

CHANGE YOUR LIFE. CHANGE YOUR WORLD.

activated

Vol 22 • Issue 3

THE TEMPEST TREE

Disaster or
opportunity?

Like Bees

How to overcome
nagging thoughts

The Special

A tale of roses and
thorns

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

WHY SUFFERING

Most people try not to think about it more than they have to, but there's no denying it: There's a lot of suffering in the world. Innocents are killed, maimed, and made homeless in cruel and unjust wars. More suffer the same in natural or manmade disasters. Cancer, AIDS, and other diseases claim millions of lives each year, often after months or years of pain. There's no end to it. Why does life have to be this way? It's the age-old question: Why does God allow suffering?

There is no simple, universal answer to that. God does allow suffering, but His reasons and purposes are nearly as numerous and varied as the sufferers themselves. One thing is certain, however: How people come through suffering or react to the suffering of others depends largely on their faith. Those who have implicit faith in a just and loving God call out to Him in their time of need, tap into His infinite resources, and find the grace and strength to rise above their pain and loss.

Little is known about the personal suffering of Frank E. Graeff (1860–1919), but he must have been writing from experience when he penned his now famous hymn, “Does Jesus Care?”¹ The pain he expresses is too real to have been mere fabrication, and only one who has been there could express the truth and hope found so victoriously in the chorus. “Oh yes, He cares, I know He cares, His heart is touched with my grief. ... I know my Savior cares!”

Suffering is part of life, but that wonderful faith and assurance of God's care and presence in the midst of our suffering can be yours too. I hope this issue of *Activated* will help you connect with God's love and comfort when you need Him most.

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1. See page 4.



BY CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER

THE TEMPEST TREE

IF YOU’VE EVER FELT LIKE YOUR WHOLE LIFE HAS BEEN UPROOTED AND YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW YOU’LL MAKE IT TO THE NEXT DAY, take heart from the Turner’s Oak—a 16-meter-tall giant planted in 1798 and now thriving in the Royal Botanic Kew Gardens, just south of London. In the 1980s, it was sickly and looked like it might die. Then on the 16th of October, 1987, the Great Storm hit parts of the United Kingdom, France, and the Channel Islands. It may have been the worst storm to hit since 1703 and knocked over 15 million trees in the south of England in just one hour. Among its victims was the Turner’s Oak. The wind

lifted the tree by its shallow root plate completely out of the ground, violently shook it, and then set it back down again like a giant hand lifting a wine glass up by its stem and then plopping it back on the table.

The head of the arboretum, Tony Kirkham, felt like he had lost a family member: “I was devastated! Trees that you’ve been looking after, that you’ve grown to recognize and be familiar with were lying on the ground.” Tony and his fellow arborists pushed the mighty oak back in place and propped it up without much hope. Three years later, to their amazement, the tree was a picture of health. That was when they realized that the soil around the roots had become so compacted from people walking on it that the tree wasn’t getting enough air and water. The storm shook the tree loose and gave the soil the needed porosity which enabled the oak to thrive once more.

In the 30-odd years since the storm, the Turner’s Oak has grown by a third and has inspired new methods

of tree management around the globe, including equipment designed to break up the soil and enable oxygen, nitrogen, and nutrients to reach the trees’ underground root systems.

Now whenever Tony strolls by this grand oak, he smiles, chuckles, and gets a bit emotional thinking about its miraculous recovery. “Trees are like people,” he says. “They stress, but they are beautiful when they are happy.”¹

When we’re in the middle of the hurricane, we may not understand what good could possibly come from it, but when the storm breaks, new life returns. Often, we don’t know the whys and wherefores of our troubles when we’re in the midst of them, and we “can’t see the forest for the trees.” But it’s in trusting in God’s good purposes in our lives that we find rest and peace of mind.²

CURTIS PETER VAN GORDER IS A SCRIPTWRITER AND MIME ARTIST³ IN GERMANY. ■

1. Find out more about the Turner Oak here: <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/stories-51282656/the-oak-tree-in-kew-gardens-that-taught-the-world-a-lesson>
2. See John 15:1–2.
3. <http://elixirmime.com>



BY RUTH DAVIDSON

JESUS COMFORTS HIS DISCIPLES

WHEN JESUS FIRST TOLD HIS DISCIPLES THAT HE WOULD SOON BE LEAVING THEM, they were greatly perplexed and asked Him all kinds of questions. The thought of Him leaving them was almost too much to bear.

