

“Keep Climbing—Part 2”

Today we're in part two of a four-part series about discovering God. And last week we had this starting point, that **God's goal is not to get rid of your problems in life. His goal is to mold us and shape us to be more like Jesus.** And last week we looked at a process that God will take us through in the midst of the storms of life, the trials, the challenges of life. **1. God will allow life circumstances to shake our security. 2. Then he makes us receptive to his activity in our life. 3. Then he creates a new view.**

And I got to tell you, that I was faced with my own words last Sunday. I'm doing my best to get ready for the 770 mile ride I'll be starting next week which is a real challenge because I'm not a cyclist. Last Sunday afternoon I went out for a ride and I've got to tell you, my confidence was building. I had put in about 15 miles and was heading home down Maiden Lane, just south of 7th Street. I'd crossed 3 sets of railroad tracks and was crossing the 4th set when my wheel got caught in the track and I crashed and burned right there on Maiden Lane. And it hurt. And I said, “Oh golly!” Over and over and over again. I banged up my arm and my knee and my hands. The chain came off the bike. It was a mess.

And I've got to tell you that my security was shaken. Because when it came to riding I was secure in my strength, in my quickness, in my alertness. And none of that matter when my wheel caught that track. That night I had a hard time sleeping because I kept thinking, “What if a car had been right behind me? What if this happens again? And what happens if I go down out there somewhere on a highway?” In my mind I'm going through this process about security. God didn't make me fall down. But he used it to make me look at my security. And he used it to help me be receptive to him. And he used to help create a new view. That night I realized that this trip I'm making isn't about my strength or agility. It's about faith. It's about realizing that God has brought me to this point and do I really trust him? Is my faith based only on good outcomes, or is my faith based on the promises that God is, that God loves, that will never leave or abandon? Do I believe that Jesus really is walking, or riding, with me? Realizing that I can't do this on my skill and strength. That either I trust and have faith that Jesus is real and really with me no matter what the outcome, or I don't.

And I am not exaggerating at all when I say that it was an act of faith to get back on that bike on Tuesday. And you may not realize it but you allowing me to go on this trip is an act of faith on your part. But listen, faith doesn't mean that you don't feel afraid. It means you feel afraid and you move forward anyway. This Keep Climbing stuff is real to me. I hope it becomes real to you also. Ultimately what we're trying to do here is enlarge our image of God, our understanding of who he is and how he relates to us in our daily challenges.

Now today we're going to look at how God doesn't just leave us out there hanging when our security is shaken, when we're faced with a storm, or a daunting mountain. He offers solutions in a variety of ways. The central passage to this series is about a time when Jesus and his disciples are cross the Sea of Galilee when a brutal storm his and is about to swamp the boat. Jesus is asleep, the disciples yell at him and it says this: **“He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, ‘Quiet! Be still!’ Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. He said to his disciples, ‘Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?’ They were terrified and asked each other, ‘Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!’” (Mark 4:35-41).**

One of the ways that God offers solutions to challenges and trials we face is right here in this passage. It's called the miracle. **“God's solutions to our challenges: Intervention.”** In this passage he controls nature, he calms the storm. He does something only God can do, and miracles are amazing!

We're going to look at how God offers solutions in the life of the Apostle Paul, so let's take a look at a miracle from God in Paul's life. One good example is from Acts chapter 16. Paul is being harassed by a slave woman who has a spirit in her that allows her to tell fortunes. This woman makes a lot of money for her owners telling fortunes for people, but Paul has enough of her and sends this spirit out of her. She's now free of this spirit, but is no longer a big money-maker for her owners. And her owners are ticked! They go to the officials and have Paul and Silas arrested and thrown in prison.

Here's what the text says, **“After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks. About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and**

singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone's chains came loose" (Acts 16:23-26).

Now THAT'S a miracle! And it's just one of many in the life of Paul and lots of others in the Bible. And the thing about miracles like this is they ripple out and have an impact not just in the life of one person, but many. Check out what happens here: **"The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted, 'Don't harm yourself! We are all here!' The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. He then brought them out and asked, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?'" (Acts 16:27-30).**

The jailer is saying, "I want to know the God you know, that does something like this!" It was an amazing thing. The jailer takes Paul and Silas back to his house, he tends to their wounds and his whole family hears about Jesus and they all become followers. This is a great example of intervention in Paul's life.

