The Catastrophe of Following Jesus Part 2  
By Dr. Steve Porter

Dr. Steve Porter:

Let me recap a little bit here. The Way of Jesus is the good life. It's the way of rest and peace and joy. But, I assume most of us don't live in that as much as we'd like, and as much as we could. Um and it looks like scripture also talks about a lot of hardship, a lot of loss. Consider it all joy when you suffer trials of various kinds, right? Um and we're gonna be looking at a text in a second here that I think helps put some of these things together, and and really where we're going is is this idea that that I was kind of ending with, and John who's my boss told me I should restate this so I'll restate it. This actually was Ron Dunn, if you know Ron Dunn who said something to this effect uh, uh, now I'm going to forget the quote uh. "We don't realize God is all we need till He's all we got. And when we-when He's all we got, we realize He's all we need."

And and how catastrophe, loss, suffering, pain drives us to that point where either we embrace our need for Him or we continue to resist it. So I want to talk about the role of weakness in in following Jesus, because I think it's really the connection between weakness and strength that is going to help at least understand a part of what God is doing through catastrophe, through loss.

And-and I want to particularly look at at one passage from St. Paul, but I want to start um with with this one up on the screen here. Uh this is from Philippians chapter 4 where where Paul is in prison and Epaphroditus has come to him from the church in Philippi and Epaphroditus brought him some money, probably, so that he could make his prison stay a little bit less harsh. And uh he's saying that Epaphroditus backed the Philippians and he's saying thank you in chapter 4, but it's kind of a very awkward thanks. He says "Well thanks for for sending Epaphroditus and
thanks for providing for my needs." Then he says "But I'm not saying this because I am in need," says "for I've learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Just gotta stop there and say "Are you serious Paul? You've learned to be content--not not apathetic, not uh cut off from his need--but but really he's ok whatever circumstances he's going through. He says "I know what is to be in need, and I know it has to have plenty. I've learned the secret--" now notice he says he's learned it, didn't happen overnight. "I've learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, with living in plenty wa-want or hear. And here's the secret I can do all things through Him who gives me strength" right.

What does that mean, what is Paul after there. I've seen a poster that has a guy standing on top of a mountain with his hands in the air and it says underneath says "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength" and it makes it look like that with Jesus on my side I can conquer the world right? And we see this sometimes on bumper stickers. I can do all things, right? It looks like what Paul is saying here is not that with Jesus on my side everything is going to go my way. He's in prison right. Things are not going his way, but he's saying even in circumstances that are not good, even when I am in need I'm still okay because Christ is strengthening me. 'Dunamis' is the Greek word group here. There is an empowering coming through Paul's life, through Christ. He is being strengthened. There's something going on in his heart such that the external circumstances, he's not so concerned about them, right. Life isn't going so well and he's all right with that because there's something else at work in Paul. It's the strengthening of Christ. "I can do everything" really what he's saying is I can be content in all things because Christ is strengthening me, that's his secret.
I wanna look at another passage, this one's from Second Timothy. He's talking about another situation to Timothy where where he was in a hard time and and he says "At my first defense no one came to stand by me. All deserted me." He says "May it not be charged against them." All the people that he was ministering with left him, right. And he was being brought before the authorities, but then he said something very interesting here, he says, "But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me." Sometimes I just find these places in scripture and I just think that's amazing. The Lord stood by Paul, now was He literally, you know, no. But there is a very real sense in which Paul is saying the Lord was there. "Lo I am with you always even till the end of the age." The Lord stood with him and strengthened him. It's the same word, 'dunamis'. Empowered him, right? "So that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles." So so Paul lived a life of strength, empowerment.

One more text: Ephesians three. This is his prayer for the Ephesians that they would be strengthened with dunamis, power through the spirit in their inner being, right. Paul's praying that they would be strengthened, so that Christ may dwell in--they're already saved by the way right. The Ephesians here are saved they're Saints he says. But now his prayer for them is that they would be strengthened with power, there's something that still is yet to be done, right? "Being strengthened with power through His spirit in the inner beings that Christ may dwell in your hearts, that you being rooted and grounded in love" whose love? God's love. That Greek word there for "rooted" is the same word that would be used for a plant rooted in soil, that they would be rooted in God's love. May be able to comprehend with all the saints what's the breadth and the length, the height and depth to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge. How do you know something that surpasses knowledge? Well this is something
deeper than just head knowledge. There's an experiential knowledge of Christ's love, this strengthening, empowering presence of Christ by His Spirit that roots and grounds them in love. Then look at that last line, "that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God." Filled up with Him—all the fullness of God, they're already in relationship with God, they're already saved. Yeah but they're not filled with the fullness of God.

What does that mean. I put a to cross-reference there Colossians 1:19. Cuz if you look at qua-Colossians 1:19, Paul says that Jesus, that in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. That Jesus lived his life in the fullness of God's love, presence, empowering, strength. So the point I'm trying to make here that I think is crucial for us understanding the role of catastrophe in the Christian life is that God wants to fill us with more of Himself. He wants to root us and ground us in more of His love. He wants to put it in Jesus's words to "abide in us as we abide in Him".

And yet there's barriers to that because we're abiding in lots of other things besides Him. I'm finding strength and life in lots of other places besides Him. Scripture calls these idols of the heart; places where we are in control, where we're trying to find life, my reputation, success, my family, my financial status though that's a [laughs] catastrophe right. There's a catastrophe that we're all experiencing right now. And really that's a real one right to the degree that you are finding security and value in your 401K, that's being challenged right now. And then the question is "okay Lord, how much was I trusting in my 401K, and how much am I trusting in You?"
So what's the key here? Well I think it's uh Second Corinthians chapter 12. And and and this I-this passage I think really helps us understand Paul's theology of weakness. It's what I'm calling the paradigm passage where he's talking about the thorn in his flesh right, and he says here "On behalf of such a man I will boast but on my own behalf I will not boast except in regard to my weaknesses," he says "because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations. For this reason, to keep me from exalting myself." K, see he was experiencing some consolations, these revelations, these insights. God was speaking to him, says "to keep me from exalting myself compete-keep me from thinking that I'm in charge, I can do it, I deserve it, I'm self-sufficient" right? To keep him from that. He says "there was given me a thorn in the flesh." We don't know what that was. Some say a physical ailment. We don't know. He calls it a "messenger of Satan" to torment him, to keep him from exalting himself, says "concerning this issue I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me." Doesn't sound too content here, right. He's still learning about contentment. But here's the lesson he learns, He says to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you. My grace is sufficient for you. I'm all you need Paul. For power is perfected in weakness." Power is perfected in weakness. "Most gladly, therefore, I'll rather boast about my weakness so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." See, there's something about Paul embracing his weaknesses that allows the power of Christ to be set loose in his life. The strengthening, empowering presence of God.

