

Help!
How the Gospel Applies to Our Real Life Crises

We have received a treasure, the value of which we cannot comprehend. Our treasure is the redemptive work Jesus accomplished through His life, death, and resurrection. We call this the "gospel." The trouble with an immeasurable treasure is that it is difficult to properly appreciate its value. Consequently we sometimes fail to give the gospel its proper place in our lives. We overlook the gospel as the source of our hope and power to live today.

Being Christians, we trust in Christ for our eternal life. We know what He has done to save us. We trust His promises to give us eternal life in heaven. We look forward to being with Him and all that living with Him in heaven means. We frequently, however, fail to understand what it means that Christ is our redeemer *now*. We either forget, or simply do not understand, the benefit of Jesus' work in our lives in the present. Instead, we look to ourselves, to other people around us, or to "systems" to help us get through the trials and struggles we face. We focus on fixing what is broken in our lives instead of wrestling with how Jesus walks with us in the midst of the brokenness. When we focus on fixing what is wrong we fail to see how He is using our trials to shape us and to deepen our faith and love for Him.

I have been privileged to study many of the publications from Christian Counseling Educational Foundation. These materials teach how God uses the gospel to shape us and sanctify us in the context of living in this fallen world. They help us to reconcile God's goodness, a fallen world, and how we are to live today. Two very helpful books from CCEF are How People Change and Instruments in the Redeemer's Hand. These materials present a biblical paradigm that guides our responses to real life. They talk about four topics: **heat** (our circumstances), **thorns** (our sinful response to our circumstances), **cross** (Jesus' work to redeem us), and **fruit** (our righteous responses to our circumstances).

Our life circumstances can run the gamut from delicious to debilitating. Difficult circumstances provoke us. We can easily understand these fiery circumstances as heat. We do not think a lot about how or why our circumstances are difficult. We focus on overcoming them and getting back to the good life. God tells us that He uses heat in our lives to refine us. (1 Peter 1:6-7) God is not the author of sin, but He uses our trials to transform us. When your car will not start and you have an important meeting to attend, your reaction brings to the surface who you are in your inner man. How you respond to criticism from a friend, or even an enemy, displays who you are. We all face various degrees of heat daily. We can succumb to the temptation to doubt God's goodness on account of our trials, or we can believe the truth of Scripture that all of our life comes to us through the loving hands of a sovereign God. We can conclude that because God has allowed us to suffer through hard times, He must not love us. Perhaps He is punishing us. However, because Jesus has taken all the punishment our sins deserve, nothing we experience as believers comes to us as punishment for our sin. God does not place heat in our lives because He is angry with us. He is at work in our heat to accomplish good both for and in us. He is shaping us and discipling us through our heat.

Frequently we respond to this heat with thorns. Irritation or weariness saps our emotional reserves. We react to evil situations with evil responses. If we yell at our kids when they disobey us, we might be tempted to think that we are yelling because of our

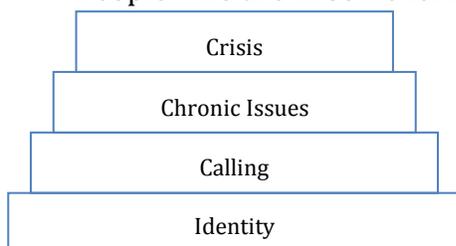
child's poor behavior. If our child had behaved well, we would not have yelled at them. If we become angry at the traffic, which is blocking us from getting to our meeting on time, we might believe that the city should do a better job of traffic management. If the people who time the traffic lights would do their job properly, we would not be yelling at the drivers around us, or at them. Although we are sorely tempted to blame our "evil" reactions on the provocation of our "evil" circumstances, Jesus tells us in both Matthew 12 and Luke 6 that our behavior is not the fruit of our circumstances. What we do is indeed a revelation of who we are in our inner man. Our anger comes out because it is inside us. Our children and the traffic did not put anger into us. They simply make it clear what is already in our inner man by making it easy for our anger to come out. We sin because we are sinners.

One way that has helped me to understand this is the idea of soil and seeds. I enjoy growing things. When I want to grow a sweet pea I plant a sweet pea seed in any soil I want. The soil gives the seed the necessary resources to grow and become what it is in itself. I don't try to identify sweet pea soil and then carelessly toss in any old seed. Whatever the seed is determines what grows in the soil. In the same way, the circumstances, or the soil, of my life does not determine who I am. My seed, or inner man, determines who I am. My soil provides the necessary ingredients to grow and reveal who I am. If I am angry in my inner man, I will act angrily in various circumstances. If I am generous in my inner man, I will act generously.

