



## **When Life Is Disappointing**

Text: Luke 1:5-20

Bible Teacher Timothy Ateek

1. Read Luke 1:6-7. Can you identify with a time that like Elizabeth and Zechariah you were walking closely with the Lord but instead of a blessing, you received disappointment? Perhaps you realized a disappointment even as you listened to the message or prepared for this lesson?
  - a. In what ways have you tended to treat God like a vending machine or buy into the karma-type thought of do good, expect good?
  - b. Why is it dangerous to base our belief in God's goodness on our experience alone?
  - c. Where in fact should we base our knowledge of God's goodness?
2. Read Psalm 107. This Psalm is the classic exposition of God's goodness. J. I. Packer writes: "The whole psalm is a majestic panorama of the operations of divine goodness, transforming human lives." God's actions reveal goodness in its highest and purest form. His goodness provides the standard for developing this fruit in our own lives.
  - a. The psalmist gives four illustrations of God's goodness in verses 4-9, 10-16, 17-22 and 23-32. What do each of these illustrations have in common?
  - b. What needs do the people have in each of these sections?
  - c. According to the psalmist, what are some ways we should give thanks to God for his goodness and love (vv. 22, 32)?
  - d. What do verses 33-42 reveal about the ups and downs of life?
3. Read John 16:25-33 together. How does this passage buck the norms of societal expectations for peace/absence of trouble? What does Jesus offer in light of that?
4. How would you describe "joy?" How does it differ from happiness?
  - a. Read John 15:1-11 & Psalm 27:5-7.

- b. What do these passages reflect about true joy, where it is found, and its connection to circumstances?
- 5. Knowledge about God doesn't necessarily translate into faith in God. Zechariah, being a priest, knew all about God, but still had doubt. What are some ways you can overcome areas of doubt in your life?

Challenge: Is there someone in your life you know who is walking through a season of disappointment or pain? Perhaps in your grow group or community? How has God uniquely equipped you to come alongside them? Don't underestimate the role you could play or even the "small" things that could truly matter. Take a step this week to love and care for them.

Prayer: Father, I pray for (name one or more) and others in my circle of family and friends who are struggling with challenges...

When they're disappointed that You haven't answered their prayers or haven't seemed to make any move to change things yet, forgive their impatience. Help them to live like the prophets of old, who were patient even when they had to suffer, and who didn't quit though they must have felt like it sometimes. Help these I'm praying for not to quit either.(James 5:10–11a)

Help them to trust You and believe that You care, that You haven't forgotten them—and You won't! When trouble comes their way, when they're facing tests and challenges, help them be willing to thank You in all circumstances, difficult as that is.(Nahum 1:7a; Isaiah 49:15b; 1 Thessalonians 5:18; Ephesians 5:20)

Help them to love You with all their hearts, souls, and minds, for You cause all things to work together for our good when we love You and are called according to your purpose. Help them realize that somehow You're fitting them into Your plans. Help their love for You to be as steadfast and unchanging as Your love for them.(Matthew 22:37; Romans 8:28, 38–39)

May they never question Your love, knowing it was settled once and forever at the cross. (1 John 4:10)

In Jesus' name, amen.

## STUDY DEEPER

### How to Find Strength in the Strength of God

<http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-to-find-strength-in-the-strength-of-god>

How do you do a task in the strength of another? How do you exert your will to do something in such a way that you are relying on the will of another to make it happen?

Here are some passages from the Bible that press this question on us:

- “By the Spirit put to death the deeds of the body” (Romans 8:13). So we are to do the sin-killing, but we are to do it by the Spirit. How?
  
- “Work out your own salvation . . . for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12–13). We are to work. But the willing and the working is God’s willing and God’s work. How do we experience that?
  
- “I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Paul did work hard. But his effort was in some way not his. How did he do that?
  
- “I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:29). We toil. We struggle. We expend effort and energy. But there is a way to do it so that it is God’s energy and God’s doing. How do we do that?
  