See there's a real problem with the prosperity gospel, isn't there. Because it looks like God wants to work through weakness, and prosperity oftentimes makes us think we're strong. Therefore I'm well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, and persecutions, difficulties, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I'm strong. Catastrophe reveals our weakness and as we
embrace our weakness, God somehow--and I want to look at that 'somehow' a little bit with you--but somehow He's able to empower, we're more open to Him than we otherwise would be. You know, I realize though as I say this, and I was just thinking right before I started, that that this really all depends on a certain view of relationship with God. That relationship with God is an experiential reality, and I don't necessarily mean that we're always consciously experiencing God's presence, though I think some of that should happen, right. But that there really is the Spirit of God indwells us. "The Spirit of God" Paul says "is testifying to our spirits that we are children of God." That there is a real, experiential reality in us, if we're indwelt by the Holy Spirit that there is an presence, right. And that this strengthening presence wants to have its way with us. We were made for this relationship and we were made to be filled with the fullness of God.

And I know sometimes I--at least for myself--I still kind of have a hangover from a certain version of Christianity that says don't trust those experiences just believe the right things about Jesus, and do the right things for Him, and cuts out this idea of any sort of experiential relationship. And I thought of this uh this book which I would recommend to you. Uh it's an older book but it just got rereleased, a new edition. J.I. Packer's "Keep in Step with the Spirit". I think this is still one of the best theologies of the spirit. This was written in 1973, I think. But Packer says here, talking about this experiential dynamic of the Holy Spirit, he says, "When however experiential aspects of life in the Spirit come up for treatment" as distinct from the conviction of the Holy Spirit or the discipline of the Holy Spirit says--well when we move we're pretty good on the conviction of the Holy Spirit the discipline of the spirit. But he says "when the experiential aspects of life and the Spirit come up, it's a different story. Here we move into new
country where evangelicals for the most part seem to be at a loss. In this terrain of direct perceptions of God, perceptions of His greatness and goodness, His eternity, His truth, His love, His glory, all of it coming through Christ to us." He says "Understanding was once much richer than is commonly found today." Says this is a place where we have some re-learning to do.

And-and I-I just wanted to kind of remind us of that. because I think the only way this this concept of how God wants to use weakness in our life is going to make sense to us is if we're committed to this idea that we have an experiential relationship with God. That God is really doing something. That when Paul says he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him that that's a reality. That-that-that that we all have strength in our life right now. Literal strength that you are able to perceive that you wouldn't have if Christ was-wasn't in you. See I-I wonder sometimes how much different our experience would be right now, if the Holy Spirit just left us. How much do we take for granted? The Empowering presence, the loving presence of God in our lives--where we don't even know that our lives are different right because it was so long ago that we came to Christ. I don't know about you but I came across at a young age, I don't remember what life was like before Jesus.

I-in one of my classes recently, I asked some people who had been converted later in life, 18 19 20's, I said I said "Do you remember what it was like before you came to Christ?" and I didn't know what to expect. They all said" Oh yeah I remember." And they used words like it was more dark it was more empty. There was a void. But when Christ came something different happened, that there was there was an energizing influence in their life. And now it looks like what the text is telling us is that energizing and empowering influence needs to take over more. "Do not be
drunk with wine but be filled with the Holy Spirit", right? That there's a controlling influence of Christ in our life through the spirit that that is meant to empower, us strengthen us so that peace, and rest, and joy begin to take over.

So Paul here is telling us that at least part of the road to this is weakness, and it's not just weakness in and of itself equals kind of empowerment, but it's embracing weakness, right? Embracing weakness. I want to go back to this this passage where Paul once again says so "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despised of life itself" right, in the face of death. They felt they had received the death sentence but then once again he says "But this was to make us rely not on ourselves, but God who raises the dead." This experience of coming face to face with death saying "Lord do I trust you. Am I going to rely on you or myself?" And it was Paul's ultimate abandonment to God, right, that allows him to say in Galatians 2:20 right "it's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." He's been crucified with Christ, he is he is he's dead. He has died. And God is able to live in and through him.

So how does this work? Well I don't know if we know exactly how it works, I don't know if I know exactly how it works but I want to I want to suggest some some things to you. Catastrophe is an invitation to embrace personal weakness. What's personal weakness? Well I'm going to suggest that personal weakness are all the ways in which we are not God. We're all finite. He's infinite. Uh we all are born into the world's original sin. We're all tweaked. And not only do we have original sin and are we finite, but we're sinned against. People sin against us and there's wounds that we have. And not only are we sinned against, not only do we have original sin and not only are we finite, but then we sin. And that increases our brokenness. And not only all of
that, but we live in a broken, fallen world where we get cancer. We get in car accidents. Our children have birth defects, we have miscarriages. We live in a fallen world, we're fallen people, we're finite. That's our weakness, right. We're not God. We're not God.