When we see our sinfulness blossoming in our circumstances, our only hope for change and growth in our righteousness is found in the redemptive work Christ has done on the **cross**. Christ lived, died, and rose again on behalf of *sinners*. We are invited, indeed called, to recognize our sin, repent of it, and turn to Jesus and His completed work for our well-being and our hope. We are rarely able to change our circumstances. We are often powerless to make our life, or ourselves, better. However, when we believe that our loving Father and our Savior are in complete control of our lives and the world around us, we do not have the same need to make our life work. When we are late for that appointment because of the traffic, we are free to believe that Jesus has the power to take care of us even if we are late. As Jesus and the Holy Spirit carry out their transforming work in us, we see Him causing us to bear fruit instead of growing thorns in response to our **heat**. This is His work of sanctification. It is what we want to promote as we "counsel" or "mentor" one another.

In my ministry in the local church this paradigm from CCEF has shaped the way I deal with my own life as well as how I disciple, counsel, and mentor the people in my congregation. I have come to see this paradigm as a very helpful way to think about living a gospel shaped life. I have, however, adapted CCEF's paradigm to shape my counseling and to help my leaders to understand how to help the people who come to them for guidance and help. I use the following image to counsel and train my leaders.

People who are in some form of **crisis** often turn to other believers for support,



encouragement, and comfort. They are looking for help to get back to what their lives were like before their lives imploded. They come for help to deal with their trials. We have to be clear on the help we hope to give these people. We can either give them gospel comfort or we can give

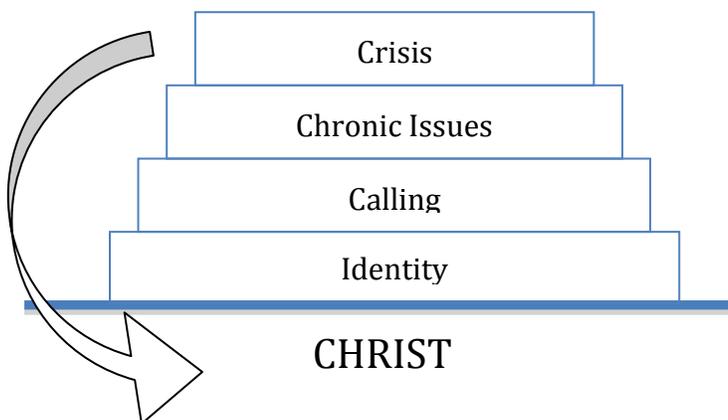
them “systems” to equip them to cope with their circumstances. Our goal determines which direction we take.

Many people who want to help others will offer advice on how to deal with the particular trials people are experiencing. You can see this in the books and articles that they are writing. There are shelves full of books in our local Christian bookstores with titles like: Six Steps to Overcoming Anger, or Three Things to Train Your Kids. Many people are looking to learn what they have to do to have success over their sins or to improve their circumstances. When they come to us, we have to choose whether to deal holistically with their life and help them biblically, or to give them the simple steps that will return their lives to “normal”. Most folks who come to us in times of crisis are focused on their pain and managing whatever it is that has “caused” their pain. They want help to deal with their immediate needs. In many cases they are not looking at the **chronic issues** that underlie the **crisis** they are experiencing. They are not looking at the big picture of what God is doing. They want to be able to function. They want relief. They want it now. We want them to have that relief, and that is right. They need, however, more than merely relief.

God is giving us an opportunity to help these brothers and sisters wrestle with the gospel. In many cases it takes some trial or painful situation to move people to ask for help. Those who are willing to come to us for counsel or advice are typically in real pain. When we love them well, we will listen to them and engage with them meaningfully in their painful heat. When people take the unusual step of coming to another person for support, comfort, and encouragement, they need us to listen and to understand their hurt. This can take a significant investment of time and love. They need help to interpret what is going on and to make some sense of their lives. We do well to care for them in their trials. We leave the job unfinished if we stop there.

If we only validate our friend’s pain or join with them in complaining about the unfairness of life, we rob them. We steal from them the hope that is our birthright as Christians. They have so much more than the suffering they are experiencing. They have

Christ! It is very important to help our hurting brother or sister to see the reality of Christ’s love and redemptive work in their life. Whatever they are experiencing, they are not going through it alone. Christ is with them. He has gone before them in their pain. He understands from first hand experience everything they are living through. *We can never suffer more than Jesus has already suffered for us.* While that might seem

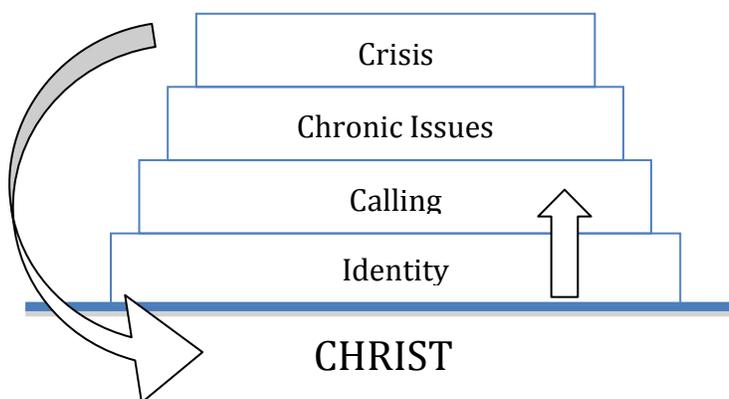


artificial or inadequate to deal with the suffering some members of our body are enduring, it is not. We only question the comfort we can find in Christ’s presence with us in our suffering because we have not properly understood His suffering. Jesus faced the Father’s wrath for our sin that He took upon Himself. If we know who He is, and what that unity of the trinity means, we will have a clearer sense of His sacrifice to save us from hell, from sin, and for heaven. This is at the root of His love for us, and our new **identity** in Him. We are