And this is usually the sort of thing we pray for, right? If I get sick, the first thing I pray for is to get well. The first thing I want to do is to pray for the miracle in my life. I want to pray for God to intervene and do something supernatural that only God can do. And sometimes, God intervenes like this. Miracles. But the danger is that we can start to think that this is the only way that God provides solutions in our lives—by performing a miracle. We can start expect a miracle every time and it doesn't happen that way and so we get hurt twice. The circumstance itself hurts, then it hurts because it seems like God isn't doing anything. That's a result of having a distorted image of God's character. We can even begin to think, "God must hate me because he didn't intervene when I prayed for it."

Lots of us in the room have experienced God's intervention in our lives. Just about a month ago we got a call that a man was in the hospital that he was crashing and it looked like he was not going to live. Several of our staff members rushed over and started praying with him and his family. We started our prayer chains and within hours, the man had stabilized and within days had gone home. His doctors said, "This was a miracle. He should not have survived." Generally doctors don't throw the word "miracle" around very much. They said, "This was a miracle."

Miracles are by nature a direct intervention of God that sometimes requires God to suspend the laws of nature. Miracles are so astounding and so visible that they're hard to miss. That's great, but listen, they are very, very, very rare. We cannot assume that that is how God is going to offer solutions when we face storms, mountains, obstacles and challenges.

So what are the other ways that God offers solutions? We really need to know more about these other ways. A big, big way that God works that's less obvious than a miracle, but still powerful, is called interaction. **"God's solutions to our challenges: Interaction."** This is where God empowers us to do something in a situation. In other words, he helps us to help ourselves, or he empowers us to help other people—people who know him and people who don't. God often uses the community of faith to bring someone through a challenge or difficulty.

Again let's look at Paul's life. He wrote this to the church in Corinth: **"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, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).**

Paul is saying, "God really does comfort us by the power of his Spirit. But he also expects us to take that comfort and use in the life of somebody else. God uses us to interact with one another and that is the miracle. Paul experienced that when the disciple Titus visited him in prison. Paul writes, **"...God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort you had given him" (2 Corinthians 7:5-6).**

The family of faith is interacting with Paul to help him in a time of need. That interaction is a powerful way that God offers solutions to life's problems. We pray and want a miracle, God's direct intervention, but if we're not open to interaction from other people of faith, we're closing down one of God's key ways to work in our lives. This is where lone wolf Christianity breaks down. We need to develop relationships with other people of faith so that God can work through them in our lives.

350 of you are in home groups for this 4 week experience on Keep Climbing. What if you opened up in that setting—not telling all your stuff all at once—but shared what’s really going on inside? Struggles, doubts, challenges, storms. Because when you do that a couple things happen: People begin to ask God what they can do to help and God uses them. AND you sharing some of what’s really going on gives other people permission to do the same and then God might use you to help them. This is how God works and changes things through interaction. No, it’s not as glamorous as a miracle, but it’s just as powerful, so don’t discount it.

God comforts you so that you are equipped to comfort somebody else. God gives you a peace about something and through your relationships, you offer that peace to somebody else. It’s interaction. It’s the faith community. Miracles are great, but this interaction builds these amazing bonds, these amazing connections, with other people.

Intervention is God supernaturally controlling the circumstances—he does something only he can do. Interaction is when God oversees the circumstances but he calls us to engage in the situation and the solution. Another way that God works, in fact, from the Bible, this is the way God works most often, is inner action. **“God’s solutions to our challenges: Inner Action.”** This is when God doesn’t change any of the circumstances, he just changes us. He gives us the strength to live right in the middle of impossible situations in our lives. God doesn’t calm the storm, he calms us in the midst of the storm. And God does this a lot.

