

THE OVERWHELMING WEIGHT OF GOD, PART 7: STABILITY

Romans 8:16-28; Isaiah 46:9-11 (NASB)

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March of 2011 was a terrible month for the people of Japan. An earthquake measuring 9.0 on the Richter scale started a tsunami about 230 miles northeast of northern Japan. So far there are tens of thousands dead, hundreds of thousands displaced or homeless, hundreds of billions in property damage, disruption of the Japanese economy, and the likely meltdown of a nuclear reactor in a power plant in Fukushima Dai-ichi.

Imagine what it must have been like to have been standing on top of a concrete building, filming the gradual onrush of water as many did--and feeling safe. One might wonder: Will the tsunami push cars away? Yes, all of them. Are large ships at risk? Yes. What about a concrete shelter in a parking lot? Swept away. What about trees and large trucks? Gone. Surely a warehouse and an industrial building will hold. No, they will not. And then...the whole city. Nothing left, no one spared, no way to resist or prevent the onrush of billions of tons of water. Perhaps even the few reinforced concrete buildings will fall as well. Many did. And then the realization must have hit the videographer: *I am not safe either.*

THE SOURCE OF FEARS AND ANXIETIES

Life in a fallen and broken world is like that. We all have different paths through life, some gain more than others in possessions and attainments, but the relentless process of breakdown and decay touches us all. As we look out on life from our little parapet we watch our finances swept away, our health, our reputation, our memory, our loved ones, our strength, our mobility, and even our ability to enjoy the pleasures which come our way.

As we experience the inevitable losses of life, we can find ourselves bound up by anxieties and driven by fears. When the intensity of a particular loss is upon us, we may feel so overwhelmed that we cannot cope. Some of us respond by running away or quitting what we are doing. Some stand in place and release all pretense of self-control in a great freak-out. Others become stoical or simply shut down. And we all seek to stave off these inevitable losses as long as we are able.

But we are not able to stave them off. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 8:19-22: **"For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now"** (Romans 8:19-22).

This world we live in is a wreck, and we are all wrecks as part of the fall of the whole creation! As commentator R. C. H. Lenski observed, "A million things are wrong." And if this is truly the case—that we, along with creation, are literally slaves to corruption—then what hope can there be for any of us as the tsunamis of life sweep away everything we care about? Fortunately, this passage contains a

promise, that **"the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God."** Liberation from the million wrong things is on the way! In the meantime the destructive flood of fallenness continues to rush upon us. What possibility is there for any stability in our lives?

A STRATEGY FOR STABILITY

The Apostle Paul gives a strategy for stability for those who trust in Jesus Christ in his letter to the believers in Rome. There are more parts to such a strategy, but the following five from chapter eight will give us a good start.

The first strategy for stability is that we receive the internal witness of the Holy Spirit, as Paul wrote in verse 16: **"The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God..."** In spite of the fact that numerous cults have adopted a false version of this teaching, it is nevertheless true for a believer in Christ. Your change in status from alienation from God to adoption as children of God is not only in your mind. A real transformation takes place by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. That real change does not happen apart from our awareness. There is a personal and subjective confirmation of our adoption which accompanies the cognitive. It is often called assurance.

I always make a point to tell new believers in Christ not to have preconceived notions of what being saved will feel like, because no one can imagine what the work of God is like before it happens. That is a setup for a wrong conclusion that we may not be saved if we do not feel a certain way. No, the feelings are real, but they are no reliable indicator.

By the same token, I have learned to receive this inward witness of the Holy Spirit as a wonderful gift of God. It has been very steady in my life for almost four decades now. It has been a tremendous bulwark against fears and anxieties of all kinds: What if I flunk out in ministry? What if I cannot do the things I think God has called me to do? No matter what happens, God's word tells me that I am his child, and he gives me a very present inward sense that this is so. I advise you to covet this testimony and let it provide stability for you as you step over the wreckage of a ruined world.

The second strategy is that we learn to reckon on the inheritance we will receive in Christ, as Paul wrote in verses 17-18: **"...And if [we are] children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us."** We receive everything God has promised without fail in Christ, ranging from glorified bodies to the sheer bliss of eternal life in his presence forever. Peter tells us that this inheritance is **"imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you..."** (1 Peter 1:4b).

Furthermore, this inheritance is incomparably valuable. Nothing we treasure now, even our loved ones and our homes, can hold a candle to the joys which are our future in Christ. But even as we know this, we must choose to reckon on it. To reckon means to adopt a conviction, a deep appreciation of a truth. As the tsunami is carrying off your treasures to destruction, your soul will almost automatically say: *Is the inheritance of Christ really good enough to offset this loss?*

Yes it is, but you and I have to work to live in it. We first learn the text that teaches us that the

sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared to the glories to come. Then we reckon on it by adopting it as a conviction which then comes to hold us. As the saying goes, a belief is something you hold but a conviction is something which holds you. And having something—Someone—to hold you and I is exactly what we need in the tsunami.

The third strategy for stability is engaged as we learn to set our hope on the glory which we will receive at the resurrection of the body, as Paul wrote a little further down in this chapter: "**And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it**" (Romans 8:23-25).

Shepherding our hope is a major task of the Christian life. Our hearts are drawn to hope like moths to a flame. Charlatans of all sorts exploit this fundamental need of the human soul for their personal advantage. As we walk through this fallen world we will be presented with one false hope after the next, including false messiahs, as Christ warned. The need is so strong that we will even manufacture our own. All these hopes are destined to be cruelly dashed.

