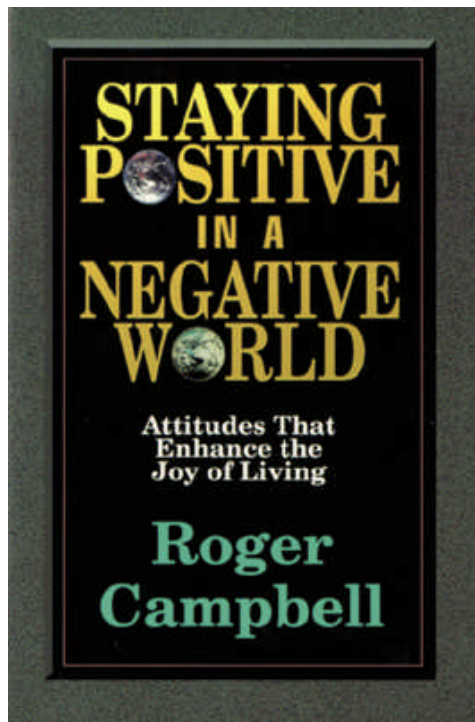


STAYING POSITIVE IN A NEGATIVE WORLD

By Roger Campbell

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INTRODUCTION

The Sunday morning service had just ended.

Members of the congregation were filing out of the church, shaking hands and exchanging greetings. I had never ministered here before but felt at ease with the people. The bond of love between us was new but familiar.

One of the worshipers stopped to ask me if I might consider writing something to help those struggling with negative attitudes.

“I’m so negative,” he said. “I’m negative about the church—about everything.”

Earlier, I had been working on an outline for a book intended to aid those who were having trouble with this very problem. Now here was a confirmation of my conviction that help was needed.

Millions who exit church services and others who never enter them are defeated by this destructive attitude. Negativism is a thief, robbing life of adventure and joy. This enemy affects every institution of society. It weakens families; it slows down churches in their outreach; even the economy of the nation is drained of needed vitality by this crippling condition that causes its victims to expect little and attempt less.

I wrote *Staying Positive in a Negative World* for those who are tired of being down, tired of despair, tired of clouds, and tired of valleys.

There is a better way to live.

Positively.

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CHAPTER 1: GOD REALLY CARES

The year was 1929. J.C. Penney was a patient in the Kellogg Sanitarium in Battle Creek, Michigan. He was broken in health and filled with despair.

Getting out of bed one night, he wrote farewell letters to his wife and son, saying he did not expect to live to see the dawn. But the next day brought an experience that changed Penney's life and restored his health. Let him tell it:

When I awoke the next morning, I was surprised to find that I was still alive. Going downstairs, I heard singing in a little chapel where devotional exercises were held each morning. I can still remember the hymn they were singing, "God Will Take Care of You." Going into the chapel, I listened with a weary heart to the singing, the reading of the Scripture lesson, and the prayer. Suddenly—something happened. I can't explain it. I can only call it a miracle. I felt as if I had been instantly lifted out of the darkness of a dungeon into warm, brilliant sunlight. I felt as if I had been transported from hell to paradise. I felt the power of God as I never had felt it before. I realized that God with His love was there to help me. From that day to this, my life has been free from worry.¹

Penney's chapel lesson dispelled his fears and prepared him for a bright and successful future as founder of the department store bearing his name. He had learned that God really cares.

But this can be a difficult lesson to learn.

Reacting to Trouble

We live in a troubled world. And trouble comes to all. If our conception of God's care is dependent on the circumstances at hand, we may find ourselves doubting his love.

Few people have difficulty believing that God cares when things are going well. But things do not always go well. Jesus said, "In the world ye shall have tribulation" (John 16:33).

How do you react when trouble comes?

Do you become pessimistic? Depressed? Angry with God?

In his excellent article, “Pulling through Depression,” published in *Moody Monthly*, Craig Massey says: “Often the believer deepens his depression by isolating himself from the Lord. He says, in essence, ‘I don’t believe You are with me. I don’t believe You care. I don’t believe You hear me.’”²

This kind of response to trouble is not just a product of these tense times. It is characteristic of the nature of man and has surfaced in times of trial through the centuries.

