

MOVING TO THE CORE

Part 6

I must tell you about a book that I got for Christmas. It is really neat. In fact, I think it ought to be a must-have book for every pastor. It is called *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. Let me share with you some of the chapter headings:

- How to Escape from Quicksand
- How to Ram a Car
- How to Wrestle Free From an Alligator
- How to Deal with a Charging Bull
- How to Perform a Tracheotomy
- How to Break Down a Door
- How to Deliver a Baby in a Taxicab
- How to Survive Adrift at Sea
- How To Survive If Your Parachute Fails To Open

There are numerous other chapters. The book stresses the need to, as the Boy Scouts put it, be prepared.

Just to be honest, we all have those days when we really need a *Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook*. In fact, I would like to see one that covers such scenarios as:

- How To Hold On When Every One Else Seems To Be Letting Go.
- How To Survive When Heaven Seems To Have Put You On Indefinite Hold
- How To Wrestle Against Forces That Are Not Flesh And Blood
- How To Believe For Tomorrow When You Are Having A Difficult Time Making It Through Today
- How To Survive The Grave
- How To Overcome An Avalanche Of Temptation
- How To Maintain One's Faith In Philosophy 101

Survival isn't always easy.

Today, as I continue my series of messages on Moving To The Core, I want to focus on surviving trials and tests. Once again, those at the core excel here, those on the edge are a little more iffy.

THE CORE STANDS FIRM

Throughout this series I have shared with you statistics on the tremendous number of people who desert the faith. As you have heard, most of these defections happen within the first year of one's walk with God. The people start, but they fail to finish. They have good intentions; they have poor follow-through. Falling comes easy for them.

Their story is captured in one of the Lord's parables. I alluded to it in the third message in this series. I want to return to it this morning. I speak again of the Lord's Parable of the Soils found in Matthew 13.

The story tells us about a farmer who goes out to sow some seed.

- **“As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.**

- **Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.**
- **Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”**

At this point it is important to again point out that the same farmer is used throughout the story. Then too, the same kind of seed is sown each time. Tragically, though, in each of these three instances, the seed fails to produce a harvest. About all that the farmer has to show for his labor is a bunch of weeds in the field and some blisters on his hands.

Jesus, however, does not stop. He continues on to say, **“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop--a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”**

No doubt the farmer would have grown discouraged and perhaps would have changed vocations were it not for the seed that fell on the good soil. That seed made all of the work worthwhile. That seed produced fruit. That seed brought about a harvest.

- We see this parable played out right here at our altars. The Word falls on some ears and the people immediately respond to the invitation. They make it all of the way to the front of the church. They pray with our Prayer Team Workers. Then they leave never to be seen again.
- Others come forward and then come back. We are encouraged. However, they never really plug in. The service is too long, too loud, too soft, too something. Anyway, it is our fault and they revert back to their old life. The fledgling plant withers and quickly dies.
- Then to our joy, we see some seemingly make it. They start to church. They occasionally put something in the offering. But, alas, they too fail to thrive. They cannot overcome the cares, the trials, the tests of life. They try, give them an E for effort, but they fail to become productive Christians. Any fruit that they would produce is chocked out long before it has time to ripen and mature.
- All too often, these are the people on the edge. Little growth; no fruit. How sad.
- Finally, we also see the ones who respond and stay; who move on to become a productive child of God. They not only produce a 30-60-100 fold harvest, they continue to serve God for 30 years, 60 years, or for the rest of their lives. They are the core!

Hear me, please. This is important. The core and those on the edge both face certain trials and tests of life. Stuff happens. Dr. Adrian Rogers, pastor and former President of the Southern Baptist Convention once said, “There are no problems too big to solve, just people too little to solve them. Couples that get divorced, and those that don’t get divorced have basically the same problems, the difference is in their levels of commitment.”

Again, the same holds true for those who seek to serve Jesus. The Bible in Matthew 5:45 confirms, **“He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”**

- Storms come to the good and the bad.
- Storms come to those of faith and those who hold to no faith.
- Storms come to those who are at the core, and those who are out on the edge.

The big difference is seen in how the various groups respond to the storms.

Would you like to have a powerful area of personal Bible study? Let me give you a thought. Study the great men and women of Scripture. Study their lives. Look at the parts of their lives

that God focus' on in the Bible. As a rule, He points to their times of trouble
For instance:

- We see that Adam and Eve caved in to temptation and saw their first born son murdered by his brother.
- Noah endured the greatest natural disaster ever to befall this planet.
- Abraham suffered through a war as well as at least two lapses of honesty.
- Joseph, of the Old Testament, went through one major disappointment after another including slavery, imprisonment for a crime he did not commit, as well as the loss of family and friends.

