

Reacting to crisis as a Christian

Part 1 - Why does God let awful things happen to Christians, too?

In his 1st prime-time news conference on February 9, 2009, President Barack Obama described the economic woes in his country as a “full-blown crisis,” and he warned that a failure to act “could turn a crisis into a catastrophe.” The situation is so dire, he said, that “the government is the only entity left with the resources to jolt the economy back to life.”

I’m no economist so I don’t know if he’s right or wrong in those statements, but assuming he was correct and we’re facing some really tough times if the U.S. economy isn’t jolted back to life, what does the Bible have to say?

Because that’s our concern, isn’t it? We’re Christians, not economists, and our expertise is the Bible. In a time of crisis, this is what we have to offer. It’s not our opinions on what’s going to happen - there are plenty enough of those already - it’s knowing (and being living proof of) what the Bible says, so if someone wants to know what we’re thinking as Christians when a crisis like this strikes, we have an answer for them.

Well, I admit the Bible wasn’t my first thought when things started turning ugly late last year. My first thought was survival. What if things get really bad, I thought, and our Bank goes belly-up, the Canadian economy collapses, our kids lose their jobs and there’s not enough money to feed all of us, and meanwhile there’s growing anarchy in the streets and people are just taking whatever they need?

So I found myself glued to newspapers, TV commentators, the latest books and the Internet, looking for clues as to where things are headed, and should I be making preparations for my family if things are going to get much worse? I wondered if we should sell our house, get out while the going’s good and hole up in some small apartment somewhere, as one best-selling author recommends. But what if this latest crisis is just like those before it, and in two or three years time things spring back again as they always seem to do, and here I panicked for nothing? But being human, it’s worrying when your life supports are under threat and you feel the weight of responsibility as a husband and Dad to protect your family.

And then I began to wonder how much help I could expect from God. What does God do for us Christians in these situations? Does he protect us from harm, so

we don't lose our homes, don't starve and don't get attacked by maniacs roaming the streets? Being human, I would like to think so, but there are many stories from many countries of Christians being attacked and losing everything, so Christians clearly aren't miraculously immune from harm.

Up to this point, then, I wasn't getting very far, and I certainly wasn't much help to anyone hoping to learn something from me in how I'm reacting. But the question then became, "But how am I supposed to be reacting?" Should I be acting all cool and blasé as the proper example of a Christian, to show how trusting I am in God? But trusting in God for what? For protection? But we just covered that, that protection from harm isn't guaranteed. So what am I trusting in God for instead, that's going to make me all cool and blasé - if, that is, cool and blasé is what I'm supposed to be?!

But then I discovered that "cool and blasé" isn't quite what God had in mind for Christians, either. He'd actually like us to go much further than that, and not just be cool in crisis but joyful! Joyful as well?! Yes, **Romans 5:3**, because "[we also rejoice in our sufferings.](#)"

How on earth does one do that, though? Suffering hurts, and sometimes it really hurts. Life can be downright scary too, especially if you're mortgaged to the max and you're laid off, or the economy is "falling off a cliff," as Britain's economy was described as doing. Whatever the source of suffering though, whether it be looming crisis financially, outright persecution for being Christian, or simply going through the typical trials of living in this ridiculous world, Paul says Christians can be joyful.

Now that would be something I'd love to experience, and especially on behalf of those who'd like to know how Christians are reacting to crisis, and do Christians experience something radically different in crisis, and if so, why?

It's the "why" I was interested in, too. What logical reason could anyone come up with for being joyful in suffering? Well, Paul actually answers that in the previous verse, **Romans 5:2**. It's because we've "[gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.](#)"

According to Paul, the reason why we Christians rejoice in sufferings, and why we have such radically different reactions to crisis, is because we understand what we've gained access to, and we realize that's where we now stand - the obvious question being, "So what exactly *have* we gained access to, and where *do* we stand as Christians?"

Paul's answer? We've broken through to, and are now firmly fixed in, grace. And why is that so important? Because in the previous chapter, Paul explains what this grace is, and what it does to us when we stand in it. Simply put, it guarantees and secures our future. And how do we know that? From **Romans 4:16**,

“Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be [by grace](#) and may be [guaranteed](#) to all Abraham’s offspring.”

There’s a whole story in that verse. There’s this “[promise](#),” first of all, that’s been guaranteed to Abraham’s offspring by this magical potion called “[grace](#).” All kinds of questions spring to mind, of course. Who are “[Abraham’s offspring](#)” for a start?

