



Christ *and* Calamity

GRACE & GRATITUDE
IN THE DARKEST VALLEY

HAROLD L. SENKBEIL

*Award-winning author
of The Care of Souls*



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in the Darkest Valley*

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Christ and Calamity: Grace and Gratitude in the Darkest Valley

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Jesus,
I am yours; save me.

PSALM 119:94

*In Thine arms I rest me;
Foes who would molest me
Cannot reach me here.
Though the earth be shaking,
Ev'ry heart be quaking,
Jesus calms my fear.
Lightnings flash
And thunders crash;
Yet, though sin and hell assail me,
Jesus will not fail me.*

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Invitation to the Reader

Christ and calamity go together. As Jesus said: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). When calamity strikes, you need Jesus.

This little book is filled with Jesus. Here you will find him quoted frequently, as well as many other Bible passages, all to help you through the rough spots in life.

Tackle this book prayerfully.

God’s word and prayer are the means by which he sanctifies all things—even tribulation and distress. And so I have included prayers of consolation that pair well with the themes in this book. You will find a prayer at the beginning of this book and then three sets of prayers—for any time, for morning, and for evening—and a hymn at the end.

You can use this material on your own or with others. The material at the end would work especially well in a group setting—it’s arranged as responsive prayer, with one person speaking and the rest answering with the words in bold.

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In the dark valleys of life you don't need platitudes. You need Jesus. Read this book with open ears and an open heart, and you will find consolation, solace, and peace in him.

In times of calamity we need the unvarnished truth. Tribulation will occur in this world. Jesus said so. But it's also true that he has overcome the world.

And in his cross and resurrection there's hope for you.

Harold L. Senkbeil
Pentecost 2020

Prayer in Time of Affliction

Call upon me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.

PSALM 50:15

LORD, you know the deep places through which our lives must go: Help us, when we enter them, to lift our hearts to you; help us to be patient when we are afflicted, to be humble when we are in distress; and grant that the hope of your mercy may never fail us, and the consciousness of your lovingkindness may never be clouded or hidden from our eyes; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. *Amen.*



Your Calamity

I write these opening lines on a stunningly gorgeous day—one of the first we've had here in Wisconsin during the lingering winterish springtime that has added insult to the injury of our months-long stay-at-home lockdown. Neighbors are out doing early yard work; tulips and daffodils wave in the sunshine; robins splash in my birdbath.

Yet something isn't quite right.

More people than usual are walking by with their dogs on a leash or their children in tow. They smile and wave at me, but they are wary of each other. Joggers head into the street to avoid closely approaching the other humans on the sidewalk. Many are masked in public to avoid spreading an unseen contagion.

Few cars drive by my house today. The price of crude oil went to negative digits not long ago—a decline accelerated by quarantines the world over. The stock market took a dive months ago and is making its first furtive efforts at recovery. Yet analysts warn that it will be a rocky road. Globally, markets lost more than 30 percent of their value. People are out of work in record numbers. Businesses are languishing because of precautionary shutdowns; many will never reopen.

We are facing a worldwide pandemic of infectious disease caused by a new virus the likes of which we have never before seen during our lifetimes. Millions of people have contracted the disease. Some have grown gravely ill, and hundreds of thousands have already died. Governments all over the world have responded by restricting our travel and imposing quarantines to limit human contact and slow the contagion. Alarming rumors swirl. Media have fanned the flames of public fear to near-panic proportions. Seemingly overnight, the world as we knew it was turned upside down. Daily life morphed into a surreal simulation of what it once was.

Now in our seventies, my wife and I are told we are especially vulnerable to this public health

threat. Our grown children enforce their own private quarantine. They distance themselves to avoid inadvertently infecting us if they are symptomless carriers of the virus. It's hard. We're not an especially expressive family, but air hugs are no substitute for a real embrace. Grandma and Grandpa are going through withdrawal; we long for the day we can regularly put our arms around our grandchildren again.

Businesses, governmental agencies, and churches have embraced new technology and implemented digital connections to avoid flesh-and-blood interaction. A gradual reopening, predicted in the months ahead, will most likely happen in fits and starts. No one really expects "normal" to return anytime soon, if ever. It's as if someone pushed pause on our daily routine, and we're all marking time while infectious disease experts scramble to find effective means to treat the illness and epidemiologists look for ways to anticipate and stem the spread of infection that has disrupted our lives.

