



BRUCE D. STROM

PERSEVERING

POWER

ENCOURAGEMENT

FOR WHEN YOU'RE

OPPRESSED BY LIFE



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GET PERSPECTIVE

There is one God, and you are not him!

A man who worked at an aviary in a bird park went to an outdoor wedding. He kept looking up until a friend finally asked him why. The man replied, “Sorry, I’m used to looking up to avoid falling bird poop.” If you want to avoid a lot of life’s poop, look up!

The apostle Paul said, “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth” (Colossians 3:1-2 ESV). Snoopy, the beloved dog of Charlie Brown, thought about it this way: “Keep looking up—that is the secret of life.”

Maybe this sounds silly, but go outside and look up. You cannot see yourself. All you see is a vast expanse of possibilities. Look down. You will see yourself and little else. This is true in life. Looking up fixes your eyes on Jesus. Looking down fixes your eyes on you. When you look up you can appreciate the majesty of God. When you look down you limit your perspective.

Christ followers believe Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. We believe he sees all things and knows all things. This means he sees you and he knows you. He knows your anxiety, stress, uncertainty, and pain. “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” (Nahum 1:7). “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

He cares for you. Look up.

PERSPECTIVE OF SELF

The challenge is circumstances. Often, we don't look up because we are in a torrential downpour and if we look up, we're afraid we'll drown. Although rain clouds may obscure the sun, that does not mean it's gone. Far above the clouds and unaffected by them, the sun shines brightly. The Son of God shines just as brightly above the storm cloud of circumstances of your life. Jesus is unaffected by the storm. He speaks peace to the storm.

The first thing about perspective is realizing it is okay to struggle with it. Honestly, if Jesus' closest friends grew afraid when he was with them in bodily form, you can extend a little grace to yourself. Jesus was sharing amazing teaching with the crowds when he climbed into a boat with his disciples to cross the Sea of Galilee. Jesus was tired and fell asleep. He continued to sleep even though a violent storm struck. While the disciples were experienced fishermen, they feared for their lives, and asked, “Teacher, don't you care if we drown?” (Matthew 4:38). Have you ever asked that? *Don't you care that I'm drowning? I'm overwhelmed. Don't you care?*

Jesus awoke and calmly said, “Quiet! Be still!” and the storm disappeared. “Why are you so afraid?” he asked. “Do you still have no faith?” (Matthew 4:39-40).

Jesus will calm your storm. Fear is natural, but he is the God of the supernatural. Trust him. Have faith. Faith is a prerequisite to persevering power. Faith provides perspective in the storm.

There have been many storms in my life, perhaps yours also. A major hurricane was our struggle with infertility. After four years of marriage, I crawled into that closet. Helen pulled me out, but then four more years passed without any change in our circumstances. Have you ever heard someone say you have to give up for God to show up? That was true for us. In 1998, we were giving up; but that fall, we were at the doctor’s office and saw on the ultrasound two tiny peanuts with beating hearts. We were having twins! Leaving the office that day we looked up and saw a double rainbow.

Nine months later we were at a restaurant celebrating the impending birth of our sons with family and friends when the entire restaurant, including the kitchen staff, emptied outside. Everyone was pointing to the brightest double rainbow I have ever seen.

God’s promises are real. His timing is not our timing or his ways our ways, but he is faithful. His perspective is better than mine. And God was allowing the pain of infertility to open my eyes to the pain of others around me.

We survived a major storm in our life, and everything was rainbows. But then it wasn’t. I took a couple of months off to be with our newborn sons. I was an anxious dad. Are they

supposed to poop this much? Why isn't one gaining weight? Why are they crying all the time? Twins can be a handful and I wanted to control everything. But I couldn't. The best lesson of parenting is learning to let go of control. Letting go of control is necessary for developing faith.

Letting go of control is hard for a lot of people—it was for me. When I let go, people messed up. That is what I discovered when I returned to work. Major mistakes happened while I was gone. Suddenly I was being sued in four lawsuits. I was trying to buy two buildings and multiple problems arose. We needed more lawyers and made an offer to one who suddenly backed out because her husband was diagnosed with cancer. My firm was falling apart. I started the firm with nothing and believed our strong alignment around service and integrity should protect us from turmoil. How could this be? I wanted to seize control of the situation and grit my way forward.

Have you wrestled with work challenges? Maybe you were an ideal employee and out of nowhere got fired. Perhaps, like me, you owned a business built on Christian principles only to face serious challenges. What do you do?