He comforted them with the words, “Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know.”¹

All the promises and words of comfort that Jesus left with His disciples are available to us today as well. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth.”²

“It’s to your advantage that I go away, for if I don’t go away the Divine Comforter will not be released to you. But after I depart, I will send him to you.”³

Christ left us with a legacy of peace. “I leave the gift of peace with you—my peace. Not the kind of fragile peace given by the world, but my perfect peace. Don’t yield to fear or be troubled in your hearts—instead, be courageous!”⁴

RUTH DAVIDSON IS A COUNSELOR AND SCRIPTWRITER FOR FAMILY LIFELINES AND A MEMBER OF TFI IN THE USA. ■

1. John 14:1–4
2. John 14:16–17 NIV
3. John 16:7 TPT
4. John 14:27 TPT

DOES JESUS CARE?

Does Jesus care when my heart is
pained
Too deeply for mirth or song,
As the burdens press, and the
cares distress,
And the way grows weary and
long?

Does Jesus care when my way is
dark
With a nameless dread and fear?
As the daylight fades into deep
night shades,
Does He care enough to be near?

Does Jesus care when I’ve tried
and failed
To resist some temptation strong;
When for my deep grief there is
no relief,
Though my tears flow all the
night long?

Does Jesus care when I’ve said
“goodbye”
To the dearest on earth to me,
And my sad heart aches till it
nearly breaks—
Is it aught to Him? Does He see?

Oh, yes, He cares, I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the
long nights dreary,
I know my Savior cares.

ENCOUNTERING THE COMFORTER

BY STEVE HEARTS

IN JOHN 14:26, Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit to comfort His followers after His departure from this world. “The Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things.”¹

This promise has been etched into my memory since childhood. But it wasn’t until I reached my midtwenties that I encountered “the Comforter” for myself.

My mother died when I was 20 years old. When a heartrending tragedy or loss occurs, it’s easy to become so engulfed in sorrow and grief, to the point of refusing all comfort. That’s how I was. Although outwardly I managed to maintain a composed appearance, it was only a façade under which I hid the grief and pain I lugged around every day after the loss of my mother.

1. KJV

2. See “Beyond Sight,” August 2013 issue of *Activated*.

The reality was, I deeply resented the fact that my mother was gone. Of course, it’s normal to grieve after such a loss, but I wasn’t able to move beyond my grief.

Sometime later, I yielded to God’s prompting to give thanks that my mother was now with Him,² which helped cure the resentment I’d held toward God.

Shortly thereafter, the tenth anniversary of my mother’s passing came around. This day had always been my most painful of the entire year. This time, however, I felt unusually happy and at peace. As I lay in bed that night, I became aware of an extremely comforting sensation filling my heart. Its healing balm reached places in my soul that had long been ravaged by grief. It was as though a pair of strong, loving arms were enveloping my heart—making me feel secure and reassured.

I asked God what was happening, and He said, “You are encountering the Comforter for yourself.”

I was being relieved of the burden of grief I had borne like a cross for so long. With tears of joy running down my face, I said again and again to the Holy Spirit, “I accept and receive the comfort you want to give me, without reservations.” The more I said it, the more the comforting sensation within me grew; and it has never left since.

Are you currently carrying around a burden of grief and sorrow? You don’t have to. The Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is knocking at your heart’s door even now, longing to come in. His arms are outstretched, waiting to enfold you. All you have to do is pray to receive Jesus and be filled with the Holy Spirit.

