for you even in the worst, most painful things.

Reflection Questions:

1. Have you ever lost something that felt like it'd be gone forever, only to have it restored to you? Tell that story to your mentor.
2. How is it different to lose something permanently v. losing it for a time and then regaining it again?
3. Why is it hard to serve others amid our own suffering?
4. In what ways do you see God working right now in your suffering?

3

FIRST STEPS

Your world has fallen apart, and you're asking yourself, "What now?" Answering that question is the goal of this section. Of course, I can't tell you *exactly* what to do, but I hope to give you some categories you can employ right away as you look for ways to progress beyond the calamity.

Pray

This sounds like a Sunday-school answer, I know. And yet, prayer is one of the greatest refuges we are offered in times of suffering. In the book of Psalms, fifteen songs are referred to as 'Song of Ascent.' These are believed to be hymns that ancient Jewish pilgrims would have sung to one another as they ascended toward the Temple to offer sacrifices and prayers to the LORD. Psalm 121 is such a Psalm, and in it the Psalmist asks, "From where does my help come?" (Ps. 121:1). He answers:

My help comes from the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot be moved;
he who keeps you will not slumber.
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.
The LORD is your keeper;
the LORD is your shade on your right hand. Psalm 121:2-5

My friend, your help also comes from the Lord. Even in your suffering, you can know that God does not sleep or slumber. He keeps you, that is, he guarantees your ultimate security all your days here and your eternal days to come when you are finally with him in Heaven. Because these things are true, you must go to him, your help, in times of trouble.

How do you go to the Lord? Through prayer. Sometimes when suffering is especially acute, the most you can muster is, "Oh God, help me. I need

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you!” That is perfectly fine. The Lord knows even what we can’t express. And we need not fear that he is uninterested in our distress. Instead, we take our griefs to the Lord “because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

Confide

To be clear, prayer isn’t something you check off the list and move on. Instead, you pray, and you keep praying. And yet, once you’ve registered your griefs with the Lord in prayer, you want to start confiding in those whom the Lord has put around you, whom you can trust. Normally, this looks like talking to parents, other family, close friends, and/or pastors at your church.

Why confide in others? Often, other Christians are the means God uses to bring us comfort. That is, in part, why God calls all Christians to “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). If you’re not used to confiding in others, now is the time to start, especially if you’re not yet in a time of acute suffering. Practice sharing what is on your heart and ask your closest family and friends to remind you of what God’s Word says is true. After all, we don’t confide simply to vent or “process.” Instead, we share so others can know how to pray for us and serve us in our time of need. If you feel like your life has fallen apart, one of the best ways to begin again is to confide in a trusted brother or sister in Christ.

Hope

Hope is the last thing to feel accessible when your life falls apart. In fact, life falling apart and hopelessness go hand in hand. And yet, hope is what every Christian has been given even amid the worst of circumstances. For one thing, we always have the hope of Heaven. This was Paul’s hope when he penned these words:

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

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If you're in Christ, there is absolutely nothing in this life that can threaten your hope. As sure as Christ is in Heaven, we can say with Paul of our sufferings that they are "light momentary affliction."

We also take up hope because we know that our God cares for us more than anything else in all of creation. Jesus made this point by drawing the crowds' attention to the birds of the air. He said of them, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:29-31). You see, no matter how bleak your situation, you can have hope because God in Heaven knows you and sees right where you are. Moreover, he has committed himself to your care all the way home.

Hope changes everything. When we have hope that dawn will come, the dark loses its grip. When we think we're going to make it, despair flees. When we know we're secure, fear vanishes. My friend, if you're in Jesus, then you have indomitable hope. He will never let you down.

One Foot in Front of the Other

Have you ever seen the Claymation film 'Santa Claus Is Coming to Town'? It's one of my all-time favorites. Specifically, I love the scene where Kris Kringle teaches the old winter warlock how to change. He makes use of a musical piece, and the lyrics go: "*You put one foot in front of the other, and soon you'll be walking across the flooo-oooo-oor. You put one foot in front of the other, and soon you'll be walking out the doooooo-oooooor.*" At risk of sounding trite, I actually think Santa-to-be has a good point when it comes to recovering from ruin. When life falls apart, we must rise and start walking again.

Life falling apart normally entails variables you didn't control. After all, if you controlled everything, you wouldn't have let it fall apart. If you could have stopped the illness, you would have. If you could have changed your friends' minds, you would have. If you could have stopped that accident, you would have. Life falls apart because things outside of our control go the way we don't want them to go. But we shouldn't take from this that we don't have any control whatsoever.