I'll tell you what I didn't do. I didn't pray. Not really. I prayed for God to remove the circumstances, but I didn't ask why the circumstances were present. I'll tell you another thing I didn't do. I didn't involve my wife. She is an amazing woman of faith, but rather than seek God together, I thought I was protecting her by taking everything on myself. I was wrong. God uses the storm of circumstances for different purposes. Sometimes he sends the

storm, other times he allows the storm. But storms always have purpose.

Sometimes God allows a storm of circumstances to correct us. He did that a lot with the people of Israel. Sometimes God allows a storm of circumstances to teach us to rely on him more fully. And sometimes the storm of circumstances happens for reasons known only to God. For me, they were a lesson in humility. I liked relying on a bank account. I liked telling people I was the senior partner of a successful law practice. My identity was rooted more in my career than in Christ. And I believed my work was mine and separate from my wife. I forgot that all I had was a gift from God, especially my wife.

） **Pitfall to Avoid**—*Don't make yourself or your circumstance bigger than God.* ）

I thought I could negotiate with God. I had a nice ministry called Administer Justice, which I started on the side. I gave more than a tenth of my money to important Christian causes. I led a small group and taught the Bible. And even though I'd written good stewardship resources for the church, I was not practicing good stewardship in my own life—I had not fully surrendered myself to God. I wanted control of my life and to share only parts of it with God. But God wanted all of me.

Maybe that is your circumstance. Maybe the challenges you are facing are God's way of saying, *Stop trusting in yourself. Trust me.* Maybe he wants you to close that business or end that relationship. Maybe he wants you to involve your

spouse or significant other in your life more. Perhaps he wants to move you out of your comfort zone so you trust him more. He often asks us to do hard things if we are to listen and not lean on our own understanding.

） **Truth to Embrace**—*Control is an illusion.* ）
 Let go and put your trust in God.

God asked me to close the law practice. He didn't want part of me. He wanted all of me. My storm of circumstances was sent so I would look up. I was trusting in my job, money, and abilities, but God wanted me to trust him. I shut down my law practice, sold everything, and went to Administer Justice full time.

And that is how I found myself all alone in a little office shaking my fist at God. I spent two years looking down. All I could see was the unfair circumstances at work. I'd done nothing to deserve the chaos and confusion. Like Job, I felt righteous in my response. But also like Job, I could not see the bigger picture. I lacked faith. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 ESV).

My friend Dr. Tony Evans says, "If all you see is what you see, then you do not see all there is to be seen." Think about that. Your perspective is limited. You do not see all there is to be seen, but God does. All I could see was that Administer Justice had only \$2,000 in the bank account and my wife was not working as she stayed home to raise our sons. I was looking down at my circumstances. When I finally looked up it was to shake my fist at God. But when

I looked up, he answered. And that wrecked me. Looking up usually does.

I left my law practice in grudging obedience to God's call. I had no joy. I was angry. Everyone thought I was crazy, and so did I. All alone in a little eight-by-ten-foot office, I looked up and shook my fist at God. "What am I doing here?"

God responded: "My will. For whatever you do for one of the least of these, you do unto me."

That was the true breaking point of my life. I had to stop seeking the approval of people. I needed to stop chasing the things of this world. I needed perspective. I was bigger in my own eyes than God wanted. I had to become less so he could become more. I had to recognize my life was not my own and I needed to focus less on me and more on God and others.

How about you? Is your identity tied to what you do or who you are with? Do you describe yourself by a role or do you describe yourself as a child of God? Perspective matters.

PERSPECTIVE OF JESUS

As I began to look up and focus more on God, I learned more about his perspective. The perspective of Jesus. If we are to be like him, then he is worth knowing.

I hope you have friends. Assuming you do, I wonder how you would describe them to me. I suspect you would talk about the character traits that are at the core of who they are: warm, funny, encouraging, adventurous, loyal. You could share stories that illustrate these characteristics. In a short period of time, I would have a wonderful picture of your friends and feel like I know them.

Throughout Scripture we see the character of God reflected in Jesus—justice, mercy, and humility. Understanding these character traits helps us understand Jesus. Jesus called us friend, and we should think of him not as some distant deity to study and discuss, but as a loving friend to follow. A friend who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness.

