



Figure 1: Lilies of the field (Matt 6:28)

**Living Beyond Work Loss**  
*(Unemployed Support Group)*  
*Anaheim Vineyard Fellowship*

*Seek first the kingdom and His righteousness,  
and all these things will be added to you.” Matt 6:33*

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**Biblical Reflections #4:**  
**“Challenging Times & God”**  
(2Cor 1:3-11 – God of all Comfort)

**1) Introduction:**

Dealing with people who are facing a crisis or difficult times is something I do on a regular basis. It is part of my job. Through my training as a counselor, I have been trained in how to respond to someone in distress. Also through my training in personality types, I am aware there are some people who have a natural talent for knowing how to respond to someone in distress. Therefore I can see how some people may be able to respond through skill or talent even if they can't relate to the problem. However, there are times when even the most gifted and the most high-skilled may not know how to best approach an individual who is distressed.

For example, I was recently talking with someone who is both talented and skilled at responding to people in distress, but admitted he didn't know how to deal with the long-term unemployed. I said, "I do." Yes, my skills, formal training, and professional experience definitely give me an advantage over the general public. However, there is one advantage I have over other professionals in my field: I have personal experience with unemployment and long-term under-employment, layoff, and trying to go to school to make a mid-life career change. In fact this personal experience is what helped me see that the "professionals" were overlooking one very strong factor which influences the unemployed: The many emotional challenges the unemployed face. I am amazed at how many "skilled professionals" seem to

be ignoring this. In fact, this personal awareness is what prompted me to create this support group; and ultimately led to me creating these bible studies.

Shortly after embarking on my journey, I found myself stressed out over something which I can't recall now. However, at the time my discipler/mentor had us start a verse-by-verse study of the book of 2 Corinthians. As I went through the passage on the "God of all comfort" this passage spoke to me personally. I had already known I was called to help people who faced situations similar to my own. This passage helped me to understand that God would put to good use whatever suffering I experienced during my journey to help others. Now, instead of seeing myself as a victim of the various trials and tribulations I have experienced, I see them as a necessary and vital part of my training and preparation for my God-given calling.

## **2) Primary Passage:**

*(Note: All passages were taken from NASB<sup>1</sup> translation unless otherwise noted.)*

We are going to look at this passage to see what God has to say about our tribulations. Keep in mind this is not meant to be an exhaustive study on this subject; rather, just a deeper look at this particular passage which spoke so clearly to me 15 years ago. Here are a few principles which can be found in this passage:

### **a) God will see us through difficult times:**

There are many passages which reveal that God is faithful to be with us in good times and bad. So much so, it would not be possible to address them all in one study. However, this passage reminds us that God will be there for us emotionally when life becomes challenging – no matter what the challenge.

*V.3 - Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,*

### **a) We may find our life's meaning and purpose in our suffering**

As mentioned in the Introduction, this passage spoke very clearly to me to help me understand that God will use my afflictions to help others. Also as mentioned in the Introduction, the reason I was able to identify and address the emotional needs of the unemployed is because I have had personal experience with it. I am all too familiar with the feelings of stress, fear, anxiety, depression, hopelessness, embarrassment, discouragement, feeling lost, and frustration over not knowing where to find answers to my questions. I am also vividly familiar with the unrealistic expectations the unemployed face since I had them as well. That personal experience gives me intimate knowledge and personal credibility when talking about this subject. In fact, I gave a workshop a while ago where I am a career counselor, titled, "Unemployed and Looking for Answers." One of my colleagues, who has a lot of experience working with mid-lifers trying to make

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright ©1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

career changes, attended. She responded, “This workshop needs to be done again; and YOU are the one to do it because you have been there!”

*V.4 - who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.*

*V.5 - For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ.*

In addition to this passage, I scholarly research indicates that unlike young adults who tend to make career choices based on some family or friend influence, older (over 25) adults tend to make their career decisions based on some significant life experience. I also discovered through my studies at seminary that God uses our personal life experiences to prepare us for ministry and calling. These consistent patterns reveal our values and our meaning and purpose are often related to those significant life events.

