

Keep Climbing—Part 4

We've been in this series called "Keep Climbing", about why God doesn't give us everything we want. Don't you kind of dream about a life of ease? A life free from hardship, trials, and struggles? Something we've discussed in this series is that God's goal is not to get rid of our problems or struggles; God's goal is to make us more like Christ and that God will use everything we face, especially the difficult times, to help us grow in our faith – our ability to trust him above all else.

Jesus makes it pretty clear that we will face trials and struggles. He even said that sometimes we will face them because we follow him and do not walk in the ways of the world. Jesus gives us some great advice about the troubles we face. Listen to what he tells us in **John 16:33 TNIV**. **I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.**

Notice that Jesus is not promising a trouble-free life. In this world we will have trouble. He doesn't explain why that is...Sometimes because of our own sin, our own choices; sometimes because of someone else's choices; sometimes it's not anyone's blame, it just happens...like a violent storm or terrible accident.

In the middle of all of that, where does Jesus tell us we will find peace? In him! He is the only one that has overcome the world and it's hardships, so it is in him, through him, with him that we find peace, even joy. But the tendency when trouble comes, is to do what? We focus on it, not on Jesus. I think for most of us, we may get to the place where we look to Jesus, but initially we tend to focus on ourselves...our hardship...the trouble.

Let me share with you a case in point from my life this week.

I want to start by telling you that this has not been my best week. Nothing tragic or terribly wrong has happened. I was just not feeling it. I am not searching for pity or for your worry, although I always welcome your prayers. I don't feel depressed, just tired. Disinterested. Not creative. Not insightful. I would have been happy with a list of chores to get done this week, although truthfully I really just wanted to take a few days off. Has anyone else felt like that? But this was a preaching week and it wasn't coming. I wasn't sure there'd be a message for me to share with you today.

All of this made me think about the series we are doing, "Keep Climbing". And I'm thinking about the process that Aaron lined out the first week. There is a process that God wants to use as we walk through the circumstances and difficulties of life. It was basically that **God uses circumstances, hardships and difficulties** (or just experiences, they don't always have to be bad) **to shake up our securities**. We place our security in lots of different things. We all do. In our own strength, our own intellects, our own financial holdings, our homes, our need to be liked, whatever. For some of us that security is in our preaching ability (in the larger scheme of things it's not really a significant hardship to be without a message on Thursday of this week unless you're the one who's scheduled to preach). Anyway, God uses our circumstances to remind us that some of the things we use for security are not all that stable.

Once our security is shaken, **we become more receptive to God's activity in our life**. Sometimes God's activity in the storms of life looks like a miracle, God directly intervening (*intervention*). We pray for God to deliver us and miracles sometimes happen. God also works in our lives through the interaction (*interaction*) with other believers who help us, guide us, care for us, encourage us and give us their strength. And God's activity

sometimes looks like what we called “inner action”, (*inner action*) where God does not change the circumstances of life, but rather changes us.

Sometimes God’s action in our lives is difficult to see, especially when God seems silent – We are looking for a direction, a sign, from God and we don’t seem to get anything. Last week, Ben shared with us some ways that God actually uses silence to lead us and guide us.

This process closes out with an encounter with God through which we a new perspective (**God creates a new view**) on God, on ourselves and on the people around us.

So I was thinking about this process this week and I decided I am going to use it with my little sermon dilemma. So my security is shaken because I feel like I got nothing and I am thinking this is going to be a bad Sunday. So I think, let’s work the process and see if I can find God’s activity in this. So I begin with “intervention”. I am praying for God to save the day. “Lord, I need a miracle...send me a message for Sunday, preferably in print, 7 pages long in 1.5 spacing...Arial font preferred.” The Lord did not answer that prayer.

God is not intervening, so the next step in the process of God’s activity is “interaction”. So then I prayed for God to give me an inspiration through others. I wanted to see an illustration or hear a story or just have a friend give me about 7 pages of really good material. God did work through this process. I did get some helpful hints from friends who pointed me in good directions and kept me from utilizing some bad ideas, but it was clear that I was still a good outline and about 5 pages short.

No intervention, limited interaction. Now this whole deal took days and this is when I wonder in awe about God’s love for me (and my wife’s love for me) because I can be so inept, so slow sometimes to see the real picture. I must be extremely frustrating to God, so thank you Jesus for loving me anyway. The next step is inner action. Which means that it’s something in me that needs to change. Ugh! Eventually, I came to my senses and I stopped pursuing that great sermon that you would like and that would make me look funny, intelligent, and good looking.

And I prayed a simple, humble prayer. “Lord, I got nothing but a Sunday deadline. And I have been worrying about me; my sermon, my message, about preserving my image through a good sermon instead of asking you how you want me to share YOUR good news. Forgive me Lord, and change me. My strength is not enough, my skills are not enough. I’m not just trying to write this sermon on my own, lots of times I am living life on my own! Help me to depend upon you in this and in all things. I don’t understand why this is such a struggle for me this week, but for whatever reason, help me to set the sermon aside and just connect with you. I want to stop making this about the sermon and make it about you and me.”