- “Whoever serves, let him serve as one who serves by the strength that God supplies” (1 Peter 4:11). We serve. We exert strength. But there is a way that our serving is the effect of God’s gracious power. What is that way?

### Introducing A.P.T.A.T.

In 1983 I gave my answer in a sermon, and to this day I have not been able to improve on these five steps summed up in the acronym, A.P.T.A.T. (rhymes with Cap That).

In 1984 J.I. Packer published *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, and gave the very same steps on pages 125–126. He calls it “Augustinian holiness teaching.” It calls for “intense activity” but this activity “is not in the least self-reliant in spirit.” Instead, he says, “It follows this four-stage sequence”:

First, as one who wants to do all the good you can, you observe what tasks, opportunities, and responsibilities face you. Second, you pray for help in these, acknowledging that without Christ you can do nothing—nothing fruitful, that is (John 15:5). Third, you go to work with a good will and a high heart, expecting to be helped as you asked to be. Fourth, you thank God for help given, ask pardon for your own failures en route, and request more help for the next task. Augustinian holiness is hard working holiness, based on endless repetitions of this sequence.

My five steps omit his first one (“note what tasks are in front of you”). I divide his second step into two: A. Admit (his word, “acknowledge”) that you can do nothing. P. Pray for God’s help for the task at hand. Then I break his third step into two. He says “expect to get the help you asked for.” Then with that expectation, “go to work with a good will.” I say, T. Trust a particular promise of God’s help. Then, in that faith, Act (A). Finally, we both say, T. Thank God for the help received.

A. Admit

P. Pray

T. Trust

A. Act

T. Thank

Trust God’s Promises

I think the middle T is all important. Trust a promise. This is the step I think is missing in most Christians’ attempt to live the Christian life. It is certainly my most common mistake.

Most of us face a difficult task and remember to say, “Help me, God. I need you.” But then we move straight from P to A — Pray to Act. We pray and then we act. But this robs us of a very powerful step.

After we pray for God’s help, we should remind ourselves of a specific promise that God has made. And fix our minds on it. And put our faith in it. And say to God: “I believe you, help my unbelief. Increase my faith in this promise. I’m trusting you, Lord, here I go.” Then act.

Paul says we “walk by faith” (2 Corinthians 5:7) and “live by faith” (Galatians 2:20). But for most of us this remains vague. Hour by hour how do we do this? We do it by reminding ourselves of specific, concrete promises that God has made and Jesus has bought with his blood (2 Corinthians

1:20). Then we don't just pray for help hour by hour, we trust those specific promises hour by hour.

When Peter says, "Let him who serves serve in the strength that God supplies," we do this not only by praying for that supply, but by trusting in the promise of the supply in specific situations. Paul says that God "supplies the Spirit to you by hearing with faith" (Galatians 3:5). That is, we hear a promise and we believe it for a particular need, and the Holy Spirit comes to help us through that believed promise.

## 10 Promises to Memorize

So here is my suggestion for how to do this. Memorize a few promises that are so universally applicable they will serve you in almost every situation where you face a task to be done "in the strength that God supplies." Then as those tasks come, Admit you can't do that on your own. Pray for the help you need. Then call to mind one of your memorized promises, and trust it – put your faith in it. Then act – believing that God is acting in your acting! Finally, when you are done, thank him.

Here are ten such promises to help you get started. Of these, the one I have used most often is Isaiah 41:10.

1. "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

2. "My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19)

3. "God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:8)

4. "I will never leave you nor forsake you.' So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'" (Hebrews 13:5–6)

5. "The LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly." (Psalms 84:11)

6. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32)

7. "Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life." (Psalms 23:6)

8. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." (James 4:7)

9. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (2 Corinthians 12:9)

10. "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me." (Psalms 50:15)

Never cease to ponder Paul's words: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Not I. Yet I. By faith.