



CHAPTER FOUR

*I Feel So Much Better Now That I've Given Up Hope**

*Life is easier than you think —
All you have to do is:
Accept the impossible,
Do without the indispensable,
Bear the intolerable
and
Be able to smile at anything.*

—Source Unknown

When we received that official notarized form saying Larry had disowned us and changed his name, I couldn't help but think of what the Bible says to Christians who are facing black times: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4, NIV).

The first time Larry left, I thought I had learned something about perseverance. Now that he was gone again—this time apparently for good—I saw that God still had some trials in mind to help me grow and mature. Growing is a lifetime job, and we grow most when we're down in the valleys, where the fertilizer is.

* For the title of this chapter I am indebted to Ashleigh Brilliant, *Pot-Shots* No. 519, © Brilliant Enterprises 1974. Used by permission.

While I was talking with a friend, she got a telephone call bringing some disturbing news. Instead of panic, her response was, "Well, here we GROW again!" She was right. We can go through painful trials or we can *grow* through them.

One of the best descriptions I've ever heard of how it feels to experience an ongoing trial came from a lady who was feeling desperate and undone. There just was no light in sight at the end of her tunnel. She told me, "I feel like I've been living in a parenthesis since I learned about my son. I keep trying to move the parenthesis, and it keeps stretching out, and I am *still* in this horrible parenthesis in my life!"

My Parenthesis Had Never Ended

Fortunately, when Larry left that second time, I was better prepared for my parenthesis—a time of trial and struggle that can be brief or seemingly endless. Actually, Larry's bitter reaction to *Where Does a Mother Go to Resign?* wasn't a new parenthesis at all. His angry exit from our lives only forced me to realize that the problem which began for me on that night at the flagpole on Disneyland's Main Street had really never gone away. The story was just continuing with a new chapter.

When Larry returned after his first absence of eleven months, I thought everything was "okay" and so did Bill. Larry's "phase" was over, and we just didn't talk about it. How wrong we were.

But now here I was, locked in another measurement of time and, until God chose to remove the ends of the parenthesis, I would have to live in another vacuum. Some people might call it a pit or a cave, but whatever you choose to call it, it's a contained situation. You can't go back and wish it were only a day ago or even two years ago. And you can't jump ahead—out of the pit into a happy, carefree time. Until God kicks the ends out of your parenthesis, you have to handle today, today.

This doesn't mean you ignore or negate God's promises and instructions. But you may have to settle for not being sure you understand what's going on—at least at the moment.

I love the cartoon caption that says, "Mother said there'd be days like this . . . she failed to mention that they could go on for months at a time."

One thing that helps is not to deny you're in the process. If you hurt, admit it. As one bumper snicker* advises:

WHEN YOU'RE DOWN AND OUT
LIFT UP YOUR HEAD AND SHOUT . . .
"I'M DOWN AND OUT!"

That's the first step in handling your parenthesis. The next step is to realize that whatever the problem is, *it won't last forever*. I was talking to a gal who has some real problems, and she told me her favorite Scripture verse is, "And it came to pass . . ." I looked at her rather quizzically and she laughed and added, "Just think, all this could have come to STAY!"

Pain Has a "Passing Through" Stage

Since every parenthesis has come to pass, you have to go through a "passing through" stage. It's okay to admit you're suffering and hurting, and you might even be angry with God. But then you go on to make the most of this particular time frame. As the passage from James reminds us, it's a chance to grow. So give it all you've got, and see what you can learn from this pain.

All the promises of God are there, and they're real, and they're true, but right now you're bleeding, you're raw and hurting, and you have to hang on to those promises even if they don't seem to work for you at the moment. As you go through the pain, it will lessen. The pain will flatten out and dilute itself, and then you can look back and realize how far you've come. You can start living with the parenthesis behind you! There may be occasional dips back into the pits, but you know you are getting out of that parenthetical period.

* As you probably have already noticed, I like collecting quips, sayings, and bumper stickers, which I prefer to call "bumper snickers" because they often provide so much humor.

Every time you feel closed in, or like you are smothering in a tight little box with the lid nailed down, imagine you are stepping over that horrid little parenthesis. You *are* going to get over this, and when you do climb over it and then look back, you will realize you've reached new gains and new values. You have completed a segment of growth as a person.