STEVE HEARTS HAS BEEN BLIND SINCE BIRTH. HE IS A WRITER, MUSICIAN, AND MEMBER OF THE FAMILY INTERNATIONAL IN NORTH AMERICA. ■



LIKE BEES

BY MARIE STORY

HAVE YOU EVER TRIED SLEEPING WITH A FLY OR MOSQUITO IN THE ROOM? You're lying there, nearly asleep, when *bzzzzzzz*—the fly dive-bombs your face. Some flies are even bold enough (or obnoxious enough) to land on your face or ear.

You're drifting off again, when *bzzz* ... SLAP! You're too tired to get up and kill the thing, but you can't sleep because of it.

1. Psalm 118:12 NIV
2. Psalm 118:25 NIV
3. Psalm 118:12–13 NIV
4. Psalm 118:21 NIV

Sometimes I go through a similar experience, but without the pesky bug. Here's how it goes:

I'm trying to sleep ... nearly asleep ... when a little thought sneaks up on me, *I neglected to take care of that point on my to-do list*. I know I shouldn't worry. I know there's no use worrying; I'll worry about that tomorrow. I roll over and try to sleep, but my eyes pop open as another little thought drifts by: *Oh no, I forgot to make that important phone call*.

Pipe down, brain, I say. Relax, quit worrying, and go to sleep. You've got

to get up early tomorrow. There'll be plenty of time to think about all this in the morning. But nope, try as I might to get to sleep, soon enough along comes yet another one: *Isn't that deadline coming up at work?*

And on and on it goes.

Early one morning, after a particularly long and restless night, I dragged myself to the kitchen for some tea and toast. I sat hunched like a zombie, eyes half closed as I tried to read a chapter in Psalms before my day began. I read through Psalm 118 till I got to verse 12 where King David writes of his



If you're worried and you can't sleep,
Just count your blessings instead of sheep,
And you'll fall asleep counting your blessings.

—Irving Berlin

enemies, “They swarmed around me like bees.”¹ I had to smile as I thought back over the long, worry-filled night I had just come through. I wasn’t surrounded by physical enemies, but my worries sure had “swarmed around me like bees”—buzzing, pestering, poking.

I tend to worry about things that I have little to no control over—like a swarm of bees. Bees, like worries, are persistent and hard to get away from. Contrary to what Winnie the Pooh may have taught you, jumping into water won’t help—the bees will just buzz around until you come up for air. Don’t bother hiding either—they’ll very quickly find a way to get at you. You can swat at them and flail wildly, but you’ll soon be overwhelmed.

When you’ve got a bee problem, the best thing you can do is call someone to help you get rid of them. Be sure to wear thick clothing in the meantime.

That’s exactly how King David dealt with the “bugs” in his life—he

called in some “pest control.”

“Lord, save us!” he cried out,
“Lord, grant us success!”²

And what happened? He tells us: “They were consumed as quickly as burning thorns. I was pushed back and about to fall, but the Lord helped me.”³

A handy beekeeper or exterminator will come along, sedate the bees with smoke, pop the beehive into a box, and take it far away where the bees will be safe and they won’t bother you anymore. When you can’t escape your worries and fears, call in the Expert Worry Exterminator—Jesus—to take care of them for you.

Are you afraid sometimes of what’s ahead? When David was worried or afraid, he turned his cares over to God and expected Him to handle them. Every time David ran into trouble, he cried out to God, and He was faithful to rescue him. “You answered me”—David proclaims—“you have become my salvation!”⁴ And He continues to do the same thing for us today.

Now, when I lie in bed, unable to sleep because of worries or fears, I’ve learned that the best thing I can do is call out for help. I explain the problem to Jesus, name each worry, and then turn each one over to Him. Sometimes I’ve got a long list of worries, and other times it’s just one thing that’s bugging me. No matter what the problem is, though, I know I can leave it in His capable hands.

Sure, sometimes new worries come buzzing in again. Sometimes I still have restless nights. But I’ve learned that as long as I stay close to my personal “Pest Controller,” I can call on Him to handle any problems that come up. Every time I do, He comes in and swats away that worry—and I roll over and go right to sleep.