And so for Paul weakness is not a bad thing it's the truth about us it's reality. We are weak. We are weak. And what happens, number two here is that catastrophe, loss, pain is an indication and thereby a reminder of our personal weakness. It's a reminder that I'm not God. Right? When things don't go the way we want them to we realize we're finite, that we're broken, that we're not in control, that we're weak, that we're limited, right? And so catastrophe, loss, pain, it's a reminder, it's an indication, that we aren't God. Now there's minor catastrophes and major catastrophes. This I put in the category of a minor catastrophe. There's two of my two-my wife and I's friends are here tonight, Ricky and Megan Williams. And they got married recently and we really want to go to their wedding, but it was shortly after our daughter was born. Life was kind of chaotic. So it turned out that that in fact we had another engagement we're supposed to be at a family thing. So I dropped Alicia off at the family thing, and I high-tailed it for the wedding knowing I was gonna be late. I had the address of the wedding. My my my uh my gamble was I would get there and there would still be people there from the wedding, so I real-realized at this point I was gonna miss the wedding, that could tell me where the reception was, and at least I could make the reception. Sure enough I get there and there are people there and they give me the address to the reception. And I have a nice iPhone. This is my one technological splurge and so I had just gotten it, so I put the address of the reception into my little MapQuest thing and yep there it is I have directions, no problem, I'm on my way.
Two hours later I'm driving around Costa Mesa trying to figure out where I went wrong when I typed in the address. Maybe it was a Santa Ana address instead of a Costa Mesa address. Oh yeah. Look there is an address in Santa Ana. That's the same. I'll drive there. Right. Well maybe it was Orange. I'll drive there. Maybe I got the number wrong. Maybe I got that-and so I drove around and after two hours and driving back to the church and the janitors are cleaning up after the wedding and no one's there. I eventually head home, not having found Ricky and Megan's reception. And I was frustrated. I was angry. I missed this family event to go to the wedding. I didn't even get to the wedding. I didn't go to the family event and I thought "Lord what are you doing in this?" right. This wasn't some great gift for me, I just wanted to go to their wedding and I wanted to bless them. All right?

I began to say "God what are you doing in this?". As I began to reflect on it, I realized that one of the things I could learn from it is that Steve you're not God. You don't get life on your terms. If you leave the house without the address to the reception, you're not going to know how to get there. And if you take down the wrong address you know. And I-I it began to humble me. I began to just kind of embrace I'm limited, I'm not omniscient, I don't know everything. I'm not you God. And it was amazing as I drove home how I just felt like a little bit of the edge had been taken off of me and I walked into this family party that was going on, and-and I felt a little ashamed because they all began to ask how was the wedding you know and I-I've been gone for two hours I've been-but I also felt more open. I-I-I just I-I never got there. I drove around, right. It it humbled me. Right? And you know it was really weird, and I'm just carrying on that you've had this experience. I felt a little more open to them, to my family, to that day, to that time. I just I had been-I'd embraced my weakness a little bit.
Now of course, you know, I was very quick to kind of armor back up and get strong again, and I'm-I can do it, now. But but for a while, for a few moments, I-I life was just a little bit more rich, because I wasn't as full of myself. And when you're not as full of yourself you're more open to others and it looks like what Paul's telling us is we're more open to God. So catastrophe, loss, pain is a reminder of our personal weakness. And then and then really this is the--it's embracing our weakness through catastrophe, loss, pain, that opens us more deeply to the fullness of God in our lives. And here I want to I want to stop and just say this is really an ontological matter I think, it's it's that somehow weakness--and ontology is just the area of philosophy where we talk about existence and the structure of reality--and somehow the structure of the human soul is such that when we embrace our weakness, when we embrace the ways we're not God it just somehow opens us up. It's literally a reality of of the human heart that that in our weakness we are open to God's strengthening presence. And I don't know exactly what that is, I'm gonna try to say a few things about it, but but there's something in the experience of embracing weakness of saying yeah that's me. That humility that opens the human heart.

There's a-one of the ways I want to try to get at that is there's a book by a guy named Gerald Sittser, he's a theology professor at Whitworth College in Spokane, a Christian college in Spokane, Washington. Gerald Sittser, uh, about a decade ago now I think, um uh was driving home from Idaho, and he was driving back to his his home in Spokane, Washington and he had his mother, his wife, and his four kids in the car. And they were hit head on by a drunk driver and he describes in his book "A Grace Disguised" how he s-sat on the freeway doing mouth to mouth resuscitation on his mother, his wife, and I think his four year old daughter as his three
other kids who were in various states of injury watched. And in that head on collision he lost three generations of his family.

And he wrote a book a few years later called "A Grace Disguised" where in no Pollyannish terms, he talks about the catastrophe in his spiritual life, of that experience. And one of the things he says that I found very powerful is he talks about how catastrophe, pain is what he called "an amputation of our identity". That when we lose something like a spouse, or a child, or a job, or our health, some of our identity gets lost. Something-some part of us that we trusted in, that we found strength in, got cut off. And he says in that vein, "loss strips us of the props we rely on for our well-being. It knocks us off our feet and puts us on our backs. In the experience of loss we come to the end of ourselves. But in coming to an end of ourselves we can also come to the beginning of a vital relationship with God. It often begins when we face our weaknesses and realize how much we take favorable circumstances for granted. When loss deprives us of those circumstances, our anger, depression, and ingratitude expose the true state of our souls, showing us how small we really are."

I'm not God, and loss reminds us of that. I can remember when Alicia and I were so excited after seven or so years of marriage that we got pregnant and then we fairly quickly found out that it looked like we were having a miscarriage, and it took a couple weeks to confirm that, but I remember those days of going from I'm being elated to being extremely devastated that life seemed more clearer. All the things I was I cared about when the pregnancy was going well just kind of dropped off the map. All the things I was so invested in, some writing project, ya know? And all of a sudden the true values of life just kind of rose to the top and I just walked through
life with a little more clarity, because that loss, that catastrophe, it-it-it reminded me--and I by God's grace was able to embrace my weakness there. A friend of mine named Keith Dowd's who's a Rosemeade grad actually, uh often says "nothing right sizes us like pain." Nothing right sizes us like pain, i-it just kind of deflates us doesn't it? And yet that deflated sense of who we are, that's that's the truth. And it brings us to that place of need.