*(If you would like to explore this concept further, work through the handout “Creating a Personal Timeline” to help you identify those personal experiences which have influenced your life and value system.)*

#### **b) The church is edified when God comforts us**

This passage reminds us that when others can see God comfort us, we will be encouraged as well. I remember when it became apparent that my aunt was going to die from her lung cancer, I asked her how she was doing. She said, “I know it sounds strange to hear, but God is giving me peace with this.” In talking to her more about this, it became apparent to me that she had emotional peace with the fact that she was dying, but was in physical pain. Now, two years after her death, when miss her, I am instantly relieved to remember her words. She was a devout believer and I knew God was comforting her in the end. Knowing that gives me peace.

*V.6 - But if we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; or if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which is effective in the patient enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer;*

#### **a) God’s comfort teaches us how to comfort others**

Because of my role as a teacher, I often see God as a teacher in the scriptures. For educators, one challenge is “linking theory to practice.” In other words, it is not enough to be told what to do; you also need to have an opportunity to put those new-found skills to practice. When we allow God to use our circumstances to benefit others, the church becomes a training ground or school where we can develop skills in care giving. Understanding this concept helped me to have peace as I watched my father decline from dementia and cancer. I understood he was not “just a burden on others”. Instead it was an opportunity for all of us to learn how to respond with grace when he would engage in inappropriate behavior. My siblings and I all were eventually able to just accept the situation and enjoy what little time we had left with him. Consequently our memories of

his end times were mostly filled with joy and laughter as we remembered trying to deal with his “inappropriateness.”

*V. 7 - and our hope for you is firmly grounded, knowing that as you are sharers of our sufferings, so also you are sharers of our comfort.*

*V.8 - For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life;*

I recently told the pastor to whom I am accountable for this group that one reason I am glad to do this ministry in this church is because the lay people of this church have been well-trained to know how to respond to someone in crisis. Because of this church’s mission and purpose, leadership places a high priority on training the laity to know how to respond to someone who is hurting.

### **a) Our suffering keeps us dependent upon God**

When life is going well, it is so easy to get “out of touch with God” because we can easily make assumptions and just “run with it.” The bible study, “God – Busyness & Your Priorities”, gives several examples of how easily we can assume we are doing God’s will, but actually be wrong. Yet, when we are in the throes of trials and tribulations, most Christians are very willing to seek God’s face and guidance. I have two favorite quotes which demonstrate this dependence: 1) A mother who had a head-strong and rebellious teen-ager would often say, ‘That child keeps me on my knees.’ 2) A former pastor would say, “Do you view God as a ‘steering wheel’ or a ‘spare tire’?”

*V.9 - indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead;*

*V. 10 - who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will yet deliver us,*

With all the trials and tribulations, I have experienced over the last 15 years, I have truly learned to depend on God. I have also had the luxury of seeing his faithfulness in providing for my needs in so many different ways. In fact, one particular way in which my journey taught me to depend on God was financially. Through my journey, I have discovered that you truly don’t know what it means to depend on God until you are without that “predictable paycheck.” I now see how often and how easy modern-day Americans assume they are depending on God, when in fact, they are actually depending on their employment to get their needs met. But what happens when that employment is gone? So now what are they going to do?

### **b) Our suffering promotes interdependence and community in the church by calling others to pray for us**

## Challenging Times & God

By: Kathleen E. High

Cultures can be either “**Individualistic**” (*valuing what is in the best interest of the individual, even if at the larger group’s expense*); or “**Collectivistic**” (*valuing what is in the best interest of the larger group, even if at individual’s expense*). Our modern-day, North-American culture is very individualistic by nature as a result of our country’s founding principle of “pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness”. In addition, it is becoming even more so every day. Examples of today’s individualism include tattooing one’s body as a form of “self-expression”; and being able to have your credit cards personalized with individual photos.

Collectivistic cultures tend to place a lot of pressure on individuals to conform to the “norms” of the culture, including choosing “right or wrong careers”. This has both advantages and disadvantages. Expecting conformity keeps order and continuity within a group over time. However, collectivism taken to the extreme will lead to oppression of the weaker parties. Also expecting someone to do something they are neither equipped nor interested in doing tends to do a lot of damage on the individual’s psyche. Whereas, people who come from highly-individualized cultures can easily become so self-involved or so concerned about “carrying their own weight” that they become isolated from others, oblivious and/or indifferent to the needs of others, and never learn to ask for help even when they should. Also individualism to the extreme can cause a culture to disintegrate because there is no common bond holding the group together.