MARIE STORY LIVES IN SAN ANTONIO, USA, WHERE SHE WORKS AS A FREELANCE ILLUSTRATOR AND VOLUNTEERS AS A COUNSELOR AT A LOCAL HOMELESS SHELTER. ■

THE ICE HOUSE

By JOYCE SUTTIN

GRANDPA FIRST INTRODUCED ME TO THE ICE HOUSE ON HIS DAIRY FARM WHEN I WAS JUST A TOT.

After the cows were milked and the raw milk put into sterilized bottles in the creamery, the bottles were submerged in ice water in the ice house. There was no refrigeration there in 1952, just good insulation and a thick door to keep the heat out. The bottles of milk were kept fresh in ice water in a large metal tub. Then, very early each morning, the wooden crates of glass bottles were put into the milk truck with big chunks of ice on top and delivered to the surrounding households. Fresh milk daily.

This milk wasn't pasteurized or homogenized. Cream for coffee was skimmed off the top, or the milk was shaken by hand to blend in the cream. Of course, the cream could

also be shaken by hand to turn it into butter. The raw milk came from healthy cows, and a lot of people believed that it had healing properties. Later on in my childhood, government rules and regulations made the selling of raw milk impossible, but my earliest memories were of raw milk and the simple processes that went into its production.

The barn where the cows quietly waited in their stanchions, the

creamery where the milk was bottled, and the ice house were all fascinating to me. I loved the green fields dotted with wildflowers where the cows grazed each day. I loved the smell of the grain and the hay they fed on as they waited to be milked. I loved playing hide-and-seek and other games in the barn with my brother, sisters, and cousins.

One of the games we played at the dairy was sneaking into the ice

Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.—*Psalm 30:5*

Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.—*John 16:22 NIV*

If you haven't yet received Jesus and His gift of comfort, you can right now by praying the following:
Jesus, please forgive me for all my sins. I believe that You gave Your life for me. I open the door of my heart and ask You to please come in and give me Your gift of eternal life. Amen.

house and seeing who could keep their hand in ice water the longest. I can still remember the sting of the freezing water as I tried with all my might to hold my hand in it. The cold would turn into a burn, and when I pulled my hand out, it would be bright red. It was so cold it felt like it was on fire.

Another time, I'd gone out sledding on a wintry morning with my cousins, and it was so much fun that I didn't think about the snow melting through my mittens or the wetness seeping through my boots. When we went inside, I realized that something was wrong, and my hands and feet hurt so much that I couldn't even go into a warm bath. I had to sit in cool water that was gradually warmed up until I could feel warm again.

I was remembering these experiences and thinking about the

heartbreaking losses in my life. Grief has an icy cold edge to it. My grandfather's death was my first great loss at fourteen years old. It was a stinging pain that reminded me of holding my hand in the ice water in the ice house or sitting in the cold bath water trying to thaw out my fingers and toes. I felt like my heart was not just broken, it had been submerged and frozen. It hurt so much that I couldn't tell if it felt hot or cold. It just really hurt, and it took gentle changes to begin to feel again.

But I did. With time, I began to feel warm inside again. The chilling pain went away, and I could look back at my time in the ice house of grief and focus on the sweet memories, my time spent with my grandpa as a child. I continue to look back and draw strength from the simple and profound life lessons he taught me.

The lessons the ice house teaches are difficult ones. Whenever you find yourself there, be gentle with yourself and allow yourself time to feel and heal. Don't expect to plunge back into normal life or try to distract yourself by staying busy or entertained by other things, or you'll find yourself hurting even worse. Find a trusted person who allows you to feel, someone who can cry with you when you need to cry and laugh with you when you need to laugh, and everything in between. Don't forget or try to block out the memory of the ice house or you'll miss its deep and valuable lessons. Respect your heart and give it time to heal.