Speaking of of psychologists, there's a uh couple uh psychologists, and as far as I know these guys aren't Christian though they in their writings they're very open to how religion plays a role in this, but they're at the University of North Carolina Charlotte and they've done some research on on trauma and the transformation that people experience from trauma. In fact they have a book called "Trauma and Transformation" and one of one of the things their study shows, and this is rather a long quote but hang with me here, is that some positive benefits of trauma are are that people realize they're vulnerable. So they say here a chang--and they kind of say that people have this sense that they're invulnerable and that seems to not be reality--so they say "a change in this excessive sense of unassailable strength, is another positive change in the perception of self that occurs in the struggle with trauma. A loss or a tragedy challenge-this challenges this sense of invulnerability, as does the recognition that it may be impossible to cope with it without some assistance." right? They realize they have need. Of course as long as one maintains the belief that one is invulnerable asking for help has little salience you-you just won't do it. "But the extremes of trauma create totally new conditions, and persons who could afford to be at the extremes of self-reliance can now find themselves submitting to the recognition that what has happened is too much for them to bear alone."Trauma, tragedy, catastrophe looks like it just has this ability to say "hey I can't make it I need help, from other people, but also of course God I need you because
ultimately these other people might fail me too. Only you. Only you are the one." So it looks like catastrophe does something to the human heart, it reminds us of our weakness and when we embrace that weakness, it opens us.

Now here's another point about this, is that embracing our personal weakness is itself catastrophic. Right, admitting we're vulnerable, and limited, and weak is hard for us. We don't like that reality. I want to be strong. I want to be in control. This is, I think really this theme in Scripture of dying to self. Dying to my self referenced way of life, that that life's about me. I'm in control. I can be my own god. And in realizing that I am not God and you're not God, that itself is catastrophic at a certain level, because you know this idea that we take up our cross and follow Him, I mean dying is never easy it's not a good experience. We die to ourselves, to the self life. Once again as Paul says, "I have been crucified with Christ. It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."

I was talking to uh Todd Pickett, some of you probably know Todd he's now the dean of uh student development or spiritual development or something like that here at Biola, and I ran into him today on the way way here and he said "oh you're talking tonight!" He said "What you talking about?" I talked about catastrophe dying to self and and he's kind of he's talking a lot about this these themes with bio undergrads. He said "Yeah you know I've been thinking about that, that part of the Christian life, the-dying to self." He said "because I've been trying to figure out how I can sell spiritual formation to undergrads." He said "and I realized I have a bad product because they're not going to like it." Right. It's-it's their deepest need, but we don't really want it. We don't really want to give up control. If we're really honest with ourselves,
right? Because you know what it is. I don't really trust God. Well, I trust him to some degree. But the reason why I worry when my wife is late and wonder if they're in a car accident because I don't really trust God with my wife and with my children. I don't think He's gonna do a good job, because I know that trusting Him is consistent with Gerald Sittser's story.

And see now if I really trusted Him I'd say, "Okay Lord even if my family got in a head on collision and none of them survived, the Lord giveth the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." But see I'm of little faith on that. I'm not ready for that. Now I still think that God, I think I can take better care of my family than you can. Because my care is not consistent with that happening, right. But see that's that brings anxiety to my life. That brings fear to my life. That brings impatience, that brings control. That's not the good life. See the good life of peace and rest is letting that go. And that's the journey, and-and so catastrophe forces us to let go. Or, uh forces us to deal with our control. Maybe we don't let go. All right? So embracing our personal weakness is itself catastrophic. It's hard to give up control. The last point here is that catastrophe, loss, pain, it becomes an invitation to embrace our personal weakness. Either we accept that invitation and we say "yeah I'm weak God I'm not You, I need You." That's humility. Or we resist it, and we say "no. My way's better, I can do it." That's what Scripture calls pride. And and that's our choice. Accepting our weakness opens us more deeply to our need for God while resisting our weakness closes us to our need for God.

I stumbled upon-across an article as I was preparing for this by a guy who used to teach here actually, David Allan Black, teaches uh in the south now at another seminary. But he he he did his dissertation on Paul's Theology of weakness and uh he says here that "Paul teaches that God's
way of exhibiting power is altogether different from man's way. Man tries to overcome his weakness. God is satisfied to use weakness for his own special purposes." Too many Christians become disheartened over their infirmities thinking that only if they were stronger in themselves they could accomplish more for God. But this point of view despite its popularity is altogether a fallacy. God's means of working, rightly understood, is not by making us stronger but by making us weaker and weaker until the divine power alone is clearly manifest. I think that's what I need, but I don't like that theology [laughs] because that means I must decrease and He must increase. That's hard. That's hard. We spent most of our lives trying to be strong. The playground is not a good school of weakness, right. We learned very early in life, in our families, on the playground, now in the business place, on the tennis court, unfortunately I think even in our churches, that you've got to be strong. You've got to be strong. Think of the weak first grader in our public school system, in any school system. The weak first grader is not doing very well. That kid is gonna get picked on. If we don't figure out how to be strong to survive, right? So we learned from a very young age, from the womb, right? To be strong, to protect, to defend. And God is calling us to lay all that down. And there's deep fear of what might happen if we lay it down. So where does that leave us.

I want to leave time for questions. I have a few more things to say. One of the things I want to make sure I say is um--well we'll get to the disciplines of weakness--but it's on the backstage-page of your handout if you're following that handout. So is catastrophe good? Is that is that what we come to here? Well it depends on which kind of catastrophe you mean. If you mean the catastrophe of dying to yourself, yeah that is good. Doesn't feel good. But if it's true that we need to die to self in order to let Christ live in us then yeah that's good. But if you mean the other kind
of catastrophe the pain, the loss, the external catastrophes: the deaths, the cancers, the car accidents, the divorces, the birth defects, no that's not good. What man meant for evil God meant for good, God uses it, right But that doesn't make it good. And I think we need to be careful of that right. We're not Hindus. You know Hindus they think evil's really good. It's not really you know we say no it's evil, it's bad that that happened to Gerald Sittser. It's bad that his wife, and mother, and daughter died. Now God is using it to great good in his and other's lives, but it would still be better if that hadn't happened. So just because good things come from bad events doesn't make the bad events good. We don't want to spiritualize evil, and say it's good. We can hold on to both, right, that God is using it for good but I still wish it hadn't happened. I mean think of the cross. Jesus died. What-there was no greater good than His death, but it was still evil and wicked that the second person in the trinity was killed by humans. It's not-it doesn't make the cross good; good comes from the cross, but the cross itself is a travesty.