The Apostle Paul is arrested 7 times that we know of in the Bible. The first time was for healing that slave girl, the next time we read about him being arrested is in Acts chapter 22. Can you imagine what he must have assumed the second time he was imprisoned? If I’m Paul and the first time I’m imprisoned God does this amazing miracle—big earthquake, shackles fall from my hands, the doors swing wide open, everybody is freed, the jailer becomes a follower of Jesus. Amazing stuff. If I’m Paul I would assume that the second time I’m arrested it’s going to be the same amazing stuff again! He’s talking to the other prisoners like, “Hey my name’s Paul. What’s yours? Nice to meet all you fellow inmates, heh heh. I’ll be out of here in an hour or two! I’ve got a really big God and let me just tell you what you can expect tonight. Around midnight we’re going to do a little singing and right around the third song, second verse, that’s when it’s all going to start. Listen up. There’s going to be a big earthquake. Your shackles will fall off. All the doors are going to swing open. They tend to swing quickly, so I would recommend you back up from the door, just to be safe.” So he starts singing and midnight rolls around and the third song comes, and no miracle. No intervention. Nothing! Just a long, ugly, painful, dismal imprisonment that goes on, and on, and on.

Now, if you were Paul and you were going to write a letter of praise and joy after being in prison, when would you have written it? After the first time when the big miracle happened? That’s when I would write that letter of praise and joy. But Paul writes his letter of praise and joy later when he’s in prison, in some of the worst circumstances in his life, when the miracle doesn’t happen. That’s when he writes his most joyful, praise-filled letter in the Bible. We call it the letter to the Philippians.

My letter in that circumstance would be, “Get me out! Still waiting for that miracle! Love Aaron.” Paul’s not like me. From a dark, dank prison that he’s in for a long time he writes, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:4-7).**

Paul was guarded in his prison cell by a centurion, but he’s thinking, “God is guarding my heart and my mind in the middle of these terrible conditions.” Check this out, he writes, **“Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Philippians 4:8-9).**

Paul realizes that his thought life, his inner life, is the key. His circumstances were irrelevant. We’re focusing on the circumstances, “God get this thing away.” When God’s using the very circumstance you’re asking to get rid of to mold and shape you, to change your inner being, to be more like Christ.

How many of us have had times when all the circumstances of life are great and we still feel empty inside? The circumstances don't make us content. The Spirit of God through Christ provides that. Here's Paul with nothing but bad circumstances who finds joy. And here are some of us who have all the right circumstances and find no joy. What's the difference? Paul learned something that some of us don't know yet.

Before his imprisonments he wrote this in Romans, **“Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2)**. Before prison he writes this about renewing and transforming of the mind. Then God takes him through this mind- and heart-transforming process of hardships, he lives through adversity and writes this letter to the Philippians.

Then Paul writes this, **I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-13)**.

How many of us would love to learn what Paul learned. To be content in any and all circumstances, in times of plenty and times of nothing? I want there! What's the secret? How did he learn the secret of being contentment? Through adversity, through difficulties, through the things that even Paul prayed to get rid of, but God didn't get rid of them for him.

A great example of this is what Paul calls a thorn in his flesh. This was probably an eye condition where he was losing his eyesight, but it could have been a temptation, or a person. But he says that he prays three times for God to take it away—intervention. Paul wanted it gone. Three times he pleads. “God I want this gone, please.” No. “How about now?” No. “OK, now?” No. Listen it's normal to pray for things like that. But Paul learns from God that that thorn would stay in his life and that because of it, he would become more like Christ, so that he would move through life with humility so that he wouldn't get in the way of the message of Jesus.

Knowing that he would keep that thorn in his flesh, he learned the secret of being content in all circumstances. With or without the thorn. With or without prison, he was content. Because the circumstances didn't matter.

If we misunderstand the character of God and expect that God is only working if we see miracles, then we miss that God's also working in lots of other ways. Not just through miracles, through intervention. But he's working through other people and interaction, and through inner action. Maybe today this expands your understanding of God.

Some people turn away from God and turn away from church because they didn't get a miracle. “God didn't answer my prayer!” And then they miss out on the life that really is life.

If the storm stays, God's going to use it somehow some way. I don't know about you, but this gives me some serious peace. Comfort in trusting that we have a good and gracious God who loves us in spite of ourselves. Who wants us, in this life to become more like Christ. And if we let him, he will use any and all circumstances at his disposal to bring that about in our lives.

What mountain are you facing, what storm? Look for these ways that God will lead you through. Intervention, interaction, and inner action. Pray for all them but make that most powerful faith statement of all, “Not my will but yours be done. If you choose to leave this in my life then teach me, show me what it is you want to teach me through this so that I might become more like you. But in faith, I will keep on climbing.”

And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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