JOYCE SUTTIN IS A RETIRED TEACHER AND WRITER AND LIVES IN SAN ANTONIO, USA. ■

BY MARIANNE AND JERRY PALADINO

HEAVEN'S CHILD

THIS IS THE STORY OF OUR SON GABRIEL, who was born with Down syndrome and was truly a special child. Although Gabriel only lived on this earth for two years and four months, the Lord used him to touch many other lives and to teach us innumerable precious lessons of love, faith, conviction, endurance, compassion, humility, courage, prayerfulness, and the reality of Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God."

When the doctors first told us that Gabriel would have Down syndrome,

it was difficult for us to accept, but as we became more informed, we found out how special Down syndrome children are. And of course, the more we got to know Gabriel and enjoyed his sweet angelic spirit, the less we thought of his limitations, and the more we suspected that we were like the people who the Bible says had "unwittingly entertained angels."¹

Gabriel had several serious physical disabilities from birth, and his body was not destined to last very long. We knew that each day with

him was a miracle, a gift. We compiled a list of Bible verses for Gabriel's health and strength, and referred to it often. The promise we claimed the most was, "He gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might He increases strength."² God surely fulfilled that promise in Gabriel.

1. Hebrews 13:2

2. Isaiah 40:29



and did our part, then God did His. Gabriel was completely healed from the life-threatening cough.

With every crisis, God seemed to teach us a new lesson on healing and fervent prayer, usually by helping us apply something we had read in His Word. It was like a whole new grade in life—one that taught us lessons we wouldn't have learned any other way. Many times we wished we could have been the ones suffering instead of our child, but we came to see that God knows best, as always, because it caused us to fight in prayer even more for Gabriel than we would have fought for ourselves. Each time, God gave us the comfort and strength we needed.

Although God had worked in our hearts to prepare us for the day that He would call Gabriel home, we grew very attached to him. Maybe that was because he was a special child, or maybe because we were aware from the start that he was “on loan from God,” only with us for a little while.

One day, as Gabriel was especially weak from a bout of sickness, he began to show signs that he was going to have convulsions, then he fainted in my arms, never to regain consciousness. We rushed him to the hospital, and as the doctors tried to revive him, we got out a little hymnal that we had with us, and it opened to the song “Some Golden Daybreak.” That seemed to be God's sign to us that Gabriel was on his way home.

We felt a tremendous sense of loss, of course, but God comforted us as only He can. What more could we have asked than to know that Gabriel was happy and whole at last, his suffering ended. At Gabriel's memorial service, someone shared a vision of a butterfly that had just escaped from its cocoon. In a way, Gabriel was like a little caterpillar in this life—in fact, he never even learned to crawl as well as a caterpillar. But now he is like a beautiful butterfly, and has flown to freedom.

Gabriel's departure to heaven made that place more real to us. We believed in heaven before and had looked forward to exploring its beauties and mysteries some day, but now that Gabriel is there, heaven seems more like home and we find ourselves loosening our grip on the things of this life. We've never been the same since Gabriel's brief time with us on earth. Gabriel never belonged to us, you see. He was a messenger on a mission—to melt our hearts and teach us to connect more closely with the divine and learn more about the true values of life.

MARIANNE AND JERRY PALADINO
SPENT 14 YEARS IN JAPAN AND 18
YEARS IN MEXICO SHARING GOD'S
LOVE AND MESSAGE OF HOPE. ■

When Gabriel was six months old, he contracted a severe cough. As we prayed desperately for Gabriel's healing, God told us that He was teaching us endurance. As we dug into the Bible to learn what that meant, we were encouraged to find that this virtue had helped fashion many men and women of God into the people He wanted them to be. As for us, we needed to not just pray once and count it done; we needed to keep seeking God's help with our whole hearts. When we realized this





THE SPECIAL

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

SANDRA FELT AS LOW AS THE HEELS OF HER BIRKENSTOCKS AS SHE PUSHED AGAINST A COLD WINTER GUST AND THE FLORIST SHOP DOOR. Her life had been easy, like a spring breeze. Then in the fourth month of her second pregnancy, an automobile accident had stolen her ease. During this week she would have delivered a son. She grieved over her loss. As if that weren't enough, her husband's company threatened a transfer. Then her sister, whose visit she covered, called saying she couldn't come. What's worse, Sandra's friend infuriated her by suggesting her grief

was a God-given path to maturity that would teach her to be thankful for the good things in her life and allow her to empathize with others who suffer.