But this is not a book about the coronavirus or the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a book about you. Rather, it's about you and God—and

how you relate to him in times of calamity. To be exact, this is a book about God's faithfulness in the face of uncertainty.

In the eleven short chapters of this book, I will talk with you about how you can count on God to keep his promises, even when you can't see him or feel him. How you can trust him even when it seems like he's untrustworthy. Even when you face an uncertain future. Even while you are doubting or when you are afraid.

It doesn't have to be a coronavirus that you're facing. It could be another illness. It could be excruciating and unrelenting pain. It could be overwhelming sadness or debilitating depression. It could be the breakup of your marriage or your household. It could be the loss of someone you love. It could be the loss of your health, or the impending loss of your own life.

This book is an invitation to hope—because ultimately, this is a book about faith. Let's talk for a moment about that: faith, of course, is foundational for Christians. But faith is not sight, and so, by definition, faith is not the same as knowing for certain. Scripture reminds us: "Hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with

patience” (Romans 8:24–25). Waiting patiently for something hoped for is a good working definition of faith, and that’s what I want to talk to you about in these pages: trusting God for help when you can’t detect any available remedy. I want to lend you courage and consolation in the face of whatever personal calamity you face.

Calamities come in different sizes. Sometimes they are comparatively minor—not much more than minor inconveniences, when you get right down to it. But other calamities are serious disruptions or overwhelming tragedies. But one thing about calamities, large or small: they get your attention. They lead you to think about God for a change. As C. S. Lewis wrote long ago: “Pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹

Public responses to the current pandemic certainly have called our world out of its spiritual doldrums. But I have a hunch your personal calamities have a similar impact on you individually. God shouts at us in our private catastrophes, doesn’t he? The question is, what is he saying? And more to the point, how will we respond?

Private or public calamity always calls for faith—confident trust in God, despite our apprehensions.

St. Matthew records that Jesus' disciples faced a test of their faith on the Sea of Galilee. As they ferried him across the lake, a violent storm came up, threatening to swamp their boat. They were amazed to discover their Lord fast asleep in the midst of the storm, so they shook him awake: "Save us, Lord; we are perishing."

That's a pretty normal reaction to impending disaster. We've all been there in the middle of our own private or public calamities—we cry out in fear, at least inwardly: "Lord, don't you care if we perish? How about helping us out? Save us!" Jesus did still the storm, rescuing the beleaguered boatmen, but not before he gently chided them: "Why are you afraid, O you of little faith?" (8:25).

A few chapters later, we read of a similar incident of peril on the sea. But this time, Peter is the one in trouble. In the middle of a stormy nighttime crossing the disciples were frightened when they spotted a ghostly figure walking toward their boat on the wind-tossed waves. But then they heard a familiar voice: "Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid" (14:27). True to form, Peter impetuously challenged Jesus: "Lord, if it is you, command me

to come to you on the water.” Upon Christ’s invitation, Peter took one step and then another on the waves, walking on the water. But when he saw the mighty wind, he began to sink and cried out in alarm for help. Jesus stretched out his hand and pulled him up, saying, “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Peter doubted for the same reason you and I doubt when we’re faced with uncertainty and calamity. We wonder what’s to become of us. Sometimes our fear can be overwhelming. We’re fearful in the face of tragedy and the unknown because we’ve never passed this way before; the terrain is unfamiliar, and the perils are formidable.

Fear is a perfectly normal response in these situations. And truth be told, our faith isn’t as strong as it could be. Like the disciples in the middle of the storm and like Peter sinking in the waves, we are people of small faith.

But here’s the thing about faith. What matters isn’t the amount of faith we have; it’s the object of our faith. The Lord in whom we trust is what matters. When we call out to him, even in fear or doubt, he’s there to hear and to save—though it’s true that his remedy may not match our expectations. Think of Peter, out on the waves:

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Peter's faith may have been small, but he had a great and mighty Lord. His faith may have been weak, but the hand of Jesus was strong to save.

He will save you, too. No matter how small your faith, you can count on him to hear your anguished cry and answer in his own time and way.

If we have died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him;
if we deny him,
he also will deny us;
if we are faithless,
he remains faithful—
for he cannot
deny himself.

2 TIMOTHY 2:11-13

II

When You Are Faithless, Christ Is Your Faithfulness

Faith, as a subjective experience, is forever in flux. Sometimes it feels like “God’s in his heaven; all’s right with the world.” Some Christians go on like this for days at a time, even weeks on end, with nary a twinge of uncertainty or doubt.