If any of God's prophets knew what it was like to go through a parenthesis, it had to be Jeremiah. In fact, you could say his entire life was one parenthesis after the other. And yet God told him, "For I know the plans I have for you . . . they are plans for good and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11, TLB).

I have come to love that verse because hope makes all the difference. Learning to relinquish Larry completely to God enabled me to face another (actually the same) parenthesis and know I could get through. I had said "Whatever, Lord," and I had meant it!

After Larry left, the SPATULA ministry began to take off. I'd share on television and radio shows, or I would speak in churches and conferences and people would ask, "Well, how is your son now?" And I would have to say, "Well, he's disowned us. He's changed his name, and he says he never wants to see us again."

That wasn't real hopeful news to share, but it was true at the time. All I had to hang on to was a love for God and a love for Larry and all those parents who had suffered the loss of a child or, worse, the pain of having a child reject their values and opt for a different lifestyle that leaves God out.

Real Hope Comes Out of Hopelessness

I identify with the woman described in the following poem from Ruth Graham's book *Sitting by My Laughing Fire*:

She waited for the call
that never came; searched every mail
for a letter, or a note,
or card,
that bore his name;

and on her knees
at night
and on her feet
all day, she stormed Heaven's Gate
in his behalf;
she plead for him
in Heaven's high court.
"Be still and wait,"
the word He gave;
and so she knew
He would
do in, and for,
and with him,
that which she never could. Doubts ignored,
she went about her chores
with joy;
knowing, though spurned,
His word was true.
The prodigal had not returned
but God was God,
and there was work to do.*

For me, that describes hope. Hope is the essential ingredient to make it through life. It is the anchor of the soul. The Lord is good to those who hope in Him. If your hope is gone, it can be rekindled. You can regain hope—you can refocus your view and wait on the Lord to renew your strength.

The title of this chapter may be puzzling you. How can you feel better if you've given up hope? What it means is, once you give up hope in all your *own* efforts and quit depending on your *own* strength, that's when you can start to have REAL HOPE in what God can do!

Think of your life, with all the mistakes, sins, and woes of the past, like the tangles in a ball of yarn. It's such a mess that you could never begin to straighten it out. It is such a *comfort* to drop the tangles of life into God's hands, and then LEAVE THEM THERE. If there is one message I want to share with you, it is to place your child, your spouse, your friend, whomever it might be, in God's hands and *release* the

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load to Him. God alone can untangle the threads of our lives. WHAT A JOY AND COMFORT IT CAN BE TO DROP ALL THE TANGLES OF LIFE INTO GOD'S HANDS AND THEN SIMPLY LEAVE THEM THERE! That's what hope is all about.

Hope Is Not Dodging Reality

The words on an American Greetings card say it all: "Hope is not pretending that troubles don't exist. . . . It is the trust that they will not last forever, that hurts will be healed and difficulties overcome. . . . It is the faith that a source of strength and renewal lies within to lead us through the dark to the sunshine of His love."*

You see, we just can't go through life pretending that griefs don't happen, and acting like the hurt and pain aren't really there. Faith is knowing that troubles do exist, but it is also the trust to know that they're not going to last forever and that you will feel better.

Hope is the essential ingredient to make it through life! It is the anchor of the soul. But you say your hope is gone? Don't worry, it *can* be rekindled. The Lord is good to those who hope in Him.

You can regain hope; you can refocus your view and wait on the Lord to renew your strength. Those without Christ may see only a hopeless end, but the Christian rejoices in an *endless hope*.

How Do You Define "Hope"?

Sometimes it's hard to explain hope—just what is hope, anyway? The cutest illustration of hope I've found is about a little boy who was standing at the foot of the escalator in a big department store, intently watching the handrail. He never took his eyes off the handrail as the escalator kept going around and around. A salesperson saw him and finally asked

him if he was lost. The little fellow replied, "Nope. I'm just waiting for my chewing gum to come back."

If your face is in the dust, if you are in a wringer situation, be like the little boy waiting for his chewing gum to come back. Stand firm, be patient, and trust God. Then get busy with your life . . . there is work to do.

I like the note one mother sent me that simply said:

Dear Barb (and Gopher Bill): Like the sundial, this year I am only going to count the sunny hours! I don't know where we are—I don't need to know. It's all in His hands. How much safer could it be?