Initially, my goal was a message...keep climbing to that! Then finally I realized that I was climbing to the wrong goal. What I needed to climb toward was my relationship with God. I wanted fast food God to be my drive up window provider (I’ll have a 7 page sermon with a couple sides of humor), when God wanted something more...God wants me just to trust him that his way really is the life that is life and that my own strength for witty meaningful sermons or for how I spend my resources, or for the ways I demonstrate love to my family and others will never be enough.

This whole series, Keep Climbing, is about striving for a deeper relationship in Christ, a deeper trust in God. It may sound a bit like we're talking about pushing through the hardships and circumstances, but really it is about striving to connect with God in the middle of those hardships and trials, difficulties or disappointments, or even just our experiences (they don't always have to be bad). And when we encounter God in our journeys of faith, we receive the gift of vision; the chance to see things differently. Put the things of this world into an eternal perspective.

It happened for Abraham, who encountered God and set out on an unprecedented adventure for a new life in an unknown land late in his life. It happened for Moses who traded in his sheep herder life for the burden and the joy of being the deliverer of God's people. It happened for so many people who met Jesus. Where they once could only see the limitation of their disease, they now saw healing. Where they once saw God as distant cold and judging, they now saw God's mercy and love and compassion. Where they once saw themselves as worthless, broken, or too far gone, they now see hope through God's compassion and extreme love for them.

It happened for Paul, for whom our church is named, who set out to persecute and destroy all the people who believed Jesus rose from the grave. I think you could say that Paul saw things differently after his encounter with Jesus.

So how are you? What are you seeing? What does life look like to you? What hardships, difficulties or disappointments are you experiencing? Are you looking at the problems?

If you're like me then sometimes you may feel like giving up or giving in. You don't want the phone to ring, you don't want to have to make another decision. You may love your work but the work starts to look like a mountain in front of you and you feel uninspired and empty and inadequate and you just don't want to climb that hill. Maybe you've been dealing with rebuilding your life for the last four months and even though you may have climbed a lot of that mountain there is still what looks like an overwhelming journey ahead and you are just exhausted and don't want to deal with it anymore.

Maybe you are grieving and the sense of loss looms over you like a mountain and it's paralyzing you...you don't want to start walking through that.

Maybe you are feeling the stresses of life...relationship struggles, financial struggles, parenting stresses and you add that to the already overloaded schedule of your life plus your work and it looks like a mountain in front of you that you cannot scale.

Maybe your industry is responding to the recovery and rebuilding of Joplin and you've been sprinting through 70 hour weeks. You're grateful for the work but you see this mountain of it ahead and you know you don't have the endurance for it.

Or maybe you're just looking at something that is broken; a relationship with a spouse, or child or parent or sibling; maybe it's you, your life, your choices; whatever it is it's a mess you've helped to create that you don't know how to clean up. And so you avoid it...and honestly some of those avoidance techniques have become mountains in and of themselves.

And if you are not currently going through something like this, then don't tune this out. You know the reality of life. You've been there before and you know you will be again.

Keep Climbing is not about pushing through all of that on your own strength and getting to the other side. In fact, it is not even about getting through it. Remember that God's goal for us is not to get rid of our troubles, issues, or hardships. God's goal is to shape us more and more into Christ-likeness. God wants to help us use our experiences to grow in ways that lead us to experience God's grace and trust God more, and resemble Jesus to others in greater ways.

So the goal of this series, Keep Climbing, is not to motivate you to endure your hardship on our own strength; the goal of keep climbing is to encourage you to use what little strength you may feel like you have to lean on God, even when you don't understand what is happening and you wonder where God is. To change your focus from the problem to the one who has overcome the world. So we keep climbing toward a greater dependence upon God. And the payoff, the payoff is when we recognize that God is at work in our lives, then God creates the new view...new perspectives from which we can expand our view of who God is and what God does; new view points from which we can see ourselves for who we really are (not who we pretend to be), and new vistas of the world around us that we are called to serve.

And here is the really good news. It really is a matter of focus. We have the promise that Jesus never abandons us. Jesus said, "I am with you always", and Paul poetically tells us that God is faithful to us through everything in this great, reassuring passage in **Romans 8:35, 37-39. (TNIV) Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Whatever it is that you face, whether it is now or it is in the future, you never face it alone. Every experience is an opportunity to see God at work in your life, and in seeing, to grow deeper in your ability to trust God as you walk further into the life that really is life. Our hope is not in our own strength. It is in the one who has already overcome...in him and in him alone, we will find peace, hope, even joy. He is our good news. And today might be a great day for you to call out to him.

Prayer: Help us take our eyes off of our issue and look to you...help us to see you, encounter you. The world tells us we are not smart enough, rich enough, cute enough, funny enough. The world tells us we are not good enough without the right car, house or look. We need to encounter you today Lord so we can see things differently. Tell us Jesus how much you love us. Assure us that there is nothing that can separate us from you...not things of our own doing nor things out of our control. Bring your strength to our weakness; your hope to our despair; your light into our darkness. Call us out of our selfishness and into your generosity...out of our complacency and into your service for others.

Whatever our current hardship or difficulty is, Lord, help us to keep climbing...not to push through on our own strength, but to keep climbing toward you; help us to stop and look for you in each and every moment. We want to follow you...and in you, Jesus, we want to find the life that really is life.