

Dear Friends

In his book, 'God's Purpose for Your Life', Dr Charles F Stanley reflects on the Bible verse: *He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others.* — 2 Corinthians 1:4 NLT. He suggests that to be able to get through difficult situations in a positive way it will help if we try to see our circumstances through the eyes of God. He alludes to Paul's teaching that God is at work for our good in all situations (Romans 8:28). He writes:

'If sorrow touches your life, the Lord knows all about it and catches your tears. Yet He is strong enough to take your pain and loneliness and produce something worthwhile out of them. He will use the adversity you've experienced to help you reach out to others who have been hurt and are struggling. He will take your pain and tragedy and use both to mould you into a wise and caring minister of His comfort.'

One modern Bible version of Ps. 56:8 speaks of God catching our tears and putting them in a bottle. Another speaks of God keeping a tally of our tears in a ledger. For 10 months we have told each other that we are living through strange times and we have experienced the pain of being unable to freely meet family and friends. Now our brothers and sisters in Woking find that a new South African variant of the Covid 19 virus is literally too close for comfort and the news media have made the grim announcement that a second mutation of the Kent variant has been identified. We are left to speculate not only 'how long will the present situation last?' but also 'what will the new normal be like?' Perhaps like me you find these questions unsettling and, on one level at least, unhelpful because there seems so little that we can do to determine the outcome, other than follow the usual advice even more carefully.

I wonder how we can reframe our thinking and change the questions that form our internal dialogue in order to nurture our own wellbeing and contribute to the needs of those round us. One of the most difficult aspects of the last 10 months is perhaps the sense of helplessness, the feeling of not having a sense of agency or control. I suspect that this feeling is shared by many people in positions of authority also. However, if we can adjust our thinking and our core beliefs then we can change the way we experience even those circumstances which are beyond our power to change.

The knowledge that God counts our every tear helps us to realise that we are not alone. Christ has promised never to leave us or forsake us. Further, the awareness that God is using our difficult circumstances to mould our character and make us into people who are better equipped to help and understand others who are finding life tough, can inspire us to carry on. The long duration of the special measures that are in place is certainly teaching us patience. The sense of isolation arising from social distancing or shielding opens up a deeper understanding of how much a phone call can mean to a lonely person. The inner struggles with sadness or anxiety that are so prevalent at this time may help us to want to reach out to someone who is struggling to cope.

We must be grateful too that the Church has been catapulted by circumstances into harnessing new forms of communication at least five years before we were likely to have adopted video conferencing and online worship. In future we will be so much better able to continue to serve those who are too frail to attend services in church.

At a time when we cannot make too many big plans, then perhaps we will benefit from making small plans. To know that we are going to try to achieve a number of small goals that lay within our grasp will make it feel like each day is worth living. Even when we cannot visit a hairdresser it makes a difference to try to look after ourselves. A little self-pampering goes a long way during lockdown! Hilary sometimes reminds me that the other participants in a Zoom meeting cannot smell the aftershave that I put on prior to the meeting. She is right of course, but I can smell it and it makes me feel better!

Dr Charles F Stanley comments, God 'can and will turn your situation around in ways you cannot imagine'. I do hope and pray that he is right. I think the key is found in that verse from 2 Corinthians: '*He (God) comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others*'. We receive God's blessings in order to bless others. Seeing so many people who are volunteering to help the NHS with vaccinations, testing and tracing inspires hope that the hedonism that has been so widespread in society may be challenged by the growing desire to help others and support the public good.

May God bless you,

Keith C. Beckingham
Superintendent Minister