Her words remind me that nothing touches me that has not passed through the hands of my heavenly Father, NOTHING. Whatever occurs, God has sovereignly surveyed and approved. We may not know why (we may never know why), but we do know our pain is no accident to Him who guides our lives. He is, in no way, surprised by it all. Before it ever touches us, it passes through Him.

The Painful Art of Tunnel Walking

To come out of the darkness into the sunshine, it helps to remember you're in a tunnel, not a cave. You will get through this if you just hang in there and keep on *walking through that tunnel*. I have a special friend named Peggy who often shares cards and thoughts with me, and one of the best she sent was this:

DARK MOMENTS ARE SHORT CORRIDORS
LEADING TO SUNLIT ROOMS!

One of the best pieces of advice on how to walk through your corridor or tunnel was written by Robert Maner, an evangelist who lives in Georgia. Several years ago in an article entitled "Tunnel Walking" in *Herald of Holiness*, he mentions terrible tragedies that can happen to any of us—a wife learns that her husband is leaving her for another woman; the doctor

* Copied with permission. Copyright © American Greetings Corp.

gives the dreaded news that you have terminal cancer; an unmarried teen-age daughter says the shocking words, "Mom, I'm pregnant"; the State Patrol calls saying your son was killed "while driving under the influence."

All of these tragedies happen every day, and Christians are not exempt. When these things happen, there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel. I know that feeling. You can hear Romans 8:28 quoted again and again, but it's still all dark—there is no light anywhere.

You can feel guilt, anger, bitterness, and depression all at once. You keep asking yourself, "Where did I fail? What did I do wrong?" As Robert Maner says, "Dreary days and nights seem to melt together in a meaningless twilight zone." He goes on to say that although you can't change what happened, there are some things that can help. You are a child of God, and that means you have certain rights, privileges, and resources. He writes:

Jesus will walk with you down your long dark tunnel. At first even His presence may seem far away. But if you look, and feel, He is there. Right by your side you can feel Him standing there. Suppose you had to walk this path alone? But you don't—He is actually there. You can talk with Him. Share your bitterness, your anger, your guilt. Tell Him how depressed you are. Tell how afraid of the darkness you are. Tell Him how lonely you are.

He provides courage in that dark tunnel life has forced you to walk. . . .

While you may see no light at the end of your tunnel, you never know when the tunnel will curve. And right around that curve may burst the light of a great new day. You cannot see it from where you are now, but it is there.

Then, too, every tunnel ends someplace. Otherwise it would just be a cave. And life is definitely not a cave for the Christian. Jesus verified that by His resurrection. Listen closely and you may hear His voice bidding you to quicken your pace.

I remember a time of tunnel walking years ago. The darkness was suffocating—so dense I could feel it. No light at the end of my tunnel could be seen. I prayed—or tried to—but I couldn't seem to get through the ceiling. Sleep was impossible, so I went outside and walked around in the night. When I looked up, the stars were all there. Not one was missing. I thought surely there

would not be one left, but I was wrong. And the God who put them there was also right where He had always been. The next morning the sun rose just as it had always done. The birds were singing, too. Not even they failed me. The day came when the tunnel took a sudden and unexpected turn. There was light—lots of light. There were answers to prayer, too. It didn't happen overnight, but it did happen.

Your tunnel will have light at its end, faithful Christian. Just keep walking.*

The "Perfect Answers" Don't Work

One way to get through your tunnel is to remember nobody's life is perfect, even though commercials and TV shows like to claim it's possible. My friend, Lynda, was looking really sharp, and I told her so. She remarked that she had bought a new bra, and the name of it was "NOBODY'S PERFECT!" That reminded me of how many of us have to live in situations where nothing and nobody is perfect—not even halfway perfect at times.

It's easy to expect too much from people, or from products that are advertised as "The perfect answer." I was in a car wash recently, and while I was paying my bill, I saw a counter display selling little bottles called "New Car Smell." On the label was a picture of a spanking new car wrapped with a big bow on it, and without bothering to take a sample sniff, I just bought a bottle, figuring I could stand a new car smell in my '77 Volvo.

