

Perspective on Tough Times: “A Grace Disguised”

Jerry Sittser wrote “*A Grace Disguised*” when he went through a crushing tragedy, losing three generations of women in his family in one accident. In “*A Grace Disguised*,” Jerry Sittser transparently shares wise life-lessons and perspectives he learned...and is learning. Rather than give fixed answers, he deals more with values and perspectives. This is superb for those who have gone through crushing tragedy in their past. God is watching how we handle failure (Philippians 1:29).

And also *A Grace Disguised* lays out an approach for individuals and groups to process any change. This especially includes the difficult transition period between the loss of the familiar and the fuller experience of the “new norm.”

Here are a few of my summary thoughts, mostly adapted from his book. I hope this whets your appetite to read his book personally to prepare you in advance for tough life circumstances. I highly recommend reading “*A Grace Disguised*” yourself.

1. Ground ourselves **now** in healthy, relational Christianity. Then we will be prepared to navigate significant loss. Begin where God does, with His unchanging Eden-intent in Genesis 1 and 2.
2. We live in a post-Genesis 3 world. The seeming randomness of loss makes the universe seem like a cold, unfriendly, capricious place with no predictability. Don’t naïvely expect a perfectly fair world. Life is now a constant succession of losses and gains, but also tremendous gains because a God who “*causes all things to work together for our good*” brings the warmth of His love.
3. Living means change. Change requires letting go of one thing in order to gain something else. Few of us want to be stuck where we are today with the wonderful possibilities available before us. So, change is actually a golden treasure with unimagined value since God’s great love can reframe evil events into good gifts for His people. Our story is part of a greater story authored by God Himself, like Joseph. Treasure hunt by welcoming what the Father is doing, even if unseen.
4. Change depends on our choices. Those persons with a self-focused victim or martyr attitude have little power to change.
5. “*Response involves the choices we make, the grace we receive, and ultimately the transformation we experience in the loss [so] we will actually become healthier people*” (*A Grace Disguised*).
6. Therefore, the “**Why?**” question brings little comfort. As we ask the “**Who?**” question, we treasure hunt and come to know God in a fuller way. We discover afresh that our good God Himself is the answer to our pressing questions, like in Job 42:5.
7. Loss is like the fading light at sunset. We can frantically chase the loss by running west in our futile attempt to outrun the darkness. Or we can accept and embrace the loss of daylight, turn east and plunge into the darkness. Our rising expectations focus on the new dawn of tomorrow (*transition into new beginnings*). Take ownership. We have the power to face the dawn and to be transformed by this experience.
8. The process of dealing with loss has three essential aspects. *First*, acknowledge that the past will never be the same again. Feel the pain, specifically name what has been lost, and grieve it. *Second*, identify possible gains that could be part of the “new norm.” I call this “*treasure hunting*.” The *last* one bridges both of these. *Transition* is that suspended

- time between the familiar past and the expected future. This period is the most difficult and challenging part of the process. *Transition* is the time when everything may be reevaluated. What has become outdated, and static is discarded for abundant life
9. *“Loss turns life into a snapshot. The movement stops; everything freezes”* (A Grace Disguised). This may lead to a simpler life, less cluttered with nonessentials. This time-warp exposes how much of our identity is improperly tied to what we lost. Churches are full of people subtly trying to earn their *identity* or prove their worth. During *transition*, invest in the “sacrament of the present moment” (since God is here, Psalm 139:7-12). Take inventory of our life. *“Failure to take stock almost ensures that we will repeat patterns that became chiseled into our lives before we suffered the loss”* (A Grace Disguised). When we explore our own personal loss, a new world of meaning opens up, which sows the seed of future possibilities, the “new norm” (Philippians 3:13b-14).
 10. Each person is a one-of-a-kind-treasure, so every loss is unique. Avoid both deserts: *“my loss is the worst ever”* and *“my loss is inconsequential compared to yours”* (1 Corinthians 10:13). Loss and suffering have a large continuum, from a colleague mocking me with “God man” to imprisonments and beatings.
 11. Loss is a solitary experience we must face alone. Yet it doesn’t have to isolate us or make us feel lonely. Loss is a universal experience that can lead us into deeper *koinonia*.
 12. The experience of loss itself does not have to be the defining moment of our lives. We can choose to partner with God to use this as a springboard for our transformation. We can choose to define our lives by the good that God will bring out of bad (Romans 8:28), rather than label ourselves with the pain and loss.
 13. The legitimate emotions in the midst of loss and pain, like anger and anguish, despair and depression, expand our capacity to feel more deeply. Once enlarged, we are now also capable of experiencing greater love and joy, peace and patience, kindness and gentleness. Our capacity now increases to know God more intimately, to love others more deeply and to live life well. It makes sense that *joy* and felt “loss” in trials are normally together in the same passage in the NT. Trials bring transition. Transition is that place where we are most open to change. The God’s-eye view is that the joy of movement and renewal are intended to come out of tough times.
 14. *“Our feelings do not determine what is real, though the feelings themselves are real. We cannot ignore these feelings, but neither should we indulge them. Instead, we should acknowledge them without treating them as if they were ultimate truth. [God] is the center of reality”* (A Grace Disguised).
 15. Loss deprives us of our illusion of control. This is a good thing! If our expectations remain tied to what we lost, then we will be disappointed and imprisoned in our past. Our creative God has something different, yet exquisitely good, possibly leading to a profound spiritual awakening. So, hunt for treasure in the loss.
 16. Recovery is a misleading and empty expectation. We recover from broken limbs, not amputations. There is no going back to the past. We can, though, reach forward toward the “*new norm*.”
 17. When a “tornado” storms into your life, how will you respond? *“Lord, help me to actively lean into Your loving presence while also honestly facing the devastation of the turmoil swirling around me.”*
 18. This response avoids the pitfalls of:

- Denial (“It’s not really so bad.”)
- Victim [martyr] mindset (“I always get [or take] the short end of the straw.”)
- Discouragement or depression fosters ongoing loss (“What’s the use of even trying.”)
- Passivity leading to disengagement (“Well, there’s nothing I can do anyway.”)

Yet a Christian may candidly look the most difficult and horrific trial directly in the eye and be brutally honest with God. Our tender Father longs for honesty. Greet Reality squarely in God’s presence, not pretending or excusing, but leaning in even closer to His heart.

Although God can bring good out of a horrific experience, the experience itself never becomes good. This is no make-believe fairy tale. Like in the darkness of the metamorphosis process as a worm becomes a beautiful butterfly, God uses tough times. However, He employs them in a way to promote our good as we cooperate with Him and persevere to bring about His great purposes. In the dark, lonely cocoon, something beautiful happens.

“In a way that defies analysis, God is able to bring good out of evil. He awaits only **my confidence** in him to turn suffering into a knife to carve away moral cancer. As drought in summer makes tree roots dig deeper into the soil or as exhausting training increases the power and speed of an athlete, so suffering makes saints. **In** suffering then, I give thanks. I give thanks not **for** the suffering but **in** it. I thank him that his grace is sufficient. I thank him that he is able to deliver me and that in his own time he will. I thank him that he can turn the suffering to serve his own purposes in my life (**emphasis added**, John White in “The Cost of Commitment”).”

Our past by no means determines our future. Yet as we mine the painful memories from our painful past, this can be a potent source for discovering the good plans God has for us. I’m beginning to see trials as God’s means to point out hidden and harmful strongholds. Now I’m in the place where I can fill the empty places in my life from not processing distressing memories with God’s light and life and love.