Which also brings another question here: is-why is God so harsh sometimes, why doesn't He play nice? I mean why if-if-I understand I need to embrace my weakness, but I'd rather miss a thousand weddings than get cancer. All right? I'll take a thousand weddings any time, over a car accident or cancer. But-but why does why does God allow these things, right, to happen. A book that I think is very impacting on this point is, uh if you've never read it once again a good read, uh Sheldon Vanauken's "A Severe Mercy". Sheldon Vanauken was was a man who who uh got married and came to Christ after marriage and and he uh he eventually lost his wife to to some disease cancer or something. And-and he talks about in this book how the death of his wife was a severe mercy of God, in fact in the book are letters from C.S. Lewis. He has this correspondence with C.S. Lewis he knows C.S. Lewis, and and Lewis calls it a severe mercy. In fact, uh Lewis
at one point says uh, "one way or another your relationship with your wife had to die" because what what Vanauken realizes that his relationship with his wife had become an idol for him, that he loved his wife more than he loved God. And Lewis says "one way or another your relationship had to die." He says "perpetual springtime", this-they were kind of in this romantic bliss, "perpetual springtime" Lewis says "is not allowed." Said "you were you were not cutting the wood of life according to the grain." You weren't you weren't-you were you were going against the grain you were trying to find value and meaning and and life in your wife, in a way that only God could give you.

Then he says som-Lewis says something very interesting in this letter to Vanauken. He says "There are various possible ways in which it could have died, though both of you went on living." So Lewis says God could have gotten you to die to the idolatry of your wife without killing her. And then he's-Lewis says "You have been treated with a severe mercy." It's severe. It's merciful, because it opened Vanauken up to a deeper relationship with God. But it's a severe mercy. Why does God have to play so rough. I don't know the answer to that question. I don't think Scripture gives us the answer that question. I think there's lots of reasons why certain tragedies occur, right, and God chooses to use them in our lives. But you know here's something to think about it, it's Sheldon Vanauken reflects on on Lewis's idea here that there were other ways that God could have done this.

And for what it's worth you know, She-Sheldon Vanauken's own perspective on this, is he doesn't think God could have done it without taking his wife. He says he says you know he just he imagines he says, "You know if if she hadn't died, even if she'd gotten very sick and almost
died but had come back to life" he said, "you know what I would have done?" Said "I would have probably done one of two things: either I would have tried to get her to love God less so that she would be more available to me." Cuz he realized he was jealous of her relationship with God, and he said "either I would have tried to get her to love God less, so that she could fill this need in my life," he said "but she probably wouldn't have done that, she probably would have loved God even more." And he said "I would have become bitter, and jealous, and I would have, in one way or another, ended up leaving my wife. And he'd already had kind of an emotional affair earlier that he says was because he was getting bitter because his wife was so enraptured with God that he felt jealous. He says "I don't think I would have let go of this idol unless God had taken her." A severe mercy.

Well, if God uses weaknesses to open our hearts more deeply to Him, and as we open our hearts more to His love and His grace and His truth, if if that is the transforming reality that brings peace, and drives out fear, and brings patience and joy. Right, then then how can we embrace weakness? Well here I just have some suggestions. These are what we might call disciplines of weakness. Disciplines of weakness: things that we can intentionally engage in to use weakness as an opportunity for God to work more deeply in our lives. So the first one is to learn to savor weakness. That when something catastrophic, whether it's a minor or a major one happens to us, to to savor it. To to not see it immediately as a bad thing to escape, or to get out of. But--and here I think of John, because John Coe has this little mantra that he has all of us repeat, which is when you experience desolation, you go "Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Oh that's so good. Mm hmm. Oh thank you Lord, Oh". That you say, you know you literally savor the pain. Right now this isn't masochistic right. We don't seek it. Right. It's gonna come, and when it comes see Paul, Paul
says "Therefore I exalt in tribulations", in weakness. He exal--I mean it looks like he's actually pretty excited-giddy about it. Right? You see when I get the flat tire I'm still thinking "Darn it!"
But it looks like maybe there's a way to say "Darn it, and OK Lord what do you have for me in this flat tire. What do you have for me in this, this loss?" to learn to savor the weakness when we experience it.

Instead of living life in anxious and fearful avoidance of weakness we can begin to see it as an opportunity, an opportunity to die to self. C.S. Lewis in one place says "Die before you die, because after that you won't have a chance." Die Before You Die, because after that you won't have a chance to do it. And here I need to say that we need a community of people to help us savour our weaknesses. We need others who will allow us to be weak. We can't do this alone. You can't do it alone. And so we need others to come around us, and help contain, embracing weakness particularly if it's a if it's a major catastrophe, right.

Second discipline is to turn to God in the midst of weakness. And here I want to suggest two prayers, two prayers of turning to God in the weak-midst of weaknesses. Uh one, I don't know-do I have these? Oh no I don't. Oops, let's go back. Now, we'll get there. The first prayer, I think you're on your handout. Yeah. The first prayer is the prayer of the Canaanite woman. I love this prayer, I think this was the only prayer I prayed for a couple years of my life a while back. She just says "Lord help me, Lord help me." You get that flat tire, "Lord help me?" You struggling in your marriage "Lord help me". There's a there's a lump there is there's there's tissue that they don't quite know what--"Lord help me. Lord help me. It's I'm not you God, I'm weak, I'm limited.
I need you. Lord help me." Just as a prayer of turning to God in the midst of weakness, Lord help us.

The other prayers is what I'm calling here a prayer of Job that gets dangerously close to the prayer of Jabez, but uh. The prayer of Job, one place Job says "Lord teach me what I do not see". Teach me what I do not see, and here what I'm really thinking of is "Lord what do you have for me in this weakness? Teach me to see the places in my life where I am trying to be strong, where I think I don't need you, where I think I can be in control. Lord teach me what I do not see. Search me oh God no my heart. Try me. Know my anxious thoughts. Open the truth of myself to me Lord. Show me the places where I am trusting in other things besides You. Lord teach me what I do not see."