profoundly loved. We are forgiven. We are citizens of heaven and adopted members of the family of God!

On top of this, He has placed us, and these friends, in the community of faith. Indeed, they are talking with you. Christ has suffered in order to redeem them. He loves them and is sanctifying them. He will bring His work in them to completion. He will give them the grace to live out their **calling**. They are the son or daughter of God Most High. Their best good is to be the man or woman that God is re-creating them to be. It is easy to lose sight of this when we are distracted by our trials and difficulties. We need brothers and sisters to help us to remember this truth. Those who come to us for help in their times of suffering need to discover, or rediscover, who they are because of Jesus' work to redeem and sanctify them. We want to help them to recognize and believe their identity and calling as Christians.

When refocused on the truth and comfort of our gospel identity, believers also need to



hear the difficult truth of who Christ calls us to be. We have the delicate job of reminding those who come to us for counsel that our identity in Christ is inescapably tied to our **calling** in Christ. Jesus will never redeem us and take us for His own simply to abandon us to ourselves and refuse to give us the grace to live as the new creature we are. We are called by God to live Christ like lives.

Husbands are called to love their wives without regard to how their wives relate to them. Parents are called not to exasperate their children without regard to how their children respond to them. Employees are called to serve their employers to the best of their ability even if their supervisors are harsh taskmasters. Those whose lives are dominated by fear or compulsion are called to live with hope and freedom. This sounds easy in theory, but when I have to deal with this in the realities of our fallen world, it becomes humanly impossible.

When I meet with the husband whose wife has asked him to move out, I cry with him and support him through this crushing experience of rejection. I must also remind him of Ephesians 5. Paul, writing by the inspiration of the Spirit, tells all husbands that we are called to love our wives as Christ loves His bride the church. Jesus loved His bride to death. Literally. His bride rejected Him and cried out for His crucifixion. His bride sinned and so He came to fulfill the law on her behalf. He went to the garden and faced squarely the Father's rejection that His bride deserved. Knowing what was ahead He still went to the cross and loved us well. If, when we meet with our hurting brothers and sisters, we do anything to minimize Jesus' self-sacrificing love, we diminish what it means to be in Christ. We are the beloved bride of our Redeemer. He loves us and saves us. He also calls us to love others as He loves us. So the husband whose wife rejects him is still called to love her well, to love her as Christ does. The young woman who has been abused by those she trusts has a bridegroom who loves her well and calls her to forgive and to love others well. This is an impossible calling.

It is at that point that we must turn again to Christ for our very lives. Jesus does not grade on a curve. He does not qualify His calling to be Christ-like. Jesus calls us to the impossible so that we must trust Him to work in us that which we cannot accomplish in ourselves. This is His program of cultivating our sanctification. When I honestly look at what God says about how we are to live, about how I am to live, I am forced to the realization that on my own I cannot do this. I have already failed. My only hope is that another has done this for me and given me His record of righteousness. And Jesus has. I need forgiveness for all my failures, and I need grace today to continue to grow. I need grace today to continue to follow Jesus and obey Him. In 1 Peter 1 we are told to center our hope on the grace the Jesus gives us in His revelation. Jesus has come and given grace through His redemptive work. He will come again and make all things new and bring to completion the work He has begun. In Philippians we are told that Jesus will finish the work He has begun, the work of our redemption, sanctification, and glorification.

The result of participating in this mentoring ministry in my life, and in the lives of the people with whom I have ministered, is that we squarely face the reality of our *crises*. Our lives are difficult in a fallen world that is not what it was intended to be. We embrace the reality of our foundational identity in Christ. Jesus tells us we belong to Him and that we are secure in His redeeming love. We wrestle with Jesus' calling for our lives and with our desperate need for His grace and transforming work in us. We strive to be the godly men and women He tells us He is making us to be. He gives us a deeper and richer intimacy with Him that is worth every bit of the heat we face. We grow in our trust in His care and more deeply recognize His love for us. We have the privilege of serving Him and glorifying our all glorious Redeemer.

In a surprising turn of events, Jesus convinces us that the crises we face aren't resolved by us, or God, changing our painful circumstances and experiencing pleasant circumstances, but by blossoming in the heat as we drink in the grace Jesus pours into us.