

FOCUS



One day this past autumn, all my plans for the day fell apart early in the morning. With the kids loaded in the back seat of the SUV, I let out a heavy sigh of frustration. My plans had gone awry. Breaking the noisy silence, my eight-year-old son asked, “Momma, when’s Thanksgiving?”

The question seemed random at first. But then my heart smiled as I answered, “Every day is thanks-giving day.” Then, to reiterate the message God was sending me, my three-year-old son started singing, “He [God] has done great things, He has done great things! He’s so good to me.” God had other plans for me that day.

With a cleared schedule, we took an unplanned drive in the countryside, enjoying the stunning rays of the sun shining on the hills and meadows. It was as if God gave me a new set of eyes. As the children and I sang His praises in the car that day, I saw so much beauty, and as our praise to God increased, we experienced increasing joy. Had my circumstances changed? No. But my focus had. And that made all the difference.

This experience is hardly unique. All of us have schedules that are frequently interrupted and changed. But perhaps you are going through something devastating right now—far more painful than having a schedule interrupted. Maybe it's a pending divorce, death of a loved one, addiction, loss of health or job, strained relationships, rebellious children, or financial hardship.

Regardless of the issue, our focus has everything to do with our response to circumstances we face. When we commit to praise God during our struggle, our vision and perspective radically change. We are transformed into joyful beneficiaries of God's goodness and, in turn, overflow with generosity and love toward others.

We can learn a lot from the example of a particular impoverished woman in the Bible who had endured a painful loss and still served God with all she had.

And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had (Luke 21:1-4).

Let us look at the facts: *What was she? Where was she? What was she doing? How much did she give? To whom was she giving?*

Scripture tells us she was a widow. She had endured the loss of her spouse. She was acquainted with grief. Scripture also states she was very poor, which means she was probably living day to day on the charity of others to provide for her needs. But she gave the last of her money to the work of God.

When she was first married, I am sure she did not envision the grief she would later have to endure. Like us, she probably had high hopes and dreams. Perhaps she thought her husband would take care of her for the rest of her life. I doubt she desired to be widowed and poor. To the eyes of those who are not familiar with God's kingdom order, it would seem unlikely she could find any joy

at all. How could she possibly be joyful in her grief and poverty?

The answer is both profound and simple: she praised God with all she had. She praised God by her faithfulness in worship and her charity—giving all she had to the ministry of the temple and the worship of the Lord. She emptied herself to be full. She desired to give back to Him out of the blessings she had received. And though the amount she gave was monetarily minuscule, her obedience was enormous. Based on where she was, what she was doing, and how much she gave, this woman was blessed indeed.

Application: What does Malachi 3:10 teach us about those who give to the Lord?

What does Proverbs 11:25 say happens to a generous person?

According to Psalm 87:7, all our blessings come from what source?

There is much to take away from this story. Jesus Christ paid attention to the widow's sacrifice. And because of her obedience, she ultimately was comforted, satisfied, honored, and blessed. How do we know this is true? Because God makes good on His promises.

Obedience is the path to joy. The widow could have chosen to stay inside her home rather than go to the temple. She could have isolated herself instead of gathering with other worshippers. She could have given way to insecurity and hoarded what she had rather than giving to and relying upon God to provide for her.

We have similar choices in our lives, too. When going through hardship, we can either choose to stay inside, isolated, and insecure or keep going, gathering, and giving.

Rewards follow action. There's no ideal place to serve God except the place where He has set you down. Worship where you are. Instead of running away or giving way to despair, determine to serve God regardless of where you are, trusting in His direction and

design for your life. We don't know why we've been placed where and when we are. But we know Who has placed us there, and His way is perfect and is for our good.

Write Romans 8:28 here:



Through the Lens of Praise

We can take away from the widow's example that no matter how difficult the trial, we can still offer God all we are and all we have.