And then lastly, oh I guess we're still here, as the last discipline of weakness--and I don't think these are the only ones by any means--but as we embrace our weakness and as the strength and the empowerment comes, because it will if we really open to the weakness God will begin to empower us. Now it may not come when we want it to, may not come the way we think it should, but as we begin to experience that strength, that empowerment, move with it. Move with it. That's God at work. There's this passage in Isaiah where it says "God's power moved with Moses' right hand." That God was at work in Moses, and as Moses said the waters part they parted because God's power was at work in him. So as the strength and empowering presence of God comes, move with it. Go with it, allow it to have its way. And that's a discipline.
I don't have a lot of examples of this as I said at the beginning, this is something the Lord is uh very much working in me with, but just a couple nights ago I was sitting in my front room and I'll close with this story, then we're going to sing our song one more time. Sitting in our front-my front room and um, I was actually preparing for this, I was thinking about my own weakness and I was feeling weak and Alicia was sharing something about, I don't even remember what it was, but it was something that was reminding me of my weakness. And uh and as I sat there just open, Lord I'm weak. Lord help me in my weakness, show me what I do not see." And-and to tell you-I-I it's only in retrospect that I think I realized God was at work, but I just was moved just to stand up from where I was in my part of the house, and walk over to where she was. And I just put my hands on her, and I just just said some words of encouragement because I sensed she needed some encouragement. And and it turned out that you know that was exactly what she needed and I think she even said something like "you know Steve, I think God really moved you in that."

And you might think "well that happens all the time in my life." Well doesn't happen all the time in my life right. Oftentimes I hear my wife say something about you know how hard things are and I'm thinking, you know I'm not thinking I'm going to encourage you, I'm thinking why did you bring that up? You know? But but just for a moment, I didn't argue with her. I didn't try to convince her it really wasn't that bad. I just opened that, "yeah we're weak aren't we? We're broken." And in that moment I think I was strengthened a bit, to give her something she needed. And and so uh my prayer for us and it is really this song, right? That that God would show us how much we need to embrace our weakness and our humility, and that He would break our
pride, that He is the God of the humble. So we're gonna sing it one last time and then then we'll have a time for question and answers.

Now before you uh, before you sit down, just just take a moment just to think of a of a weakness in your life, something that you are weak in. Could be an area of your spiritual life, could be a relational issue, could be a physical, could be emotional. Try to identify a place of weakness. A place of need. And whatever that is just just in the midst of that, maybe you don't even have a clear sense of what it is, maybe just a general sense of "I'm weak", but just in that that place just just just say to the Lord "Lord help me. Lord help me. I'm not you. I need you."

[Silence]

Dr. Steve Porter:

And then just ask the Lord to reveal to you the places in your heart where you try to remain strong, where you live in autonomy from Him. Where you want to take care of things yourself.

[Silence]

Dr. Steve Porter:

And don't beat yourself up for those places, because those are the places where you need Him. And Lord I pray for each one of us that that You would open our hearts more deeply to our need for You. I pray You're gentle with us Lord. Catastrophe looks like it's needed, but we would
ask that You would be gentle. Don't give us more than we can handle, make us neither rich nor poor. We don't want so many riches and blessings that we forget about You, but we don't want so much struggle and pain that we curse You. And Lord You know our hearts. And so in as much as we can we trust Your Spirit's work in our life. In Your name, amen. Well we have a little time left for uh comments, questions, jokes. And if you need to leave that is fine. Just embrace your weakness on the way.

[Laughing]

Dr. Steve Porter:

Any any-I guess there's some microphones here set up, but anything that has just come to your mind, your heart as you have been-is that-are you-youre a questioner okay. I was-with the with the uh headset on there I thought maybe you were a part of the establishment here but yeah go-go ahead! Give us your name.

Clayton:

My name is Clayton.

Dr. Steve Porter:

Clayton.

Clayton:
Um, since I'm not in spiritual formation at the Institute here, I've only getting some information on some of the tools that we can have, but I was thinking of how can we enter into catastrophe in a more intentional way without actually being brought, so more of coming into the spirit, um apart from an external circumstance. Um to enter into that maybe in a little bit better fashion than just it just getting dropped in our laps, or--

Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah.

Clayton:

Um or let-some of things you mentioned already, towards the end was, you know, just I need You, or just recognizing where we stand in the truth and the reality of things.

Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah.

Clayton:

Just other and-tools like you've heard of-you know the power of intention or of recollection and things. But is there other places in scripture or other tools that we can have to try and enter into that weakness and really embrace that, and know that you're doing it correctly, and you're not doing it abnormally or whatever, that you know that you're not you're not taking responsibility
for what you should actually have responsibility for, but you're actually-by also placing right responsibility at God or others, you know, correct boundaries. Those type of things.

Dr Steve Porter:

Okay, okay. Yeah, there's a lot there. Thanks Clayton. Um, uh well--and I-I-you weren't asking this but I just want to use this question as an opportunity clarify that that I don't think we should seek catastrophe, if what we mean by that is is pain and suffering, uh you know to to go out looking for uh struggle and challenge and uh do things to actually bring uh catastrophe to our lives, um. That's masochistic. And I don't think scripture encourages us to seek pain and suffering and bring it on ourselves, right? This would be foolishness to to actually do things to cause ourselves pain and suffering because "it'll help me grow" right? No this is not-not-not the Christian way, and that mistake has been made right? People uh binding themselves with rope, and flagellating themselves and doing things to mortify the flesh. And that's that's-there's no place for that. Um but now to say we're not going to be involved with that, I take it the question then is well, but I am weak, and I don't need necessarily to have something happen to me to to embrace that weakness more. So what can we do to be proactive about that? Do I have to wait for the cancer to give up control, or could I somehow take a preemptive strike? All right, maybe I could get out of cancer this one.