Job suffered as few men have ever suffered. He was a good man. He feared God and hated evil. He was also greatly blessed of the Lord. Then too, he had seven sons, three daughters, as well as...

- 7,000 sheep,
- 3,000 camels,
- 500 oxen,
- 500 donkeys,
- plus all the fertilizer that he could even need.
- He was the greatest man of his day.
- One day as Job was shaving, a messenger came up to him and cried, "**Job, while we were out working the fields, the Sabeans came and stole all of your oxen and donkeys. And then, master, they killed all of your servants....**"
- While this fellow was yet speaking, another messenger came running up, "**Job, while we were out watching your sheep, a great fire fell from heaven and burned alive all of your sheep....**" By now Job realized that this was not going to be the best of days.
- Then, at the same time, another fellow came in yelling that while Job's children were eating a meal, a terrible tornado hit their house killing every last one of them. Had I been there, I would have loaned him my worse case scenario book at that point. He needed it.

Let's leave Job for a moment. David was caught by the preacher while he – David -- was committing adultery. He also saw one of his sons go into terrible rebellion.

Peter failed miserably. He cursed, he lied, he chickened out at the Lord's greatest hour of need.

Paul was in and out of prison, had a number of health problems, and endured great persecution and eventually death for the sake of the Gospel.

Though these were great people; people of God, they were yet not immune to periods of testing and trials.

I enjoy John Maxwell's ministry. I want to borrow from a recent study by Maxwell that I heard on CD:

- "What does Paul do while he is in prison? He writes letters to those who are free and walking around.
- What does David do when He is hiding in a cave? He writes the 23rd. Psalm.
- What does Joseph do when after 30 plus years his dream hasn't been fulfilled? He still obeys God and finds favor with Him."

Let me add one of my own here. Back to Job. What does Job do when every fiber of his being is crying out for relief? Listen to Job 1:20-22, **“At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised.’ In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrong-doing.”**

Well, maybe you are thinking that his wife was a source of great faith and inspiration. Think again. Her solution to the problem was for Job to **“curse God and die.”**

Job, however, would have none of that. He was made of better stuff. Listen now to Job 23:10-12, **“But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. My feet have closely followed his steps; I have kept to his way without turning aside. I have not departed from the commands of his lips; I have treasured the words of his mouth more than my daily bread.”**

Then Job 13:15 adds, **“Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him....”** The *King James Version* puts it, **“yet will I trust Him.”**

The story of Job was written primarily to share two important truths.

1. God can be loved and trusted on His own merit aside from any blessing or good that He might give.
2. The Christian can serve God for nothing save only God alone and can continue to serve Him even when God chooses to be silent and may even appear to be an enemy.

Back to John Maxwell: “Here is what I have found about the difference between immature Christians and mature ones: Immature Christians see God only in the good; mature Christians see God in the good and in the bad.

When people tell me that they are really growing in their walk with God, one of the ways that I test them is to see how they respond to God in times of adversity. Do you see God in the bad times, or only in the good times? You see, the immature Christian when times are bad says, ‘God change my circumstances’. A mature Christian, when times are bad says, ‘God change my heart.’” That is good.

Again, the core stands.

NEXT POINT. THE CORE, INSTEAD OF LOOSENING THEIR GRIP, SIMPLY HOLD ON A LITTLE TIGHTER.

I love Psalms 125:1 in *The Living Bible*. It says, **“Those who trust in the lord are steady as Mount Zion, unmoved by any circumstance”**

Psalm 1:3 adds, **“he is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.”**

Now Psalms 46, **“God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart**

of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

‘Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.’ The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

One of my favorite places on earth is the beautiful Monterey Peninsula on the central California coast. Words can not adequately describe the awesome beauty of the place. Then, my favorite spot on the peninsula would have to be Point Sur. I have been there. I speak from personal experience.

(SHOW OHT) As you can see, I have here a picture of a tree that stands there on the Point. I would guess that this is one of the most photographed single trees in the United States. In one of my books, I have a photo of the tree. Under the picture these words can be found: “The struggle for survival rages along the coast under conditions of haunting beauty. A twisted old cypress seems to be resting between rounds in its eternal bout with the wind and the gray surf, moving idly below.”