Sometimes I think we study Jesus like he is some math problem to solve instead of a friend to embrace. We emphasize the birth and death of Jesus almost as if he never lived. Our church calendars place great emphasis on Christmas and Easter. We frequently say Jesus was born to die. But that is misleading. Honestly that is like me saying you were born to die. While a true statement, it misses the point of your life. Jesus was born to live.

If Jesus came only to die, he could have done that quickly. He made enemies right away. But most people agree he lived thirty-three years, spending the last three as a traveling teaching rabbi.

Why?

Jesus did not merely come to die. He came to live. Jesus chose to be vulnerable and experience suffering. He chose to associate with outcasts, including Samaritans, women, people with mental illness, drunkards, tax collectors, the poor, and people with diseases.

Jesus modeled justice, kindness, and humility. He wrapped himself in a servant's towel and washed our feet (see John 13). He loved supremely. He demonstrated courage and unwavering faith. He possessed persevering power.

Jesus spent all his time talking about the kingdom of God and advancing that kingdom through service to the least of these.

I grieve “Christians” who claim to love God while hating their neighbor. More interested in maintaining power and status, they fail to treat others as image bearers of God. Whether women, minorities, immigrants, refugees, poor, drug-addicted, etc.—it matters not to Jesus. All those words are labels created by men. Jesus created only one label: “child of God, made in my image, precious in my sight.” Jesus elevated these marginalized image bearers. He loved them, listened to the cries of their heart, and healed them. Too many “Christians” today are haters, not healers.

What angers me most is the damage these individuals do to my friend Jesus. Jesus is not like that. Jesus is worth knowing. Jesus is worth following. But if people think these other individuals represent Jesus, why would they want to have anything to do with him? We wonder why people leave the church. I think it is because some people in the church left Jesus. The church should be a house of prayer, not politics. The church’s voice should be a prophetic voice of lament, not an angry tirade for losing power. Stop thinking things have never been worse. Our nation fought a civil war. Our problem now is not a civil war but a civility war. We can change that if we regain perspective.

Some churches are looking down. All they see is ground they are losing beneath them. The number one subject of conversation for Jesus was the kingdom of God. Look up and set your affections and your work toward the advancement of that kingdom.

The church stands at a crossroads. Some in the church are moving toward the opportunity to love neighbors through justice ministries. Others see justice as a distraction from the gospel. They believe *justice* is a volatile word infused with a leftist political agenda. Really? Justice is part of the character of God (Psalm 50:6; Isaiah 30:18) and the foundation of his throne (Psalm 89:14; 97:2).

The heart of justice is the cross of Jesus. The two cannot be separated. If you look at the center of the word *justice*, you will see the cross of Jesus. The letter *t* forms a cross and a visible reminder that the kingdom of justice is rooted in the cross of Jesus. You are not saved to sit. You are saved to serve. The cross provides the hope of salvation. And the cross is to be picked up daily as we follow Jesus in serving the least of these through acts of justice.

justice

Jesus came to restore us in relation to God and in relation to others. Love of God is the gospel in action. Love of neighbor is justice in action. He called us to do both. He demonstrated this in his life and in his death. Perspective matters.

Administer Justice works with churches. We believe effective ministry is rooted in and leads back to the local church. As messy as churches are—because they are filled with messy people—we invite churches to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God through legal ministry. We work with churches across the spectrum because the

kingdom of God contains a spectrum. All those who believe Jesus is the sole means for salvation are part of that kingdom.

My prayer is that your church considers the opportunity to pursue both grace and justice. Paul Tripp is an evangelical Christian leader, counselor, writer, and speaker. He long advocated for the gospel of grace while missing the gospel of justice. His challenge is one for all of us:

God makes his invisible justice visible by sending people of justice to advocate for justice to people who need justice, just as he makes his invisible grace visible, by sending people of grace to give grace to people who need grace.

I am grieved that I have been a vocal and active ambassador of one but not the other. Yet, I am thankful for the insight-giving and convicting ministry of the Holy Spirit, and grateful for God's forgiving grace as I have begun to make life choices to position myself to do better. What about you? How balanced has your gospel been? Have you been an advocate for grace, but silent in the face of injustice? Have you been comfortable with the segregation of the Christian community or with subtle personal prejudice? Where is God calling you to confession, repentance, and brand-new ways of living? . . .