But that’s not the norm. It’s unrealistic to assume your faith should constantly seem strong and resilient; by its very nature, faith usually is mingled with doubt. That’s because your faith differs from knowledge that you acquired by logical deduction. Though God indeed uses word and water, bread and wine to connect with us, ultimately faith itself is rooted not in tangible things but in invisible ones. It is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

For as long as we live, you and I will experience ups and downs in our life of faith. We can be at the top of our game at one moment and down in the depths in the next. Human emotions are like that, as you well know. Any number of things—what’s going on in a given moment, even the phases of the moon or atmospheric conditions—can impact our mood.

Faith isn’t an emotion. True, as we reflect on faith, it can often seem like a feeling. But faith is far more: Faith is the hand that grasps the promises of God. Faith is trust—faith is reliance on God and his word. It’s a two-party arrangement, a mutual bond, and while God remains steady and firm, we often falter.

You can certainly see this dynamic playing out in the history of Israel and their faith. God chose their ancestral father Abraham, pledging to make of his descendants a great nation from which would come the redeemer he first promised in Eden. Through the centuries he repeatedly renewed his covenant relationship with them, promising to be their God over and over again. And in turn, generation after generation of Israelites promised to be his people.

Most strikingly of all, after their long bondage in Egypt, God delivered his people dramatically

and miraculously from the swift chariots of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, leading them safely through the waters on dry ground and bringing them to the sacred mountain of Sinai. There, he personally appeared to Moses and the elders of Israel, renewing the covenant he first gave to Abraham and vowing once again to give them his gracious blessing and merciful hand to guide them. At Sinai God spoke to his people through his prophet Moses, giving them his law to bind them to himself. And with one voice the people of Israel responded: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exodus 19:8).

But what did the people *actually* do?

Even a casual review of the history of God's covenant people shows how fickle they were in their relationship with him. Repeatedly they turned to other gods instead of the Lord, who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt and delivered them with his mighty hand and outstretched arm. Repeatedly they broke his commands. Repeatedly they embraced the idolatrous, adulterous ways of the pagan nations among whom they lived.

You might think that their faithfulness would improve when God entered human history in person, born in human flesh. But no. The pattern of ancient Israel carries through in the church in

the New Testament. While Jesus deliberately hand-picked his twelve disciples to found a new Israel, their faith faltered as well.

On the night in which he was betrayed, after the Last Supper, Jesus informed his disciples that they would all fall away when he was betrayed to his executioners. Peter objected: “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!” (Matthew 26:35). The other disciples said the same. Of course, before that night was over, Peter denied that he had ever known Jesus. The very next day at Golgotha, the whole crowd of disciples—with the exception of John, Jesus’ mother, Mary Magdalene, and Mary of Cleopas—abandoned Jesus to die the agonizing, despicably shameful death of crucifixion.

I think I can understand Peter and his friends. At times, I’m utterly convinced that I can suffer anything—even death—and not depart from Jesus. At other times, I’m not so sure. Judging by my words and actions, the sad reality is that, like Peter, I repeatedly have denied the Lord who bought me with his blood. Over and over again I have failed to live according to the commandments of God’s law. Not only have I done things God forbids, but just as grievously I have not done the things he commands.

I have lived as if God did not matter and as if I mattered most. My Lord's name I have not honored as I should; my worship and prayers have faltered. I have not let his love have its way with me, and so my love for others has failed. There are those whom I have hurt and those I have failed to help. My thoughts and desires have been soiled with sin.²

I suspect that it's much the same for you. But my point is not that you and I are sinners. Rather, I want to highlight what should be obvious but what we so often forget: our faith fluctuates from day to day. As a subjective, felt experience, it's on again, off again. Hot and cold, strong and weak, sturdy and frail.

But faith does not hinge on our feelings. It is rooted firmly in the promises of God. When “we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself” (2 Timothy 2:13).

When calamity strikes, you can count on God—not because you feel close to him, but because he remains close to you, in his word, for Jesus' sake. In the midst of the uncertainties of your life you needn't wonder about his feelings or attitude

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toward you. Though your faith might fluctuate, his promises never waver: “all the promises of God find their Yes” in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20).

In life’s tight spots, focus not on your faith, but on God’s faithfulness. Look not at your promises to him, but his loving promises to you in his Son. Rest assured, those promises include your name.

Then, freed from the continual teeter-totter of faith’s emotional roller coaster, you can confidently utter your hearty “Amen” to God’s eternal glory.