Doubting God’s Care

Standing at the Red Sea with Pharaoh’s army in hot pursuit, the Children of Israel doubted God’s care. Fear caused them to question His goodness and love. Though they had witnessed His power and protection in their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, they now buckled under pressure. Concluding that God had forsaken them, they accused Moses of having taken them into the wilderness to die (Ex. 14:10-12).

Shortly after their tirade against Moses, one of the greatest miracles of the Old Testament took place: The Red Sea opened before them, allowing their safe passage to freedom. This cased their faith to soar and gave them a song.

But three days later, the only water they could find was bitter and undrinkable. They were in the pits.

Still patient with His people, God sweetened the waters of Marah and confirmed His promises to them, guaranteeing His continued care (Ex. 15:23-27).

They were on top of the world.

A short time later they ran out of food and the cloud of gloom moved in again. This time they not only complained against their leaders but insisted it would have been better for them to have died during the plagues that had come to Egypt when God was securing their freedom (Ex. 16:2-3).

Every time trouble came they began looking back to Egypt. “If only—,” they said.

God Meets Us

You may be looking back and second guessing decisions mad in the past. You think things would be better “if only” you had not moved...or changed jobs...or married your mate. But looking back is futile...and unnecessary.

God meets us where we are.

He knew all about the hunger of His people and provided manna for them to eat. Had they been able to go back in time and reverse their decision to leave Egypt, they would have missed the opportunity of a lifetime: the single occasion on this planet when earth people ate angel’s food.

Adversity also caused Job’s wife to doubt God’s care. When her husband was healthy and wealthy, it was easy for her to see God’s hand in al their affairs. There is no record of even one negative word from her during their time of prosperity.

Then trouble came.

She and her husband lost everything, including their seven sons and three daughters. Finally Job’s health went; he was covered with boils from head to foot. It was too much for this grieving woman. Reacting to changed circumstances, she concluded that God had forsaken them and blurted out her infamous statement: “Dost thou still retain thine integrity? Curse God, and die” (Job 2:9).

Mrs. Job may be the most maligned woman in the Bible. But her husband seems to respond to her one lapse into negativism tenderly, telling her that she is out of character, that she is speaking as one of the foolish women...not as she would have ordinarily spoken (Job 2:10).

The Pulpit Commentary makes the following observation about the disappointing outburst of Job’s wife during the time of her deep depression:

Men have been too hard on Job’s wife for this one foolish saying of hers, forgetting how huge was her affliction. Indeed a great injustice has been done her, and while sympathy and admiration have been lavished on the husband, the partner in distress has scarcely received a glance of pity. But his troubles were her troubles. She had been in affluence, the happy mother of a happy family. Now she is plunged into poverty and misery, bereft of her children, with her once honored husband in disease and corruption. Is it wonderful (strange) that she should utter one hasty, impatient word?³

This is consistent with Job’s response. After telling his wife that her reaction is not like her but like the foolish women, he explains that God’s love is unchanged by their

difficult circumstances (Job 2:10). His correct understanding of the situation is a mark of his spiritual maturity. The harshness of his wife's negative challenge under pressure, when she was not known for that kind of attitude, shows to what depths depression may drive us and emphasizes the importance of looking beyond the ash pits of life to our unchanging Lord.

The most familiar biblical example of believers doubting God's care under stress is that of the disciples during the storm on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41). Having been instructed by Jesus to cross over to the other side, they started the journey without delay. Weary from the busy day's labor, the Saviour slept in the rear of the tossing boat.

Suddenly a great storm swept in upon them. Strong winds piled the waves high. The boat began taking on water, and they were in danger of going down.

The storm in this text pictures the storms of life through which we all pass from time to time, and the whole harrowing experience is loaded with practical lessons. Perhaps the most important of these is the truth that Christians have trials in life even when they are studying and applying God's Word and living lives of obedience to the Lord. Commenting on this time of peril for the disciples, J.C. Ryle has written:

Let us learn then, first of all, that following Christ will not prevent our having earthly sorrows and troubles.