As the caption notes, the tree is old. Nonetheless, the tree still stands against fierce elements. What is its secret of survival? The wind, the storms, the crashing waves. The very things that would bring it down are the very same things that help make it strong; that help make it survive!

On October 17, 1989, an earthquake occurred on the central California coast at 5:04 p.m. It lasted for about 15 seconds. The magnitude 7.1 quake was followed by a 5.2 aftershock which occurred 40 minutes later with 45 more serious aftershocks on through that terrible night.

The first quake was felt over an area of about 400,000 square miles. Six persons in Santa Cruz County died; it is estimated that 671 persons were injured. At least 85,000 persons were adversely affected by earthquake damage to their homes. Many homes were so badly damaged that they were condemned. Many other damaged homes could be saved but were unsafe to live in until they were repaired. Individuals and families found themselves suddenly homeless, living in shelters, with friends or with family. The financial cost of the quake was literally in the hundreds of millions of dollars.

The point is, the old cypress stood while everything else around it was falling down.

- You see, the tree is firmly planted by a boundless supply of water.
- The tree has roots that go down, out, and in among the dirt and the rocks of the point.
- The tree has learned through the years to simply tighten its grip.

As a result, it has withstood hurricane force winds, earthquakes, droughts, cold, and whatever else nature throws at it.

Let me tell you the story of Cliff and Ruby. I used to be their pastor. I will never forget the night in January several years ago when their house literally exploded into a ball of fire.

They had spent the evening visiting with us at our house. On their way home they stopped to clean an office. Moments before they were to start for home a gas line ruptured in their basement and every physical thing that they owned was destroyed -- even their dog, and

their pickup out in the garage. To add to the loss, Cliff and Ruby were in their seventies. A lifetime of memories was destroyed in a matter of a few minutes.

As soon as I heard about the explosion, I rushed to be with the couple. They arrived there only minutes before I arrived. Cliff was standing out in the cold January rain. Ruby was sitting in the back of a police car. For some time, Cliff and I just stood and watched as the flames shot some 60 feet into the starless sky. As we stood there together, I inquired, "Cliff, How does this affect your faith?" I will never forget his answer. He straightened himself up to his full height and said, "Oh Pastor, this doesn't affect my faith!" He almost acted as if the very question offended him.

- To Cliff, it was just a house.
- It was just 50 years of memories.
- It was just furniture and clothes.

He no doubt remembered well the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:19-21 (*The Living Bible*), **“Don't store up treasures here on earth where they can erode away or may be stolen. Store them in heaven where they will never lose their value and are safe from thieves. If your profits are in heaven, your heart will be there too.”** Cliff and Ruby had done that very thing. Their heart and their treasure was in heaven. The fire had not invaded there.

Cliff and Ruby remind me of that old tree out on Point Sur.

So does Richard Williams. Richard was a medical missionary. On the night before he died, he entered words in his journal that must stand out as some of the most moving in all of history. Huddled in the hull of his little boat, dying of scurvy and starvation, he penned, "Should anything prevent my ever adding to this, let all my beloved ones at home rest assured that I was happy beyond all expression the night I wrote these lines and would not have exchanged situations with any man living."

But pastor, the fellow died. I know.

Let me ask you a question. What do you think of when I mention Hebrews 11? Faith. Right? The chapter is a summary of the faith of many of the characters described in the Old Testament. While we find the word "faith" some 23 times in chapter 11, there is another word which is oftentimes found alongside of faith--it is death. While every one of these members of the "Hall of Fame of Faith" had faith, every one of them nonetheless eventually died.

- Abel died.
- Noah died.
- Abraham died.
- Sarah died.
- David died.

On and on the list goes.

Not only did these individuals die, some died terrible deaths. Listen to verses 37-39, **“They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated-- the world**

was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith....”

It sounds almost contradictory, doesn't it? Faith and death. And yet, the core knows that eventually everyone dies. This passage reveals, though, that the great warriors of faith do not lose faith even in the face of death.

- Hebrews 11:13 simply says, **“These all died in faith....”**
- Verse 21 adds, **“By faith Jacob, when he was dying....”**
- Verse 22 likewise notes, **“By faith Joseph, when he was dying....”**

The Imperials used to sing a beautiful song that included these thought-provoking words:

"He didn't bring us this far to leave us,
He didn't teach us to swim to let us drown,
He didn't build His home in us to move away,
He didn't lift us up to let us down."