Uh so, yeah you know I think I think there are some things we can do, and I think it's I mean I think these kind of prayers of "search me oh God and know my heart" and trying to really explore the places in our lives where where we are attached to an idol of some sort, a place where we are finding our our strength apart from God. I mean one way to do it is just to is just to,
what are you anxious about? What are you fearful of? Because any of those places are places in life where we are trusting in ourselves, we're not trusting the Lord. So to to identify those places where we aren't experiencing the goodness of the way of Jesus and say "well why why am I not experiencing joy in the midst of my education? Well, because I'm not trusting God in the midst of my education" so, so let's let's follow that down. Let's trace that down to why is that, where where what are these places in my own heart where I'm hanging on to to control and strength and autonomy, um. So I think there are other ways to get at these places of strength, and then the question is Well what are what do we do to begin to kind of let go of control? And once again I think that's oftentimes where some sort of external catastrophe is is is oftentimes helpful. I don't think it's not always necessary, but um, but we we we just gotta begin to open to "well God, I don't know. What are You going to do to to to let me come to the place where I'm willing to let go of my grip, my controlling grip on my wife and my children. How how can You help me do that, Lord?" And so then you begin kind of a journey of prayer uh with the Lord on on what what what what why am I attached, God how can I depend?

And I think a lot of it is just confession: "I-I am, attached Lord I know I am. Lord I believe, help my unbelief, right? I believe You are sufficient, but help my unbelief where I think You're not." And just to try to continue to come to God in that that place of honesty, with places where you are strong and then as you realize those places of weakness to just say "Lord this is where I'm weak" and to try to remain in that place of weakness. There's a few people I know who walk around in weakness fairly well. They stay in that place of brokenness and humility, and there-they are people who are dynamic people. They have lots of room for other people, and they have lots of room for God because they're not so stuck on themselves. They're not so worried about
their own lives, right. And so there's-where there are ways, right, of coming to this place of remaining more in this this place where it looks like the apostle Paul was where he was able to just kind of stay in that place of "I need You, I'm not you." Right.

So so I think prayers like that, I think following our strength, places of strength and anxiety and down to kind of the roots, kind of begins this this heart exploration of of of opening uh places where we need more of God. The Body of Christ is going to have a-a role here too when my wife, you know confronts me on things, it's oftentimes it's there's some truth there. So there's gonna be ways that the body of Christ can help us see these things, then there's certainly gonna be ways that the body of Christ helps us uh experience God's love in the midst of these places. So that's, what I'd say. You have a question too?

Dean:

Uh, my name's Dean, uh. My question is, sort of, somewhat paradoxical we're called to pursue the good life as we follow Christ, but at the same time we're also called to put our hope in the fullness of that li-that life when Christ returns, so.

Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah.

Dean:

Where does hope fit in, and how do we hold onto that hope?
Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah, um good. And in fact I had something in my notes that I don't think I said about that, that of course um the fullness of joy and peace and righteousness and the Holy Spirit is-is is in the fullness of the Kingdom and we don't live in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. And so this is all this is this is you know the the completion, the culmination, is future. We live in the "already but not yet" as you know we often talk about it. And so yeah there's a sense in which there is joy and peace and rest available now, and there's a sense in which to the to the degree we can experience it here and now, there's there's always going to be an extent of it that's future, right? And that's that's the sanctification process where we're always this side of of glorification. And we uh we see through it a-a dimly lit mirror, but one day will-we see face to face, and when we see Him as we-as He is, we'll be like Him, right? So there's there's this there's a future time coming where where we will experience more of this, and so yeah we can hope for that time, and and hope for uh-t-to be completely freed. So so I-I don't don't expect that people are going to um-we still have to deal with the biblical texts that seem to suggest that it's available now. You know when Jesus says in Matthew 6 "don't worry about your life you don't need to. Your heavenly Father knows what you need. You don't have to worry anymore." I mean He He's not saying, and of course you'll never get there until heaven, He really goes, "you don't have to" right? I imagine for most of us though, worry is going to remain with us. It might be a diminishing reality in our lives, but it will remain with us, right.

So so how far can we go this side of heaven? Well, we press on toward the upward mark in Christ Jesus, we go as far as you can, right? You know as Dallas Willard often says, "you know
none of us have to worry about perfection yet" right? We we all have a long way to go before we have to worry about that so. So I'm taking your question a little bit-but I think there is room for hope, but but there is a-there's a lot of room to grow this side, and let's just see let's just see how much is available for us in the here and now. So yeah! Oh, there's a-over here yeah?

Eugene:

Thanks umm. This is maybe going to come out a little bit messy.

Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah.

Eugene:

First, thanks. Thanks so much, um I think earlier this evening I was feeling a bit irritated because I was gonna miss part of the presidential debate--

[Laughing]

Eugene:

--And tonight's been one of those times that uh, rare in my life, that I have the sense that God uh really meant for me to be here. So thanks I appreciate and some can try to get this out in whatever messy form it's in, um. I might-my question will almost be similar to to I guess
Clayton's question, um and I'm interested in what you were saying about disciplines of weakness, um not that we want to pursue the disciplines, I know, as a means of creating another avenue of control for me to control, you know just for it to be another thing that I I use to prop, prop myself with um. In my own--I know two guys here from my church and the rest of you I don't know, so I'm just gonna go ahead and throw it out there--in my own experience of psychotherapy with my therapist, um, he--I mean this this issue has been very very prominent--it's really bubbled to the surface of the last few years especially recently, that um, I want to be God, um. And so to that end, obsessive compulsive disorder, and we diagnose you know addictive behaviors um, and this that and the other. And it, and my my therapist said to me last week last Thursday that I'm one of the most stubborn people he knows in terms of--I mean he was, he prefaced that by saying "hey" you know I must let the set lay that out there, he prefaced that by saying that [sigh] you know just where he was coming from, but he said your one of the most stubborn people I know in terms of holding on to you just will not you won't let go of the of the fact that you are broken and screwed up, and you know just so totally, I mean at the same time a bearer of God's image, um you know and all all that other. So I guess I-almost the question is similar to really Clayton's, I--

Dr Steve Porter:

What do you do.

Eugene:

I'm sorry?
Dr Steve Porter:

What do you do?