My prayer is that God would grant us the desire and the ability to speak and act as faithfully for this holy justice as we have for his forgiving grace, until that day when the final enemy is under the foot of our Savior and our advocacy and action is no longer needed.¹

The institution of the church needs a fresh perspective. So does the institution of law. Law is a monopoly. Only lawyers can practice law. In many states, for anyone who is not a lawyer to advise on legal matters is the unauthorized practice of law and is punishable as a crime.² The problem is that most people cannot access lawyers. One in three Americans simply cannot afford the high cost of lawyers.³ In only a couple of isolated geographic areas are lawyers required to provide free or low-cost legal assistance. And most do not. Consequently, there are very few lawyers available for those of modest means: as of 2021, there were only 10,479 legal aid attorneys nationwide.⁴

The vision of Administer Justice is to see one thousand gospel justice centers transforming lives in the name of Christ. We need only two thousand lawyers to join a trained team of other volunteers to make that possible. But lawyers face multiple challenges of time, doubts over usefulness, and fears over lack of expertise. While these questions are important, they come from a flawed perspective of looking down at what one lacks instead of up at God's plan and provision.

Lawyers have great privilege in the United States. While only 0.4 percent of the population,⁵ we populate every hall of power. When we set aside our privilege to enter a neighborhood and sit with a vulnerable neighbor, we reflect Jesus. He set aside all his privilege and left the corner office of heaven to wrap himself in human flesh so he could sit with us. He used his power to heal and restore vulnerable people. And when attorneys use their power to create clarity from

confusion and freedom from fear, we restore neighbors as Jesus did.

What I love most is the transformation that happens in us when we take our eyes off ourselves, look up, and trust God. He will take unjust circumstances and use them for our good and his glory. My friend Allison exemplifies this well.

Allison is an attorney who moved to Arizona. She struggled as a single mom and wrestled with the pending high school graduation of her daughter. Could God use her? When she picked up a copy of my book *Gospel Justice*, God shifted her perspective. As she wrote,

Thank you for being the Lord's vessel to bring me into this amazing opportunity to provide help and hope to the most vulnerable among us. I literally have spent every free moment immersed in all I can learn about gospel justice and the work of Administer Justice and its partners. My head and heart are spinning with all of this. . . . It feels so perfect for me, but I still can't believe it's happening. I'm not kidding when I said I didn't even know if there was another Christian attorney in America other than me. The timing of all this coming into my life is crazy perfect and freaky cool. Just trying to process it all.

It's such a blessing to me . . . after all I've been through as a single mom. My go-to Bible Scriptures for the past ten years have been Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28. In my wildest dreams, I wouldn't think that a month before my daughter was turning eighteen, me wrapping up a long, hard road of single motherhood, wondering what

was next for me, that the Lord would open up the door to my next chapter of life, where I would seamlessly walk from being the victim to the advocate, immediately giving purpose to my suffering before I even took a breath of the emptiness of empty nest life—it's just a mind-blowing experience of the hand of God in my life.

Allison reminds us that looking up is a recognition of God's sovereignty. Her Genesis reference is to Joseph's comments to his brothers that they meant to harm him, but God intended it for good. Pain can be gain. Her reminder to us from Romans is that God works all things together for the good of those who love him. All things. Even painful ones.

Allison also reminds us that trials are no respecter of persons. She was a lawyer, but the pain of suffering enveloped her. Yet in her pain she found purpose. "I would seamlessly walk from being the victim to the advocate." God will do the same for you if you look up.

As we move to the importance of purpose in persevering power, take some time to reflect on perspective.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8 ESV)

PRAYER

Father, help me have the right perspective. I confess I want to control my circumstances and not let go and trust you. I too often look down and only see my pain and limitations. I become the center of everything and make myself big and you small. Help me look up and see your vast creation and know that you created me and love me. You are bigger than my pain. You are my gain. Help me empty myself of me and fill myself with you. In Jesus' name, Amen.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Take time each day to walk. Go outside and look up. Then look down. Remind yourself of the infinite goodness of God as you look up. He is bigger than your problems. He loves you and can turn your pain to gain. Remind yourself of the finite view you have as you look down. If you want to avoid a lot of life's poop, have the right perspective—look up.

Questions to ponder or discuss:

1. Do you believe God is in control of your circumstances? What does that mean for you?
2. What story or idea captured your attention most? Why?
3. It is common to speak of the impact of Jesus' death and resurrection, but what is the impact of his life on you?
4. Can you identify with Allison? Have you faced a crossroads where God suddenly showed up in a significant way?
5. How can you apply a healthier perspective in your life this week?

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