He is a good God.

He can be trusted.

When things get rough, just tighten your grip.

The core knows that the Lord will not let them down.

THE CORE FINISHES

Notice with me 1 Corinthians 15:58, **“Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.”**

The writer, in this chapter, is talking about the return of Jesus Christ for His church. It is a blessed passage complete with many wonderful promises. Then to finish the thought, Paul tells the reader to do three things:

1. “Stand firm.”

The thought is, in light of the rapture, we are to “be steadfast, firm, fixed, determined, purposed, and faithful to the end.”

The world, the flesh, and the devil are to find no quit in us.

Think of 2 Timothy here. Paul is facing the end of his life. As he does so he says, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”** He had made it to the end.

2. “Let nothing move you.”

This means, “be unyielding, unshaken, undisturbed.”

The believer is to stand as solid as a rock.

Think again of the tree out on Point Sur. It is planted and it is not going to move!

Recently I read of one of our Pentecostal pioneers. He wrote: "Both the pulpit and the press sought to utterly destroy our place and prestige, until my wife, her sister and myself stood alone. Hated, despised, counted as naught, for weeks and weeks never knowing where the next meal would come from, yet feeling that we must maintain the faith that was once delivered to the saints. When we had car fare, we rode. When we didn't, we walked. When buildings were

closed to us we preached on the streets...."

Is serving God easy? Guess again! It never has been, it never will be. The core understands this and yet they let nothing move them away from their faith in the Lord. Nothing.

Job 17:9 (*The New Living Translation*) tells us that **“The righteous will move onward and forward, and those with pure hearts will become stronger and stronger.”**

3. Finally, the believer is to give themselves “fully to the work of the Lord.”

The saint is to “never cease, never stop, never slacken up, never quit, never retire” in his or her work for the Lord. We will have all eternity to rest. Now it is time to pitch in and get the work done.

The promise is, **“Our labor is not in vain.”** Payday is coming someday.

In the end, our trials and tests are not meant by God to make us FALL; they are allowed in order to make us soar. Trials are not sent to defeat US; they are sent so that we may defeat them.

JOHN ORTBERG IN HIS EXCELLENT BOOK, *THE LIFE YOU’VE ALWAYS WANTED*, WRITES OF A VISIT HE ONCE MADE TO THE LOS ANGELES MARATHON. There were 18,000 runners. 18,000 brave, motivated, skinny, overachieving, masochistic people. With the event being held in California, we can expect that some of the runners were a little out of the ordinary. One guy ran in full circus makeup and called himself "T-bone the Clown." Another contestant ran as "Flower Man." Thirteen people draped themselves in a specially designed costume and competed as a human centipede.

The starting line was a sight to behold. T-bone was shaking hands with the crowd and laughing and waving. The centipede looked friskier than any centipede has a right to be. Then the race began. The first phase of such a race might be called the pleasure stage. At this point running is fun. Your body is loose, your heart is pumping, you are "one with the cosmos": The blood is flowing, the head is clear, the lungs are breathing deeply, the birds are singing, the sun is shining, the fish are jumping, the cotton is high, Daddy's rich, and Momma's good-looking. You are functioning like a well-oiled machine.

How long this stage lasts depends on the runner's conditioning. For me, it lasts twelve or thirteen feet.

After the initial rush of pleasure, running becomes drudgery.

After drudgery it becomes effortful and laborious. And if you keep going long enough, you reach the point when the temptation to stop is overwhelming. Your feet are protesting vigorously, knives of pain are stabbing through your calves, your lungs have burning coals at the bottom of them. Runners speak of this experience as "hitting the wall."

To run at this stage--to hit the wall and keep going--is the ultimate test of a runner. Races are won or lost, completed or abandoned, at "the wall."

At this stage, the LA marathon really became interesting. T-bone wasn't laughing with the crowd anymore. The human centipede was hanging over the fence, and it didn't look good as thirteen centipedal stomachs united in collective revolt.

At the finish line, people came dribbling in one at a time. Some didn't make it at all. The start of a race is enjoyable. It is easy. Finishing is hard work.

To finish well-that's glory. Finishing well is what counts. How will we run the race of life? Will we finish well? The capacity to finish well is what the New Testament writers called endurance, or perseverance. It is the virtue by which we become increasingly able to honor commitments that ought to last a lifetime. It is especially the ability to honor commitments when honoring them becomes difficult.

The core stands firm.

The core holds on a little tighter.

The core finishes.