Jesus Christ presents the believer with the One True Hope of the human soul, namely that the one who trusts in him will be resurrected in glorified bodies to dwell with him forever. That means that our redemption in Christ has broken the power of death over us. As we watch these earthly human bodies disintegrate, we choose to set our hope on this great truth. We prepare ourselves to take off these bodies the way an astronaut takes off a spacesuit. Yes, we groan along with all creation as we die progressively through the years of life, but we learn to wait eagerly with great perseverance for the fulfillment of our blessed hope in the Lord.

The glorified bodies we are destined to receive are the solution to every ailment we have or will ever have, and fulfill our yearning for the final adoption. John described it in the book of Revelation: "**And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away'**" (Revelation 21:3-4). Set your hope on that!

The fourth strategy for stability in our lives is that we learn to rely on the Holy Spirit in our prayer: "**In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God**" (Romans 8:26-27).

For some reason the commentators want to make these verses a battleground, and after they are done arguing I find myself unable to be blessed by them! So I offer this simplified explanation from the standpoint of a pastoral theologian: We are all about weakness. This weakness is so comprehensive that it intrudes into our prayer lives. At the very moment that we cannot deal with something that is overwhelming us, we go to prayer and find that we cannot even pray about it effectively. At times, we cannot even talk! And at those times, we learn to rely on the Holy Spirit of God who intercedes on our

behalf.

Are we unable to remember everything about which to pray? We rely on the Holy Spirit. Do we fail to remember every Scripture which explains how we ought to pray about everything? We rely on the Holy Spirit. Do we struggle to find the right words, sometimes worrying that we do not sound as eloquent as the person praying next to us? We rely on the Holy Spirit to work in and through our prayer, and then we know that we have prayed according to the will of God, because the Holy Spirit knows the will of God! Praying with this confidence brings stability which can come in no other way.

Finally, and fifthly, we come to the mother of all strategies for stability in a world full of tsunamis: We take heart in the providence of God. We learn just how powerful God is to work his plan in this world, and then we take cover in him. The Lord had Paul write these words: "**And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose**" (Romans 8:28).

Really?!? our souls cry out. *How can this be? I'm being swept out to sea and everyone I know is drowning!* At that moment we have a choice which may not be supported by our feelings in any way. We can go with our feelings of fear and anxiety, or we can take heart in the reality of God's sovereign oversight of all things, as the Psalmist expressed: "**He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High /Will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. /I will say to the LORD, 'My refuge and my fortress, /My God, in whom I trust!'**" (Psalm 91:1-2).

As Lenski pointed out the obvious, the "all things" in Romans 8:28 must include, by definition, "every kind of painful experience"—nothing left out. If you love God and are called according to his purpose, your sorrows and lack of understanding of the ways of God cannot negate this truth: "**All things work together for good.**"

I advise you to permit the implications of God's providence to squash your rebellious heart into subjection. Yes, it does mean that God has so much control that he "**works all things after the counsel of His will**" (Ephesians 1:11b). If you are not acquainted with God in this way, you do not yet know God as he really is. This is the God who can actually help you when there is no hope on earth. Your logical mind will scream: *But this means...!* Just realize that you will never be able to satisfactorily draw out the implications of divine providence. All that is required at this moment is that you take heart in the one grand, weighty implication: "**God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.**"

This is what Job believed as he watched the tsunami of a fallen world sweep away almost everything and everyone he loved. "**Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped. /He said, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, /And naked I shall return there. /The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. /Blessed be the name of the LORD.' /Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God**" (Job 1:20-22). He had somehow already learned this great strategy of stability. He had learned to quiet the confusion of his mind and take heart in the overwhelming weight of God in providence. His wife had not yet moved into this grand reality, and when she spoke against God for these sorrows Job said: "**You speak as one of the foolish women speaks. /Shall we indeed accept good from God and not accept adversity?' /In all this Job did not sin with his lips**" (Job 2:10).

Job's misery was upon him like a wasting disease. He could not merely shake it off. But he, even back near the beginning of redemptive history, had learned to reckon on the fact of God's providence. He believed that the adversity which was upon him would somehow be part of God's plan for his life—to do good to him, and not evil.

The forces of corruption in creation can make us all despair. Even those of us who believe in God struggle to see him as big enough to deal with the tsunamis which are sweeping us away. And yet this is precisely the testimony of the entire Bible about the nature of God. He plans, and no one can stop him from completing his plans. He directs human beings—even lost ones!—as a means to fulfill his plans. He is master of time and history, of kings and nations. He announces the future before it happens. There is no one like him! Blessed be the name of the Lord!

So Isaiah wrote: "**Remember the former things long past, /For I am God, and there is no other; /I am God, and there is no one like Me, /Declaring the end from the beginning, /And from ancient times things which have not been done, /Saying, 'My purpose will be established, /And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'; /Calling a bird of prey from the east [Cyrus], /The man of My purpose from a far country. /Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. /I have planned it, surely I will do it.**" (Isaiah 46:9-11).

That is the kind of God who can trump the effect of any tsunami with just a word. That is the God who is worthy of our trust even in the middle of apparent disaster. That is the God who can give us stability as we grow to rely on him in every circumstance. Let the weight of God's providence have its effect on your soul!

If you do not yet trust in Jesus Christ as your Redeemer and Master, this stability from the providence of God is not yet your privilege. His plan for you is that you confess your sins to him, abandon them, receive forgiveness for them, become indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and begin to experience eternal life as you follow Jesus Christ. A prayer to that effect in your own words is all that it will take to begin.

[clip from news reel, Incredible_tsunami_video_short.avi, 3:16 min.]