Has she lost a child?—No. She has no idea what I'm feeling! Sandra shuddered. She expects me to be thankful? Thankful for what?—she wondered. For a careless driver whose truck was hardly scratched when he rear-ended mine? For an airbag that saved my life but took that of my child?

"Good afternoon. Can I help you?" The flower shop clerk's

approach startled her. "Sorry," said the clerk, whose name was Jenny. "I just didn't want you to think I was ignoring you."

"I need an arrangement."

"Do you want beautiful but ordinary, or would you like to challenge the day with a customer favorite I call The Thanksgiving Special?" Jenny saw Sandra's curiosity and continued. "I'm convinced that flowers tell stories, that each arrangement suggests a particular feeling. Are you looking for something that conveys gratitude?"

"Not exactly!" Sandra blurted. "Sorry, but in the last five months, everything that could have gone wrong has."

Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has plenty; not on your past misfortunes, of which all men have some.—*Charles Dickens (1812–1870)*

Sandra regretted her outburst but was surprised when Jenny said, “I have the perfect arrangement for you.” The door’s small bell suddenly rang.

“Barbara! Hi,” Jenny said. “I have your order ready. Just a moment.” She politely excused herself from Sandra and walked toward a small workroom. She quickly reappeared carrying a massive arrangement of greenery, bows, and long-stemmed thorny roses. Only, the ends of the rose stems were neatly snipped, no flowers. “Want this in a box?” Jenny asked.

Sandra watched for Barbara’s response. Was this a joke? Who would want rose stems and no flowers! She waited for laughter, for someone to notice the absence of flowers atop the thorny stems, but neither woman did.

“Yes, please. It’s exquisite,” said Barbara. “You’d think after three years of getting The Special, I’d not be so moved by its significance, but it’s happening again. My family will love this one. Thanks.”

Sandra stared. *Why so normal a conversation about so strange an arrangement?* she wondered. Sandra

pointed and blurted out, “That lady just left with, uh...”

“Yes?”

“Well, she had no flowers!”

“Right, I cut off the flowers.”

“Off?”

“Off. Yep. That’s the special.

I call it the Thanksgiving Thorns Bouquet.”

“But why do people pay for that?”

In spite of herself, Sandra chuckled.

“Do you really want to know?”

“I couldn’t leave this shop without knowing!”

“Barbara came into the shop three years ago feeling very much like I think you feel today,” Jenny explained. “She thought she had very little to be thankful for. She had lost her father to cancer, the family business was failing, her son was taking drugs, and she faced major surgery.”

“Ouch!” said Sandra.

“That same year,” Jenny explained, “I had lost my husband. I assumed complete responsibility for the shop and for the first time, felt completely alone. I had no children, no husband, no family nearby, and too great a debt to allow any travel.”

“What did you do?”

“I learned to be thankful for thorns.”