Well, that’s easy to answer. It’s us, **verses 16-17**. Next, what’s the promise? That’s easy to answer too, **verse 13**, that the world will one day belong to us - or as God phrased it to Abraham in that verse, he’d be “[heir of the world](#).” So how does one get this promise of being heirs of the world? By grace. And how does one get access to this grace? By faith. In other words, if we believe all this, that God guaranteed to Abraham that he and his offspring would inherit this entire world simply by God’s grace, our future is utterly secure.

That’s how it happened for Abraham originally too, **verses 18-21**. God tells Abraham that he and his wife are going to have children, despite the obvious fact they’re way beyond child-bearing age, and Abraham, bless his socks, “[did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God](#) (**verse 20**).” God promised, and Abraham believed him. It was as simple as that, but for his belief Abraham was now guaranteed the world would one day be his.

And that same guarantee is made by God to us because of our faith now, **Romans 5:2**. And what does God ask us to believe? That Jesus “[was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification](#) (**4:25**).” If we believe that, we gain access to the same grace Abraham gained access to, the same grace that now guarantees the world belongs to us, too.

Where is our fear of crisis, then, when our future has already been guaranteed by God? No wonder, Paul says, “[we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God](#) (**5:2**).” This is what fills Paul’s vision, it’s seeing what God’s promised us beyond all this mess, and we know it’s coming to us one day because of God’s amazing grace. Things can be collapsing all around us in this world, but so what? We know the future and we know it’s guaranteed.

And what an incredible blessing that is, because in crisis, isn’t that what people want to know most of all? It’s knowing what the future holds. Well, we know. We know that beyond this world is another world we inherit, purely because of God’s grace which we have access to through our faith. This mess going on around us right now, then, is just “[the dead burying their dead](#),” blind sinners reaping the horrible consequences of rejecting or ignoring God, and it’s a ghastly, temporary hell we all have to go through to learn how helpless we are without God - but none of it affects our future as humans, that’s the amazing part of it, because God, in his amazing grace, is bringing everyone through to the point that, eventually, we’ll all stand together in his world one day, guaranteed. Because

that's what he sent Jesus Christ for. It's just that we get to experience that world beyond, right now.

That's not all we get to experience right now, either, because we're also "at peace" with God, **Romans 5:1**, so there's no need for us to get all anxious when crisis strikes that God's punishing us, or that he's brought this suffering on us because we haven't been good Christians. That fear does not exist for us, because we've been given access to a world of peace, not worry and guilt. And what a blessing that is too, because Christians load on the guilt whenever a crisis occurs, yelling it's a sign of God's anger and punishment on our nations for deserting our Christian roots and letting sin run rampant.

How some Christians love issuing threats and guilt-trips! But where's the hope in threats and guilt-trips? And is that what I'm going to tell my children, that the present crisis is due to them not being Christian? No, the present crisis is simply what happens when people are being people. It's all happening quite naturally, according to the dictates of human nature, not God's intervention.

Rather than using crisis, then, to threaten people into being Christian, wouldn't it be better for Christians to have crisis show what's so great about being Christian? Look what happens to a Christian in crisis. He has no fear, no worry and no guilt. Instead, he has hope, peace and joy. What an opportunity crisis becomes, then, for Christians to demonstrate a miracle. And what a miracle! The very thing people wish for most, Christians have got!

So where are the Christians in whom this miracle's happened? In those who realize what they've gained access to for believing what God has done in Jesus. They grasp the incredible reality of scripture that their belief in Jesus has opened up a completely new world to them. It's like the children in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, discovering the magical land of Narnia. They had no idea Narnia existed until one of the children, trying to find a place to hide in a game of hide-and-seek, hides in a wardrobe, the back of which opens up into this other dimension.

We had no idea there was another world we could enter, either. But God got us into the wardrobe. He opened up our eyes to what he's planned for humanity through Jesus Christ, enabled us to believe it, and at the point of our belief, the doors to his world swung open, and there we stood on the threshold of his world looking in, just like the children looking out from the wardrobe on Narnia.

We were given the opportunity then and there to enter the heavenly realms. What got us there was our belief in God raising Jesus from the dead (**Romans 4:24**), but it's what God raised Jesus from the dead for that's so staggering for us Christians. God raised him up so he could raise us up with him, **Ephesians 2:6**. He raised Jesus up so we could be seated with him - and at the exact moment we believed in what God raised Jesus for, that's where we were sat!

We are now, therefore, walking in God's world, just as freely as the children were walking in Narnia! And the proof of it is **Ephesians 1:3**, that God is now blessing us "with every spiritual blessing." We are blessed with things that can only come from God - like this amazing ability to rejoice in sufferings. People don't do that in this world, but this is what God makes possible for those who have access to his his world, and we are the proof of it.