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Even amid our greatest sufferings, there are still things within our control. First and foremost, we control our response. Will we rage at God and everyone else in response to our feeling a sense of ruin? Or will we trust the Lord and seek to love him and others through it? Will we use our tragedy as an excuse to sin, or will we seek to have faith and obey God's Word even when others would give us a pass? If your life is in ruin, try doing the next best thing. Take one step of obedience before the Lord at a time while you wait for him to reveal his purposes. I think you'll find that it not only makes the time go a little faster, but it also frees you from obsessing over yourself and your circumstances. And while you trust the Lord and seek to obey him, he promises to be working your circumstances out for your good. So, go ahead. Put one foot in front of the other. *"You'll never get where you're going (ba bababa) if you never get on your feet. So come on, there's a good tailwind blowin'! A fast walking man is hard to beat!"*

Reflection Questions:

1. What do you spend time praying for when you're experiencing great suffering?
2. Who has God put in your life whom you feel like you can confide in?
3. Do you find it hard to trust others with your suffering? If so, why?
4. What small steps of obedience can you take today in the face of your suffering?

4

LOOKING BACK

I'd bet my last buck that at some time or another, you've heard someone say the phrase, "If I only knew then what I know now," or something of that variety. The idea is captured in another phrase: "hindsight is 20/20." We often can see so much more clearly what a situation means after the fact. This idea of hindsight is the invisible engine behind one of my favorite authors, PG Wodehouse, and his fantastical tales of Bertie Wooster and his cheeky butler, Jeeves. Bertie is always plunging himself mid-section deep in a hairbrained idea, and when it goes pear-shaped, which it always does, Jeeves swoops in with an elaborate plan to set the thing right again. At the end of one of their runs, Bertie looks back and, aside from his inflated view of his own contribution to the win, seems to understand more about what the dust-up was all about to begin with. Hindsight for Bertie and Jeeves is what the whole story points to.

Have you suffered anything that required hindsight in order for you to achieve understanding? What did you do with what you learned? In Bertie and Jeeve's case, hindsight rarely results in better decisions going forward. In fact, Wodehouse saw to every story involving those two mucking it up in one way or another. But it doesn't have to be that way for you. The Lord allows us to suffer to teach us to depend on and trust him. And through suffering, we learn wisdom that we can then apply to future bouts with unpleasant times. This section is about how to capture wisdom to apply it during seasons of future suffering.

Reflect and Learn

The first thing to do when you're on the other side of suffering is to reflect on what it all was and what it all meant. Sounds simple, yet this is a step most people aim to avoid. In fact, reflecting on the hard stuff can be nearly as unpleasant as the situation itself! If you're in that camp, I urge you to kick against your instinct to suppress suffering. Instead, reflect on it. Ask

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the Lord for understanding. Lean on family and friends for an outsider's perspective.

One obvious reason you want to reflect is so that you don't leave anything behind that would be useful to you in the future. Bear in mind, your suffering comes to you through the hand of the Lord, and he has planned *everything* according to your heavenly good, which he has secured for you in Jesus. What this means is that there truly is a reason for suffering, and you don't want to waste it by missing it.

I must admit, I am not a big journal-er. My bookshelves, with empty journals on them, attest to my having aspired many times to enter the practice and having failed to do so. I have, however, found making lists of lessons learned through suffering to be a very fruitful practice. I typically try to roll the tough times around in my head and then write down my reflections in bullet points. I may write things like: "I learned that the Lord is far more faithful to me than I am to him." "I saw my wife's contentment and consistency on full display, and I am so grateful." "I was hurt by my sin. I don't want to do that anymore." By writing these reflections down, I am less likely to forget them. Not forgetting them means being able to make use of them next time I am taking waves over the bow.

Once you've reflected, I think another great step you can take to ensure that you learn the lessons the Lord has for you in suffering is to share your list with a friend. After all, we are meant to walk alongside each other through the good times and the bad. Part of how we do that is by holding each other accountable. If you're confident that the Lord has used your suffering to teach you something about his character, his ways, or his law, then tell that to a friend who can remind you of it when your next time of testing takes place. We are so prone to forgetting even the most important things. Our friends help us hold on to the truths that secure our souls even in the worst of times.

Say Thank You

Once you've reflected, let me encourage you to do something that will come off as a bit bonkers to most—and that is to say thank you. Trials are an opportunity to say thank you to the Lord who assigned them to you for your good. Remember, suffering is never pointless. He has purposes we

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may not see right away or at any point in this life, but the heavenly day will come when we know full well why the Lord chose our challenges for us. That means even our trials are a legitimate cause to thank and praise the Lord.