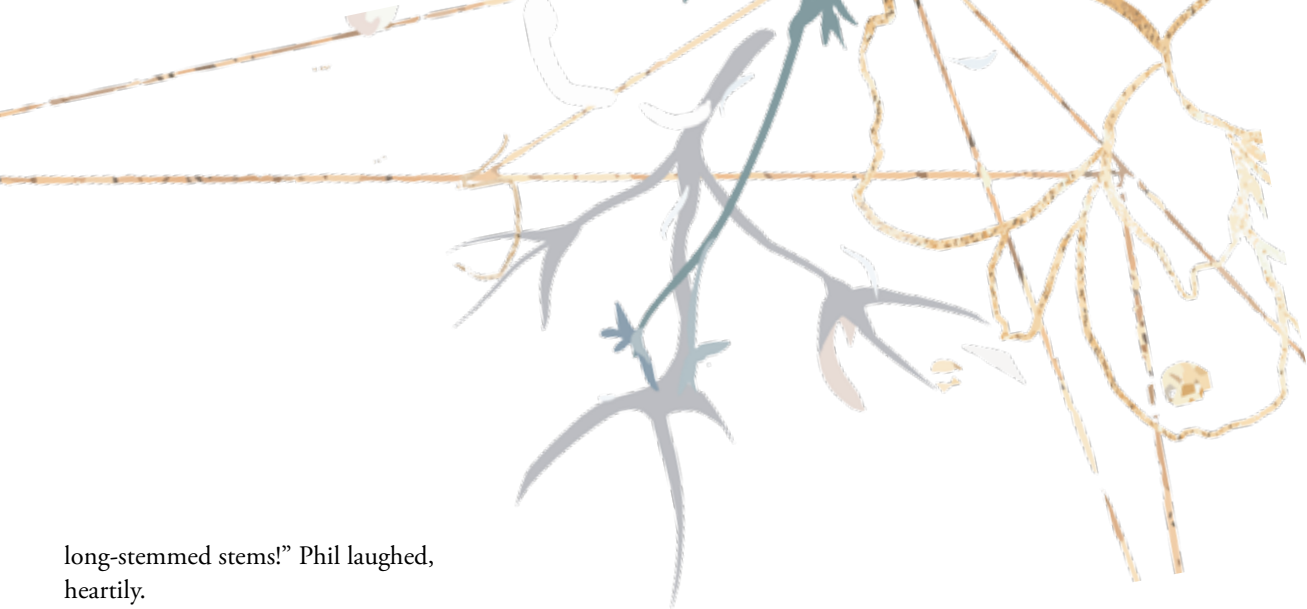
Sandra’s eyebrows lifted.

“Thorns?”

“I’m a Christian. I’ve always thanked God for good things in life and I never thought to ask Him why good things happened to me. But when bad stuff hit, did I ever ask! I had always enjoyed the ‘flowers’ of life but it took thorns to show me the beauty of God’s comfort. You know, the Bible says that God comforts us when we’re afflicted, so that from His consolation, we can learn to comfort others.”

Sandra gasped. “A friend read that passage to me and I was furious! I guess the truth is I don’t *want* comfort. I’ve lost a baby and I’m angry with God.”

“Hey, Phil!” shouted Jenny, as a balding, rotund man entered the shop. She softly touched Sandra’s arm and moved to welcome him. He pulled her to his side for a warm hug. “I’m here for twelve thorny



long-stemmed stems!” Phil laughed, heartily.

“I figured as much,” said Jenny. “I’ve got them ready.” She lifted a tissue-wrapped arrangement from the refrigerated cabinet.

“Beautiful,” said Phil. “My wife will love them.”

Sandra could not resist asking. “These are for your wife?” Phil saw that Sandra’s curiosity matched his when he first heard of a thorn bouquet. “If you don’t mind my asking, why thorns?”

“I don’t mind. In fact, I’m glad you asked,” he said. “Four years ago, my wife and I nearly divorced. After forty years, we were in a real mess, but we slogged through, problem by rotten problem. We rescued our marriage—our love, really. Last year I stopped in here for flowers. I must have mentioned surviving a tough process because Jenny told me that for a long time she had kept a vase of rose stems—stems!—as a reminder of what she had learned from thorny times. That was good enough for me. I took home stems. My wife and I decided to label each one for a specific thorny situation and give

thanks for what the problem taught us. I’m pretty sure this stem review is becoming a tradition.”

Phil paid Jenny, thanked her again, and as he left, said to Sandra, “I highly recommend The Special!”

“I don’t know if I can be thankful for the thorns in my life,” Sandra said to Jenny.

“Well, my experience says that the thorns make the roses more precious. We treasure God’s providential care more during trouble than at any other time. Remember, Jesus wore a crown of thorns so that we might know His love. Do not resent thorns.”

Tears rolled down Sandra’s cheeks. For the first time since the accident she loosened her grip on resentment. “I’ll take twelve long-stemmed thorns, please.”