Here are the chosen disciples of the Lord Jesus in great anxiety. The faithful flock is allowed by the Shepherd to be much disquieted. The fear of death breaks in upon them like an armed man. Peter, James, and John, the pillars of the church about to be planted in the world, are much distressed.

Perhaps they had expected Christ's service would at any rate lift them above the reach of earthly trials. Perhaps they thought that He who could raise the dead, and heal the sick, and feed multitudes with a few loaves and fishes, and cast out devils with a word—He would never allow His servants to be sufferers on earth. Perhaps they had supposed He would always grant them smooth journeys, fine weather, an easy course, and freedom from trouble and care.

If the disciples thought so, they were much mistaken.⁴

Alarmed at their apparent peril, the disciples cried, "Master, carest Thou not that we perish?" (Mark 4:38). And their question reveals their problem to be the same as that of the troubled Israelites following Moses, Job's wife, and many today: in adversity they doubted His care.

Responding to their cry, Jesus arose and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace, be still" (v. 39). At his command, the wind ceased blowing and the sea flattened.

There was a great calm. Then Jesus asked two probing questions: “Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?” (Mark 4:40).

These are good questions to ponder on our down days.

Afraid, the disciples raised a question of their own: “What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41).

They might have answered their own question: “He is a man who cares in a storm!”

Whatever your storm, if you belong to him, he cares.

Proofs of God’s Care

God’s care is shown in His creation. Once, when Martin Luther felt depressed, he heard a bird singing its evening song. Then he saw it tuck its head under its wing and go to sleep. He said, “This little bird has had its supper and now is getting ready to go to sleep, quite content, never troubling itself as to what its food will be or where it will lodge on the morrow. Like David, it abides under the shadow of the Almighty. It sits on its little twig content and lets God care.” The bird’s example lifted Luther from despair and enabled him to get on with his important work.⁵

Jesus often appealed to lessons in nature to demonstrate God’s care for His children. He spoke of birds that neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns but are fed of our heavenly Father (Matt. 6:26). And his message about the lilies of the field is one of the most comforting in the Bible for those enduring economic storms:

And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matt. 6:28-30)

In his book, *Countdown*, G.B. Hardy points out a number of scientific facts about the earth and its relation to its atmosphere and other planets that demonstrate the Creator’s care. He writes:

We now know the size of our earth could not have been a thing of chance. It is exactly the right size for the sustenance of life. The height of the atmosphere is just right...A change by as little as 10 percent either way in the size of our planet, and science agrees no life could exist. As a matter of absolute

fact, life on earth is only possible because of an incredible number of “just rights.”⁶

After listing a number of these “just rights,” such as the atmosphere, the temperature, the amount of nitrogen and oxygen in the air, the earth’s tilt, its speed of rotation and distance from the sun, he contrasts the earth to other planets as follows:

These dead and dismal moons and planets are a witness to the providence and genius of God. They stand bleak in dazzling light or eternal blackness, in blistering heat or deadly cold. They stand an eternal witness to man of what his world would be like if a loving God had not meticulously fashioned it for life and comfort.⁷

Consider God’s care the next time you see photographs of barren planets sent back from space. Look about you and understand that people are more important than any other part of God’s creation.

While passing through a storm some years ago, I started the habit of looking out of my study window early in the morning, drinking in the view and saying, “Thank you, Lord, for allowing me to live in this beautiful place.” I have found this a good way to start the day on a positive note. Appreciating the beauty that surrounds my home reminds me of God’s mighty power, His great plan and His attention to minute details. There is a world of life all about us and that first look and my prayer of thanksgiving keeps me aware that my Father planned it all...and sustains it.

The early morning view from my window is always new. The seasons come and go, bringing color changes and different cycles of life that are peculiar to our area. Day after day, I am moved by the drama before me: the brilliant greens of spring, the reds and yellows of fall, the stark beauty of winter.

And there are the birds.

In the spring, robins and other warm weather lovers arrive with family plans in mind. I don’t blame them for choosing this spot for nesting and raising their young. I have done the same.