But isn't the suffering Paul is talking about really just the suffering we get from being Christians, and people objecting to our beliefs? He doesn't mean the practical suffering people experience in a global economic crisis, surely, like losing your job, losing your savings and wondering how on earth you're going to make ends meet? He didn't include those kinds of sufferings, did he?

Yes, he did. When Paul talked in **Philippians 4:11** about being content "whatever the circumstances," he included in that being hungry and in desperate need. He spoke of despairing of life too, in **2 Corinthians 1:8**, and experiencing pressure so great it felt like a "sentence of death." He reached the point he had no strength left, he'd completely had it. It looked like the end had come, there was no way out, no light at the end of the tunnel, no hope whatsoever.

I imagine a lot of people can relate to that right now too, as they watch their sales dip, their costs exceed their income, their savings evaporate and the props that kept themselves and their families at a reasonable standard of living, get swept away one by one. The mental turmoil and feeling of helplessness must be awful, and Christians are not immune to it, either. Paul despaired. It's a terrible word meaning "sunk in utter want of hope," combined with a dread of coming evil. It's like being in the trenches in a war, and you're down to your last few rounds of ammunition, and over the hill comes the enemy with hundreds of fresh troops, dozens of tanks and men with flamethrowers. You know you're dead, and it could be a horrible death, and your legs turn to rubber.

But it was in just such a situation, when Paul's legs were turning to rubber, that he found himself being lifted out of his despair. It felt like he was being raised from the dead, to quote his own phrase in **verse 9**. Something dramatic and radically different happened that "delivered us from such a deadly peril," **verse 10**. It was amazing. There was this other dimension in existence that somehow, miraculously, could turn utter, dreadful despair into hope.

And it was then that Paul learned a secret. "But this happened to us that we might not rely on ourselves but on God," **verse 9**. Very enlightening, that is. Paul knew why God had allowed this latest crisis to happen. God had let Paul hit bottom so Paul had nothing to rely on but God, but when he relied on God, guess what? God existed. There really was this other dimension he had access to.

He learned that secret again and again too, to the point he could say after years of personal experience, “I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation....I can do everything through him who gives me strength,” **Philippians 4:12-13**. It didn’t matter what hit him, it couldn’t knock the stuffing out of him. Instead, he was content. He could even rejoice in sufferings, because he knew there was a strength he could tap into in this other dimension in which he stood, that not only guaranteed his future, it could deal with despair now.

But how does that dimension become real to us? The same way it became real to Paul. Through crisis - or any situation that’s “beyond our ability to endure.” It’s anything we can’t handle, deal with or sort out ourselves. It doesn’t have to be a “full-blown crisis” threatening life and limb, it may be something much smaller, like a strained relationship or a weakness we keep falling prey to, but it’s still a crisis to us, because for us the problem persists, there’s no obvious solution, and it’s driving us nuts. We’ve come to the end of our resources. We’ve had it.

So we turn to God. And what happens? The same thing that happened to Paul. We experience being raised from the dead. There we were, dead in the water, with no idea what to do and no solution in sight, despairing even of life. And to our amazement, God delivers us just like he did Paul, **verse 10**, either from the situation or from the despair, or both.

And that’s when we learn the secret Paul learned, that there’s another dimension we’ve been given access to, that not only guaranteed our future, it’s a powerful force now, too. We can also see, just like Paul, why God is letting these things happen to us, and why he leaves us in a world being threatened with global meltdown on several fronts. And when we can answer that, we become a powerful force for hope for others who may be watching us, so let’s answer it.....

Part 2 - “Rejoice in suffering.” But how?!

The question at the beginning of Part 1 was: Why does God let awful things happen to Christians, and why does he let us suffer like everyone else in a world threatened with global meltdown on several fronts?

Paul gives two answers to that question. First, in **2 Corinthians 1:8** - “this (crisis) happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.” When Paul experienced stress so great it was beyond his ability to endure, he realized it was to help him rely on God, not on himself. The circumstances had to be so bad though, that he didn’t have anything left in himself he could rely on. At which point he turned to God, and in turning to God an amazing thing happened. He found himself being “raised from the dead.” Mentally he had nothing left, he was dead in the water, but when he turned to God the despair lifted.

Paul learned a wonderful secret, that when he turned to God in personal crisis “I can do everything through him who gives me strength (Philippians 4:13).” He discovered a whole new dimension in existence that always came through for him. When troubles in this world squeezed the life out of him, this other world would open up. It’s like the parallel worlds in *The Subtle Knife*, the second book in Philip Pullman’s “His Dark Materials” trilogy, where a knife could be used to slice through into another world if the pressure got too great in this one. It was the stuff of fantasy, but with God it’s real! There really is another dimension we can slice through to.