When I got home, I sprayed it around inside the car and almost got sick from the aroma that seemed to be a combination of old oil, tar, and bananas. If a new car ever did smell like THAT, the owner would surely think something was wrong.

I also remember some years back when stores carried unpopped popcorn that came in colors. The kernels were bright red, green, purple, and orange. I bought some, thinking that when it popped, we would have some truly colorful popcorn. We stood around and watched it popping, only to learn that it

* Robert E. Maner, "Tunnel Walking," from *Herald of Holiness*, Nazarene Publishing House. Used by permission.

came out snow white as usual. The colors we anticipated never did show up.

Advertisements have a way of building our expectations, but we learn reality the hard way. No spray will make an old car smell new, and colored popcorn always comes out white. Yet, something inside of us keeps us willing to believe those ads. Maybe we're always hoping for that miracle, and that's why we always try something new to see if it does what somebody says it will, to see if we can find the perfect solution.

Life Can Turn Upside Down

But nothing is perfect. We have to live in a world that is not perfect with people who are full of quirks and in homes that have imperfections. I have a friend who saved and scrimped to buy some expensive wallpaper for her son's bedroom. It finally arrived after being special-ordered, and she brought it home and put it away, planning to hang it as soon as she found the time.

Her husband discovered the wallpaper and, while she was out shopping for the day, he decided to surprise her by hanging it himself. So he worked all day, papering the entire bedroom with the lovely new paper, which was supposed to show colorful balloons with the strings hanging down. He made only one mistake: he hung all the paper UPSIDE DOWN, and the strings were all pointing up the wall like slithering snakes instead of hanging down gracefully as intended.

When my friend returned, she was shocked, but it was all done and couldn't be changed. So, she and her husband simply learned to live with the upside down wallpaper and adjusted to seeing the strings going up. She had wanted it to be just perfect, but it had come out exactly opposite of what she had planned. Learning to live with upside down situations is not always easy, but it is part of life because we all face living with imperfect situations.

We have a clock in our car that is always one hour off from October to April when the time changes. The mechanism that changes the dial is broken, and during those months I have to keep remembering that the clock in our car is one hour ahead

of life. I have to keep adjusting my time and schedule according to a clock that is one hour off, and perhaps this is teaching me something. Some things in life are NEVER what they should be and you have to adjust. Being willing to adjust to something less than perfect is a sign of acceptance.

One heart-broken parent, whose child had disappointed her terribly, finally came to terms with her trials. One of the things that helped her was this little poem:

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is the answer to all my problems today.
When I am disturbed, it is because I find some
person, place, thing, or situation—
Some fact of my life—unacceptable to me, and
I can find no serenity until I accept that
person, place, thing, or situation as being exactly
the way it is supposed to be at this moment,
Nothing, absolutely nothing happens in
God's world by mistake.
Unless I accept life completely on life's terms,
I cannot be happy.
I need to concentrate not so much on what needs to
be changed in the world as on what needs to
be changed in me and in my attitudes.

—Source Unknown

I got a letter from a dear lady who admitted she had no offering to send for the SPATULA ministry, but her love and prayers are with us. She said:

My husband has not worked in four years since his legs were both amputated from an accident. My son is in contact with us now, thanks to SPATULA, and he has moved near us to help with the farming. I have recovered from my surgery for breast cancer, and thank the Lord for that. However, the eye problem I told you about has increased so much the doctors tell me that I will lose all my sight within a few months. But I am thankful my husband can read to me when I go blind, and he will interpret all the cartoons and jokes for me so we can laugh together when your newsletter comes each month. I have laughed more

over your newsletter than all the smiles I could muster since these trials came to us. How I praise the Lord for SPATULA and the laughter it brings to me, along with the encouragement to hang on when everything looks so black.

In her pain, facing problems that would leave many people distraught, this lady still has reason to hope!

God Uses Troubles to Sweeten Us

Life is never perfect, but Jesus is. And He takes the imperfections—the broken pieces and the messes—and turns them into hope. Remember, no matter what you're going through, it didn't come to stay, it came to pass. You may be living in a parenthesis, but whatever you're going through, it won't last forever.