No one is wise like our God. No one knows like our God. No one is powerful like our God. And no one is good like our God. It is this combination of attributes that make him able to plan good for us even through the toughest of trials. Remember the Bible character Joseph? I'm talking about the sad chappy who was sold into slavery in a foreign land by his no-good-for-nothing brothers, only to then be slandered by his master's unfaithful wife and then thrown into dead-end prison? Yeah, that guy. The Lord ordained every stage of his sufferings to save two nations. Joseph didn't see God's hand at work at first. But by the time the story was nearly over, he knew that God was behind the worst of his days to accomplish the best. That's why in Genesis 50:20, Joseph says, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

Your sufferings may not be so that God can save an entire nation, much less two! But you can count on him having multiple reasons for keeping you in irons, and all of them accord with his perfections and promises. God doesn't allow a single hair on your head to be harmed without a reason that involves your good. You can trust him. Indeed, you must. And because you trust him, you must thank him.

Corrie ten Boom's poem 'The Tapestry Poem' has long been a favorite of mine. I first learned of it from my sister, who shared it with me during a season of suffering. I can't count how many times I've returned to it since. Let me offer it to you in full, and as you read it, ask yourself what there is to thank God for in his providential work in your life *through* your sufferings. By doing so, you might just be in an even better position to say thank you:

*My life is but a weaving
Between my God and me.
I cannot choose the colors
He weaveth steadily.*

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*Of't times He weaveth sorrow;
And I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper
And I the underside.*

*Not 'til the loom is silent
And the shuttles cease to fly
Will God unroll the canvas
And reveal the reason why.*

*The dark threads are as needful
In the weaver's skillful hand
As the threads of gold and silver
In the pattern He has planned*

*He knows, He loves, He cares;
Nothing this truth can dim.
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice to Him.*

Help Others

You've suffered and survived. What is there to do now? Help others. In fact, I would say that one sure-fire reason you can take away from whatever you've been through is God's intent for you to use your experience to help others. Have you sinned and then repented only to find God's mercy still great? Then call the sinner to such forgiveness that he, too, may have it as you do. Have you lost a loved one whose place can never be filled? Then weep with those who also mourn the passing of such a one to them. Have you lost earthly possessions through theft, disaster, or persecution? Then give care to those around you who once had and have also lost.

You see, your sufferings prepare you to care for the suffering. In fact, we're often best suited to care *after* we've suffered. There are many reasons for this. Top of mind is the fact that suffering gives us experience, and experience supplies us with compassion—compassion for others who are walking a similar road. I have too often been guilty of thinking of someone else's road smoother than they make it out to be until I must walk it myself. Experience has a way of cutting us down to size. Once at size, we can see

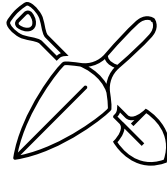
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and care for those whom we otherwise would have simply looked over or around. Don't waste your sufferings. Instead, use them. Use them for the sake of others.

Reflection Questions:

1. Is reflecting on suffering difficult for you? Why do you think that is?
2. What have your sufferings taught you about God? About yourself? About others?
3. What suffering have you gone through recently that you can thank God for?
4. Have you ever been helped by someone who has suffered something like you? How did their experience enable them to especially serve you?

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CONCLUSION

One of the most riveting and inspiring stories I have ever heard about starting over after ruin comes from the French novelist Alexandre Dumas in his incredible story, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. If you're not a reader, at least avail yourself of the 2002 movie! The story's protagonist is Edmond Dantes who his friends and rivals betray on the night of his engagement to the love of his life and the promotion to Captain on a merchant ship he had previously crewed. Dantes is cast off to a harrowing prison known as the Chateau d'If for fourteen years. Eventually, he escapes, finds treasure, and aims to use his fortune in order to get revenge against all those who ruined his life. On his way to finishing his foes, however, his wrath is turned away, and his heart is softened. Rather than revenge, Edmond chooses mercy for his enemies. As for himself, he embraces his life marked by suffering and seeks to do good with what time remains.

In some ways, *The Count of Monte Cristo* is a picture of the key truths this guide aims to make clear for you. Truths such as God's sovereignty over your sufferings, his promise to use suffering for your good, and your opportunity to grow through suffering to become stronger, more mature, and better prepared to make your life count. All the truths and lessons in the world, however, won't matter if you refuse to apply them to your own heart. My prayer is that you won't sit in suffering as if it were the end. Instead, I pray you will believe the Lord your God and seek to bring him glory by serving him and others until your dying day. I trust that each experience of suffering is helping you become more effective toward that end until the end comes and the Lord calls you home.



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