Paul realized this incredible chance to slice into God’s world wasn’t just for himself, though. There was a second reason why God let him suffer these awful bouts of stress and mental torment - “so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God,” **2 Corinthians 1:4**.

It was for other people’s sake that God let Paul suffer. “If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation (verse 6).” Here Paul was, down and out, but God raised him from death’s door, and instead of despair Paul was now full of hope. Something remarkable had happened to him. But that put him in the wonderful position of being able to help others, because he knew now, from real, personal experience, what God does for Christians when they hit bottom. He opens up a door into his world, where there is “comfort and salvation.”

God let Paul get into these distressing situations, then, to act as a guinea-pig, so to speak, to show people there really was another world they had access to when things became too hot to handle in this world. And they only had to look at Paul to know it was true. Despite the enormous hardships he’d been hit with, he was content. He even rejoiced in sufferings! Perhaps, then, God would do the same for them. Maybe there really was another world they could slice through to, as well.

But isn’t this what God intended from the very beginning? On the 7th day of creation, God rested, because his purpose for humanity was to join him in that rest. That’s always been his plan - for Adam and Eve, for Israel, for people in Jesus’ day, and now for us - it’s to enjoy the same state of rest that he enjoys. And he’s not just talking about eternal rest, he includes “comfort and salvation” now. That’s certainly how Paul understood it when he writes, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles.” The word “comforts” is present tense. It means now.

This, then, is meant to be the Christian experience. When we turn to God in crisis, no matter what that crisis is, it is God’s pleasure and full intent, and even his guarantee, to lift us out of our despair and into the same dimension he entered on the 7th day of creation. It’s this marvellous dimension called “rest,” where there is comfort to be found, and salvation.

But salvation's all about our eternal future, isn't it? Not in Paul's experience it wasn't. When he talks of "comfort and salvation" it was something he'd already received from God, **verse 4**. And he talked in the past tense in **verse 10** too, when God "delivered us from such a deadly peril." Salvation is clearly for this life, too. It happens when something rips the heart and strength right out of us and God saves us, lifting us from our limp, helpless state into his rest. And in his rest, there's no such thing as despair.

On a minor scale I remember the last time this happened to me, when I happened to look down at the carpet while studying in my office, and the carpet was soaked. A pipe had sprung a leak, and obviously been leaking for some time. I tried to stop the leak but nothing worked, and when I phoned for a plumber, none of them were available, or to them it wasn't a problem! I could hardly believe my ears. I know the feeling of desperation you get when no one seems to understand or care, and you're left on your own with no help on the horizon.

Does God care in situations like that? Well, if we're not at rest, yes he does, because it's rest he's called us to, not despair. And Paul said God delivers us from "all our troubles" so that others can be comforted by what God does for us. That's why God lets these situations happen to us. And if something is so bad it knocks the heart and strength out of us, so much the better, because what God then does for us will be of even greater help to others. So in desperation I turned to God as the water kept spreading, and suddenly a plumber was available, on a Sunday, who didn't normally work on Sundays and moaned the whole time he was over to repair the pipe!

On a much larger scale, the example that sticks out in my memory is of a lady with Parkinson's disease which ever so gradually sapped the strength right out of her, to the point she was stuck in bed with raging headaches and unable to speak. The only way she could communicate was by pointing to letters on an alphabet card. So I asked her how she could survive such terrible hardship so cheerfully, and on the alphabet card she spelled out "Jesus."

At the time I couldn't bear to think what it would be like if I was in her situation; I'm sure I'd go completely mad. But here she was in this amazing state of rest. In an absolutely mind-numbing, horrible situation she'd clearly entered another dimension, and she became my most vivid proof that what Paul said is real.

What made it even more remarkable was that God didn't remove the pain or change her situation. But he did provide comfort and salvation - the same salvation Paul experienced when he too discovered the power of Jesus, as he mentions in **2 Corinthians 1:5** - "For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows."

Paul says two things in that verse. First, guaranteed, we're going to experience suffering. We don't escape suffering any more than Christ did. But that's not so bad when you read the second part of the verse, which says comfort is also guaranteed with the suffering. We don't escape Christ's comfort, either!

Comfort is guaranteed, And it'll be so obvious in its "overflowing" that others receive comfort from our experience too, **verses 5-6**, because that's what God lets us suffer and be comforted for. This helps answer the question for me, "Why does God let Christians suffer?" It's so we can enter God's rest ourselves, but it's also to help others realize God's rest is real, too.