Verse 11 shows how God uses our trials and tribulations to encourage us to depend on and support one another, thus creating community. Instead of assuming we are a burden when we need others, we should realize this is a training ground for others to learn how to “do community”.

**V.11** - *you also joining in helping us through your prayers, so that thanks may be given by many persons on our behalf for the favor bestowed on us through the prayers of many.*

*(If you would like to explore the cultural influence concept further, work through the handout “Culture, Education and Unspoken Expectations” to help you identify how your “cultures” have shaped your attitudes towards education and career.)*

*(If you would like to explore the external factors damaging one’s psyche concept further, work through the handout “True Self” to help you identify how your environmental influences have positively and negatively affected your personal development.)*

## **2) Other Relevant Passages:**

Just as there are many scriptures that talk about how God is faithful to see us through our challenges, there are also many other passages that can also reveal what the scriptures say regarding why we face challenges in the first place. This study will not attempt to do a complete survey of these passages or why God allows suffering; but it is appropriate to remind you of just a few scriptures which could remind us of some sources of stress.

**a) Problems and challenges – An Imperfect World:**

I often hear Christians talk as if they assume that being a Christian, not sinning, or even living totally obedient to God's will, will somehow save them from trials and tribulations. However scriptures tell us this is not true. Because we live in a fallen world, we will experience trials and tribulations in this life regardless of whether or not we are believers.

**GEN 3:17 – 19** –<sup>17</sup> Then to Adam He said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you will eat of it. All the days of your life.<sup>18</sup> “Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you will eat the plants of the field; <sup>19</sup> By the sweat of your face You will eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return.”

**John 16:33** –<sup>33</sup> These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

**Matt 5:45** –<sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

**b) Problems and challenges – Sometimes Are Self-Inflicted:**

A few months ago, God revealed to me that when this season of unrest hits (the economic turmoil), people would find themselves being “strangled by the consequences of their life choices.” I know I am certainly living with the consequences of my life choices. For example: Because I did not take advantage of my parents’ willingness to put me through college when I was 18, I had to support myself through school when I was older primarily through student loans. Consequently, I have an exorbitant amount of student loan debt, which I will be paying off well into retirement. Because I spent my 20’s and 30s having fun instead of sacrificing for my education, I am still trying to establish myself in my career at almost 50 years old. Because I chose to not get married and have children when I was younger, I now deal with “biological clock” issues.

**Gal 6:7** – Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

**3) Summary**

I initially realized this study needed to be done when it dawned on me that so many people may not fully understand why God allows us to face trials and tribulations. As mentioned several times, this is not intended to be an exhaustive study on this subject; but rather to help believers understand that God is not sadistic, cruel, indifferent, or unresponsive to your challenges. Instead, he is likely doing some “inner work” in you during this season. My hope is that you can learn to ask him, “Ok, God what do you want me to learn from this

experience?” Responding to my various trials and tribulations with this question meant I was never tempted to walk away from him even when things were at their worst. While I may not have always appreciated his methods, I always knew there was a point – whether or not I understood it. I hope you can also come to this realization as well.

**4) Reflection:**

To help you fully process this lesson, you are encouraged to take the time to answer the following questions. Follow-up reflection is a necessary part of the learning process. Feel free to write on additional sheets of paper if necessary.

**How do your current challenges affect how you see God? Are you able to trust there is a reason for your suffering? Or are you inclined to assume he is unloving or indifferent to your suffering? Are you inclined to see him as cruel and sadistic? Explain your response.**

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**When life gets challenging, how do you respond? How quick is your inclination to stop, pray, and ask God for wisdom, discernment, and comfort? Explain your response.**

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**Are there any issues relating to “pressing in to God” which you need to address? Explain your response.**

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**What challenges you are facing today are a result of simply living in a “fallen world” where adversity is just part of life?**

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**What challenges are you facing today that are a consequence of your prior life choices?**

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**How do issues of “Collectivism vs. Individualism” relate to the challenges you are dealing with? Are you being expected to conform in unhealthy ways? Do you or someone in your life act in ways that don’t consider consequences on others?**

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**Are there any “significant life events” this study has brought to mind for you? Did you know God at the time, and can you recall him comforting you through it? Is it possible those times were things God can use to prepare you for a ministry, calling or simply to minister to others? Explain your response.**

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**What is the next step you should be taking right now?**

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**How is this lesson speaking to you personally?**

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