“I was hoping you would,” Jenny said. “I’ll have them ready in a minute. Then, every time you see them, remember to appreciate both good and hard times. We grow through both.”

“Thank you. What do I owe you?”

“Nothing. Nothing but a pledge to work toward healing your heart.

The first year’s arrangement is always on me.” Jenny handed a card to Sandra. “I’ll attach a card like this to your arrangement, but maybe you’d like to read it first. It’s a prayer that was written by a man who was blind. Go ahead, read it.”



My God, I have never thanked Thee for my thorn! I have thanked Thee a thousand times for my roses, but never once for my thorn. Teach me the glory of the cross I bear. Teach me the value of my thorns. Show me that I have climbed to Thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow.¹

Jenny said, “God bless you, Sandra,” handing her *The Special*. “I look forward to our knowing each other better.”

Sandra smiled. She turned, opened the door and walked toward hope. ■

1. George Matheson (1842–1906)



BY MARIE ALVERO

THE ART OF ENCOURAGEMENT

AS I WRITE THIS A VERY GOOD FRIEND OF MINE IS STRUGGLING WITH WAVE AFTER WAVE OF HARD NEWS. Her husband has been laid off from a job he held for 27 years, she had a suspicious mammogram, their home AC has gone out, and they had to put down a family pet. No tragedies, yet, but plenty of hard stuff—the stuff that makes you ask “Why, God?” or “Are You there, God? Do You notice these things? Do You care?”

I want to offer comfort and support to my friend. I hate that things are hard for her right now, but I struggle with knowing how to do that. I don't want to offer clichéd encouragement and sympathetic “I'm praying for you” messages that feel like I am speaking from a life that's not touched by the struggles she's facing. Do you ever feel that way? Or maybe you're on the other side of the

1. 2 Corinthians 1:4 NIV

equation, as the one needing comfort and just wishing your friends would understand what you need. Here are some things I have learned about how to offer comfort and support to loved ones facing hard times:

Find a verse or song that I can pray over them, and let them know. I'll usually text something like: “Isaiah says that those who wait on the Lord will have their strength renewed. I know you're so tired right now, but I'm praying that God will renew your strength.” I have both sent and received messages like this, and just knowing someone is standing on God's promises for you when you feel weak is a great boost.

Offer distraction. Sometimes the battle is long, and you just want a space that's not all about your struggles. Ask your friend to go on a hike with you, go out for coffee, join you for dinner or a movie, or anything that gives a little reprieve from the struggle. Be a place for them to recharge.

Do something thoughtful. Drop off a meal. Take their kids for an afternoon. Pay for their groceries. Mow the lawn. Take the time to call and chat or mail a card. Small deeds of kindness are powerful and can renew hope and strength.

Be the cheerleader. When your friend has a job interview or gets good news from the doctor, celebrate with them. Be a part of their journey.

Over the course of our lives and relationships, we will have ample opportunity to be both the encourager and the struggler. We will learn to “comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God,”¹ and help each other keep going even when we feel weary.

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FROM JESUS WITH LOVE

THE SANCTUARY

I see your struggles and hear your calls for help. When you feel all alone, I am with you. I feel your heartaches, and wait for you to draw near to Me in prayer. Come into My sanctuary, into that secret place that you and I can share. There you can find a reprieve from the worries, the cares, and the confusion. There I can restore your feeling of purpose and infuse you with strength to go on.

Life can be a struggle, but you do not have to struggle alone. Many times you faced burdens in your life that seemed like mountains. They weighed your spirit down and you wondered why I allowed them there. I allowed these things not to reprove you or as some sort of punishment, but to bring you closer to Me. I know you better than anyone else ever could, and love you more dearly.

The problems and obstacles in your life can be taken two ways: they can make you either bitter or better. When you find the peace that only I can give, I can then use you as an instrument of My love to comfort others.

Many things in life can seem unfair or even unloving, but when you look at them through My promise to work all things together for your good, that gives a whole new meaning to the difficult things you face. That promise holds the key to easing heartache, relieving anxiety, and conquering fear.