That could be a scary thought, though, because it means God may be allowing us to suffer because our suffering benefits others. But if it's scary, then that's another crisis we've got that God will supply his comfort and salvation for! So, whether it's fear in crisis, or fear of crisis, or even fearing the fear of crisis, Paul tells us God guarantees the same marvellous experience of his rest "in all our troubles."

And when it happens - when we actually rely on God and he comforts us, and we've got some real experiences under our belts now that others watching us could really benefit from - then crisis has amazing purpose to it. It's not just a crisis anymore. It's a portal into God's rest, the very thing God intended all humanity to experience from the 7th day of creation.

No wonder Paul could say in **Romans 5:3**, "Rejoice in our sufferings," because suffering opens up the incredible world of God's rest. And in that world, "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance (produces) character; and character, hope (verse 4)." And, Paul adds, it's a "hope that does not disappoint us," either. Imagine that. There's a hope that won't ever let us down. It's the hope Paul tapped into when he wrote back in **2 Corinthians 1:10**, "On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us." When Paul talks of hope in these verses, it's hope that never disappoints and never fails to deliver. That's quite a hope that suffering creates - the confidence that God will always come through.

You can almost hear Paul yelling, "So bring on crisis, then!" because look what it produces. We are raised from the dead, delivered from despair, filled with comfort, which in turn "produces in you patient endurance (**2 Corinthians 1:6**)" and perseverance. What incredible blessings they are when you've had your heart and strength ripped out, or you're stuck in a Nursing Home like Hell itself with nothing to live for.

But what makes us turn to God in the first place? Two things. First, we've reached the end of our rope. Like Paul, we're beyond our ability to endure, and there's nothing left but a dismal dread of the future. It's at this point that people normally head into panic, depression and despair, but God has another little trick up his sleeve for Christians that enables us to turn to him. It's in **Romans 5:5**,

“And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

We turn to God because the Holy Spirit turns us to God. He has an amazing way of doing it, too. He pours God’s heart into our heart. We can see God’s heart, that he’s only interested in our highest good. So God may be letting us suffer but we know he’s up to something wonderful. But how does that become real enough to us that we’re able to trust God no matter what’s happening? Because God gave us the Holy Spirit to make it real. We’d need the Holy Spirit to make it real too, because in crisis we humans without the Spirit blame God. Without the Spirit’s help we’d hate God in a crisis. Why isn’t he using his power to stop us suffering, we ask? And any horrific disaster involving huge loss of life, we call it an “Act of God,” as though God loves to see us suffer.

That’s why people struggle with why God allows suffering. It’s because they haven’t been given the Holy Spirit yet. The Holy Spirit can answer the question, “Why does God allow suffering?” because the Spirit knows God’s heart. He knows God’s plan. He knows that in the long-run all this suffering we go through was designed by God to help us rely on him, not on ourselves, and when we rely on God we enter his rest. The Spirit can see God’s love behind everything that happens, and now, because of the Spirit, so can we. And it’s because we see his love that we turn to God in trust when we suffer, not hate him. It’s what turns a child to his parents when it seems like his parents are making him suffer; he can see their love, too.

This is what enables us to rejoice in suffering, because we know our hope and trust in God will never be disappointed. And the reason we know we’ll never be disappointed is because we see God’s love, thanks to the Spirit.

Crisis, then, becomes a window into God’s heart. The Spirit will make sure of that too, because when we see God’s heart it’s the portal into his rest. And in his rest there is comfort and salvation.

It made me wonder, then, “What other crises have I got that I’ve been trying to carry myself?” because they’re all opportunities to slice through into God’s world and experience his rest. It doesn’t have to be a major crisis, either. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” **Matthew 11:28**.

So, what’s wearying me? Is it worry about this latest economic meltdown, worry about my kids’ future, or worry about my health? And what am I burdened by? Is it my own frailties, weaknesses and inadequacies? Is it the mess Christianity is making of the gospel? Is it not being able to spread the true gospel? Well, Jesus said “I will give you rest.” None of these things, real and justifiable though they are, need weary or burden me. In fact, in Jesus’ world I can rejoice in them, because in some way or another they’re happening to me for my good and

through me for other people's good. Nothing but good can come of them. But that's life when we enter God's rest.

It's like finding ourselves in a magic wardrobe, or having a key that unlocks a secret door to another dimension. For us, it's discovering a world where suffering takes on a whole new meaning and purpose, so wonderful that a Christian ends up rejoicing in it!