Then there are times for watching larger varieties. Ducks become restless and start moving from one nearby lake to another. Some mornings, I will be greeted by the honking of Canadian geese in flight formation; always a wonder to me.

Finally, we will enter the time of cold winter storms. Except for the evergreens, the view from my window will be white. Many of the birds will have left with their kind for warmer places. Only the hardy ones will stay: bluejays, cardinals, sparrows...especially the sparrows, the common folk of the winged ones. And as I look at these busy brown customers awaiting my trip to the bird feeder, I remember that my heavenly Father cares about each one of them. If even one of them should perish in a winter blizzard, He will know about it (Matt. 10:29).

Shall I then think that any part of my life is unimportant to Him? Shall I doubt my Father's care when trouble comes? Never. We are of more than many sparrows (Matt. 10:31). We can rest in His care.

God's care is most clearly seen in His provision for our salvation. Here is the greatest love story ever told: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Now here is a wonder: that we should think that God would care enough to make us citizens of heaven and then be disinterested in problems and heartaches that we encounter on our journey home.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Everything about the Gospel declares God's continuing care for His own. Herbert Lockyer has written, "Justice demanded punishment for sin, and in His love God provided the One who should suffer death for every man. But His justice did not imperil His love and mercy. If a suffering heart is tempted to feel that God has not acted kindly or justly with him, let him remember Calvary."⁸

A woman who had endured excruciating pain while hospitalized with rheumatoid arthritis told me she had been able to stay on top during her suffering by remembering all that Jesus had endured on the cross. She knew her Lord would understand.

A minister who was being unjustly criticized by members of his congregation found strength to hold up under their bitter attacks by keeping his Savior's strength in mind. No one had injured him physically or cursed him publicly. He had not been crucified nor wronged as had his Master. Therefore, he could continue to stay positive while serving and even loving his persecutors.

C.H. Spurgeon wrote:

God is with us in sorrows. There is no pang that rends the heart, I might almost say, not one which disturbs the body, but what Jesus Christ has been with you in it all. Feel you sorrows of poverty? He had no place to lay His head. Do you endure griefs of bereavement? Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. Have you been slandered for righteousness' sake and it has vexed your spirit? Jesus said, "Reproach hath broken Mine heart." Have you been betrayed? Do not forget that He, too, had His familiar friend who sold him for the price of a slave.

On what stormy seas have you been tossed which have not roared about His boat? Never glen of adversity so dark, so deep, apparently so pathless, but what, in stooping down, you may discover the footprints of the crucified One! In the fires and in the rivers, in the cold of night and under the burning sun, He cries, "I am with you; be not dismayed; for I am both thy Companion and thy God!"⁹

The Circle of God's Love

Negative attitudes overcome us when despair leads us to conclude that some areas of life lie outside the circle of God's love. This kind of thinking compartmentalizes God and limits expectation of His care. God's love, so clearly evident in creation and redemption, extends to all areas of life. All things that concern God's children concern their heavenly Father. "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

Are you passing through trials?

Are you hurting?

Our Lord has been where you are today.

"At the head of the procession of the world's sufferers is a thorn-crowned man."¹⁰

His name is Jesus.

He understands and cares.

¹ Dale Carnegie, *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1948, Pocket Books, Inc., New York, 1953, p. 320.

² Craig Massey, *Moody Monthly*, Chicago, April, 1974.

³ *The Pulpit Commentary*, Funk & Wagnalls Company, London and New York, Vol. 16, p. 47.

⁴ J.C. Ryle, *Holiness*, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, N.J., p. 197.

⁵ Walter B. Knight, *Knight's Master Book of Illustrations*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956, p. 52.

⁶ G.B. Hardy, *Countdown*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 52.

⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

⁸ Herbert Lockyer, *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs*, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, N.J., 1979, p. 60.

⁹ Walter B. Knight, *Knight's Master Book of New Illustrations*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1956, p. 641.

¹⁰ Herbert Lockyer, *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs*, Fleming H. Revell, Old Tappan, N.J., 1979, p. 76.