Eugene:

Yeah. I mean, without--a couple things--without without holding my breath for the next catastrophe to come my way, um I'm just afraid that what's God going to take away from me now. Um, mentioning also that my two most prized material possessions were lost slash damaged last Monday when my car with my 2 year old daughter my wife in the backseat, and we're all okay, but car was totaled. Um I love that car. It was this car I just got last November, uh and then our our stroller, we got a great stroller and now it's bent um. That's kind of where I am right now and I-I just wanted to take this, I want to seize the opportunity because you know I may not get a chance to interact with you in the future just, and any other thoughts you would have on resources for disciplines of weakness and I was kind of jotting down a couple of things that you mentioned to Clayton about confession of attachments. I've done a lot of the work in terms of--maybe there's still a lot more to go. My therapist is a Rosemeade graduate and he speaks very highly of Dr. Coe, and um.

Dr Steve Porter:

He must be good then.

Eugene:
He's-wish I'd gotten to him sooner. Um but what--

Dr. Steve Porter:

What's what's your name?

Eugene:

Eugene.

Dr. Steve Porter:

Well Eugene, I'm going to embrace my own weakness here because I don't know I don't know. Um but it sounds to me like you're on the right road. I think that you're in therapy is obviously a very important place that God has for you and something He's working through, and um He's working through your therapist in your life um. My hunch is it's gonna be a long journey for you, and it is for all of us, that-that you're even aware, that you want to be God though, right, is is uh you're-you're-you're coming into it more and more. And-and-and that's that's so--so so give yourself some credit for where you're at, and realize that God has you on a journey, and it it sounds like you got people around you who are helping you through this. And um, uh so so I you know--this is where spiritual formation becomes such a difficult topic, because it's where the rubber meets the road, right? And we can talk general principles of embracing weakness, but then it comes down to, well how does Eugene, given his defenses and given his personal history, right, how do you embrace weakness in your life given that the barriers that you have in your
heart, right? Well that's where one on one ministry, and what your therapist is doing, and what the people who know you best. That's where that work's going to happen.

One-one thought that did come to mind is I thought of a quote by Blaise Pascal that you know "the heart has reasons of which the mind does not know." And there there are deep reasons in your heart why you're so stubborn. Right? And I imagine that part of what's going on in therapy is trying to to trace what those reasons are, right. Wh-why have you had to hang on so tightly to control, and-and-and what did that protect you from and how did that make you survive. And now if those were real risks and threats which I take it they were, men laying down those things is gonna be a long process. It's gonna be a long process, and you're gonna need people to help you with and it sounds like you have some so. I-I do--I also want to mention--and you remind me of it--that I'm so glad that uh not next week but the week after Betsy Barber and Judy [inaudible], the week after her. They're gonna be--at least as far as I know--kind of part of what their talking about-- They're gonna be talking about uh what's called 'attachment theory' and how our early attachment relationships, with our parents primarily, affect our ability to open to God. And-and so, I think a lot of what they're gonna be presenting more from a psychological perspective will go a long way to helping you maybe get some more insight. But it sounds like you're on the right path.

Eugene:

OK. Thanks.

Dr. Steve Porter:
Yeah.

Eugene:

Appreciate it.

Dr. Steve Porter:

I don't know—it's nine thirty, do we—should we—yeah, OK. So there's there's there's a few more. Take one more, I said. You guys have to roshambo for it. You guys are ISF students, you guys you have access all the time.

Question asker four:

Well I can just e-mail you later, then, if you want?

Dr. Steve Porter:

Okay, no go ahead.

Question asker four:

It's kind of a twofold question, but uh how do you live in a place of desolation, catastrophe, um suffering in in a community that maybe doesn't embrace that, doesn't get it, doesn't like it, thinks it's bad, is trying to cover that up?
Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah.

Question asker four:

And then, how do you also live in that place, maybe with unbelievers in your life--

Dr. Steve Porter:

Yeah.

Question asker four:

--wanting to be authentic with them, um. Because you don't want to deny the state of where you're really at, but not not being what you know Nietzsche said, not having this blessed--

Dr Steve Porter:

Yeah. Let me give a real qui--that's a great question--let me give a real quick answer. With the unbelievers I'd say let it fly. I-I think what what unbelievers really want to see, are not perfect people, right, but people who have problems and who are able to admit them honestly and be loved in the midst of them. So you know the unbeliever usually is a lot safer than than the believer is on this. So so I would just don't don't feel like you need to hold it together. I think the idea that the best way to witness to the unbeliever is to kind of pretend like our lives are
perfect, and Jesus--that's not what that's not the witness that that the world is looking for, they're looking for people who are broken and hurting like they are, but who are loved. So so let it fly with the unbeliever. With with the believers, um if you're in a community that isn't accepting of weakness and brokenness, then find another community uh to to to experience your weakness and brokenness with brokenness with, and then and then stick around for those folks who aren't open to it because they're going to come to it and they're going to need you when they come to it. So don't leave them, because they they need you. But you need another community because they're not ready for what you're dealing with. So that's my quick and quick answer. So I'm I'm done.

[Applause]

Announcer:

So good. Before I close with prayer, let me just say that for next week we were going to have um Dr. Demarest to come from Denver Seminary but about three or four weeks ago he contacted me and he's had some real neurological problems. He can't come, um. And so um I asked uh Bill Hull. Bill Hull is a person who is the head of Choose The Life Ministries, he's the president. He was a former Talbert student. And his interest has been 20 or 30 years, he uh I know him through Dr. Willard, um in the area of spirituality and so he's gonna be with us next week and his topic is gonna be, uh because this has been his interest now for 20-20 years actually, is practical spirituality in daily life. He really wants to know how can--you know when you read a Dallas Willard book it's like whoa OK that's good, now how does this work? His interest is how can we
really live this every day, in our experience, in a real way. And so I was very glad that he was willing to come.

Let me close in prayer, and uh ask our God's blessing. Father we we do we love You we need You, and there are parts of our heart that don't love You. And um, but Lord those will be places that You will teach us so much in. Those will be places that You will open to us, how really much we need You, that we cannot live this life without You, we cannot pray without You, we can't grow without You. I-I just praise that we hear all the words that Steve said that we would not be afraid of the truth of our life, our weaknesses and our need. God You're so gentle, You're so kind. We wish to open our heart to You. Watch over these people, may that You continue to work in their life for good. Hear our prayers in Jesus' name. Amen. Have a good night.