Our emotions have much to do with the way we think and feel. You and I were created to be instruments of praise. Worship from your lips ushers you into God's presence and brings great peace (Psalm 119:165). There is not an end to the things that can draw our attention away from God. But God does not want us focusing on those things because He knows His joy, not our circumstances, is our strength (Nehemiah 8:10). That is why our command is to bring "into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). And to think on "whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you" (Philippians 4:8-9).

To be certain, the joy we have in Christ goes deeper than our grief, its light penetrates our darkest hour, and it abides with and in us when the feelings of happiness fade. Because the Holy Spirit indwells the believer, joy is an ever-present fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). It is a wellspring from which to draw, and it will never

run dry no matter how bleak the circumstance.

What are all the fruits of the Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23?

When we praise Him, we invite His joy, peace, and strength to fill us. Invite Him into your circumstances in every area of your life. Praising Him is the key to keeping your focus on Him regardless of what you may be facing.



Seeing Trials From God's Perspective

Even when you are living and working for the Lord, storms will come. But remember, in the darkest of circumstances and the lowest of emotional valleys, God is working behind the scenes to bring about redemption and beauty and to draw you to Himself, accomplishing His purpose.

Recently, Lois Evans, co-founder of the Urban Alternative and the wife of evangelist Dr. Tony Evans, passed away. During the eulogy, their son Jonathan shared this truth in regards to God's answer to his prayer for healing for his dying mother: "She was either going to be healed or she was going to be healed. She was either going to live or she was going to live, either she was going to be well taken care of or she was going to be well taken care of. Victory belongs to Me [God]."

There will be prayers not answered in the way you want them to be. But when we follow Christ, we have victory in Him in every area of our lives.

Hebrews 11:1 says, "Now faith is the substance of things _____ for, the evidence of things not _____. And verse 6 says, "without _____ it is impossible to please him: for he that _____ to God must believe that he is, and that he is a _____ of them that diligently _____ him."

We want to know that through all of life's hurts and disappointments, God is there orchestrating the events for our good and His glory. Jeremiah 29:11 is one of the most beloved verses because we all want our lives to matter. It says,

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward _____, saith the LORD, thoughts of _____, and not of _____, to give you an expected end."

Another verse that brings us strength in trials is Isaiah 40:31, which says:

"But they that _____ upon the LORD shall _____ their strength; they shall _____ up with wings as eagles; they shall _____, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."



The Mind's Eye

What does it mean to "raise my Ebenezer"? The phrase comes from 1 Samuel 7:12. The prophet Samuel raised a stone as a monument and said, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." It serves us well to remember God's goodness. When we walk through the valley, though, it is hard to remember those former blessings and even harder, with a broken heart, to see His current provision.

I encourage you to start using what I call a 'Joy Jar.' It is a simple glass jar you probably have around the house. This past Christmas season, I gifted 'Joy Jars' to many friends and family members with an ample amount of square, blank papers tied together. Many of them are in a season where it is hard to keep focused on the daily mercies God gives. It was for that very reason this daily exercise is important. The exercise is to write down at least one blessing or joy experienced every day and place it in the jar. According to Lamentations 3:23, there is always something to write.

What does Lamentations 3:23 say about the Lord's mercies?

Whether you started 2021 on the mountain top, or in the valley, or somewhere in between, I pray Romans 15:13 for you as you seek the Lord and follow Him:

“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”

May this great hymn of the faith be an encouragement to keep your eyes firmly fixed on the Lord.

The Solid Rock

*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name.*

*When darkness seems to hide His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.*

*His oath, His covenant, His blood
Support me in the whelming flood;
When all around my soul gives way,
He then is all my Hope and Stay.*

*When He shall come with trumpet sound,
Oh may I then in Him be found,
Dressed in His righteousness alone,
Faultless to stand before the throne.*

*On Christ, the Solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

(Lyrics by Edward Mote, 1834) 

About the Writer: April Tummins lives in Dickson, Tennessee, with her husband Philip and two sons Grant and Oliver. She serves as worship leader and Sunday School teacher at United Free Will Baptist Church. Professionally, she enjoys serving others as a volunteer coordinator for a local hospice organization.