Not long ago Bill and I were driving through Palm Springs, the famous desert resort community. We came upon a roadside stand, and the sign said, "DESERT SWEETENED GRAPE-FRUIT." I thought, *That's the way it is with all of us when we go through a desert experience—when we're out there in the barren and dry wastes, not seeming to receive any encouragement from anybody. That's the time God uses to sweeten us as we learn to give our problem completely to Him.*

There are several steps we all go through when we try to give a problem completely to God. You take your first step when life rises up to knock you flat—you CHURN. You feel as if your insides are full of knives, chopping you up in a grinder. There is no other way to describe the devastation you feel when you're churning inside.

Your next step is to BURN. That's right, you want to kill your child, and then you want to kill yourself. You are so full of red hot anger and the anguish of frustration that your temper is out of control. You literally feel as if you're burning inside.

In your third step, you YEARN. Oh, you want so much for things to change! You just ache inside for things to be as they were before you knew about this. You yearn for the happy past, and this stage often lasts the longest of all.

But then you take your next step, which is to LEARN. You talk with others, maybe you find a support group, and

you learn that you're in a long growth process. You become more understanding and compassionate. Spiritual values you learned in the past will suddenly become *real* to you. You will learn a great deal about unconditional love and reaching out to help others. The wonderful result is that you relieve your own pain.

And, finally, you take your last step—you TURN. You learn to turn the problem over to the Lord completely by saying, "Whatever, Lord! Whatever You bring into my life, You are big enough to get me through it." Now you can relinquish your heaviness to God, knowing that He is in control. He loves your child more than you do, and He has not rejected your child because of whatever is in his or her life. When you nail your problem to the foot of the Cross and say you have deposited that problem with the Lord and truly mean it, then you will be relieved of your crushing burden.

But now comes the really difficult part. Just because you've come through all those steps does not mean that you will not go back to churning, burning, and yearning on certain days. But each time you will stay in those stages for a shorter and shorter period. And you will be able to spend more of your days in turning it all over to God. In 1 Peter 5:7 we are told to cast our cares upon Him. That means to deposit your cares, just as you deposit money in a bank, and leave them there. So many parents write or call me and ask, "How can we give our kids to God and find some relief for this devastation we feel?" I believe, from my own struggling, that the answers are in the stages of relinquishment I describe above.

CHURN awhile . . . BURN for a time . . . YEARN for as long as it takes to move on . . . LEARN as much as you can . . . and then TURN it all over to the One who cares for you. Don't fret if you think you are not progressing or even when suddenly, for no reason, you find yourself back at square one. You may find yourself churning, just as you did at the beginning. That is normal and very typical of grief. Never forget this is a grief process, and you have to work your way through the shattering of your life.

Right now you have a broken dream. It may not always be so, but for now it is, and you have to accept it. But believe me . . . healing does come. The mending process takes time, but you are making a long journey to becoming whole again,

and you have a *door of hope ahead!* I love the way one woman signed an Easter card she sent me: "FROM AN EASTER PERSON LIVING IN A GOOD FRIDAY WORLD." Even in the midst of this messy old world, we can rejoice because we know our future—and our hope—is in Him!

Extra Thoughts to Take Along

Only some of us learn by other people's mistakes;
the rest of us have to be the other people.

* * * * *

When you're lonely,
... we wish you LOVE.

When you're down,
... we wish you JOY.

When you're troubled,
... we wish you PEACE.

When things look empty,
... we wish you HOPE.

—Source Unknown

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TRUE UNDERSTANDING

We do not understand:

Joy . . . until we face sorrow

Faith . . . until it is tested

Peace . . . until faced with conflict

Trust . . . until we are betrayed

Love . . . until it is lost

Hope . . . until confronted with doubts.

—Source Unknown

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WHAT LIGHT?
I'M STILL LOOKING FOR THE TUNNEL!

* * * * *

HOPE MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Hope looks for the good in people instead of harping on the worst in them.

Hope opens doors where despair closes them.

Hope discovers what can be done instead of grumbling about what cannot be done.

Hope draws its power from a deep trust in God and the basic goodness of mankind.

Hope "lights a candle" instead of "cursing the darkness."

Hope regards problems, small or large, as opportunities.

Hope cherishes no illusions, nor does it yield to cynicism.

—Source Unknown

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Thank You, dear God
For all You have given me
For all You have taken away from me
For all You have left me.

—Source Unknown

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TAKE YOUR BROKEN DREAMS
TO JESUS!