

# The Bible Club

**“Be content with what you have, because  
God has said, ‘Never will I leave you;  
never will I forsake you.’”**  
*Hebrews 13:5*

March 2014

Dear Friend in Christ,

The season of preparing for Easter is here. I love how Lent begins in the dark cold of winter and gives way to the bright colors of spring. Frankly, as I get older I am less comfortable with ice and snow, but more comfortable with waiting. I'm also more accepting of discomfort, since I've learned (the hard way) that my faith tends to grow deeper in difficult times than in good ones. Since Lent is a time for stirring up our hearts, I thought perhaps this would be a good month to talk about how difficulty can draw us toward deeper trust in God.

## **The Problem With Being Comfortable**

I like my creature comforts: the soft, hand-knit blanket, hot tea in a mug, a vase of cut flowers. I'm thankful for the comfort of long-time church friends and the familiarity of my town and neighbors. But even as I thank God for giving me these good things, I am able to fall into the trap of focusing on what this world can provide, forgetting that our true home is not here: “We have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven” (2 Corinthians 5:1).

Earthly ease can be a first step down the slippery slope to

complacency. We cannot be faithful if we become “complacent in Zion” (Amos 6:1), dependent upon comforts and assuming we are entitled to good things. Complacency involves a kind of smugness...and that’s not in keeping with being a servant of God.

There is another reason we must be wary of yearning too keenly for a comfortable life: Comfort makes it harder for us to see what God has put in our path to do. In theory, when we have material comfort we have more time and energy to focus on the needs of others. But in fact, most people use their free time and available income on themselves. A much-touted study by the Chronicle of Philanthropy found that people with lower incomes contribute substantially more to charity than the rich. The reason for this is that the poor understand what it’s like to be in need, and this brings their empathy closer to the surface.

When the same study analyzed charitable giving by ZIP code, another interesting fact turned up: Wealthy people who live in neighborhoods where there is a wide range of income levels also contribute higher-than-average amounts. They see the needs of the less fortunate around them every day and respond accordingly. I have a good friend like this who lives in New York City because, she says, “If I didn’t have to step over the homeless, I’d forget they exist. I need to see the poor so I see that I need to do something for them.”

The long and the short of it is that we like feeling comfortable, but we’re more likely to feed the poor, tend to the sick, help the homeless and visit those in prison when we struggle ourselves.

### **Making Progress in Turning Discontent Around**

Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you” (Matthew 26:11) — and he might as well have added that we’ll have discontentment, too. There will always be something we can complain about.

Unlike Paul, who was content with what he had, most of us are content only when things are going well. We flail against “weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, and in difficulties” (2 Corinthians 12:10) — the very things Paul says make him strong in faith. It’s worth wondering how we have it so backwards and what we can do about it.

It’s helpful to know that even Paul didn’t always immediately see

rough situations as transforming. “Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death,” he wrote. “But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead” (2 Corinthians 1:9). It takes practice — and prayer — to develop a mindset of peaceful acceptance. We start by asking God to help us accept each difficulty and beg Him to use our suffering to transform the lives of people around us. And then we take the next step by asking Him again and again and again.

### **Fight, Flight or Acceptance?**

I once heard a sermon in which the preacher said, “The only real tragedy is sin.” I don’t agree with him entirely — horrific tragedies occur regularly — but I understand his point. Pain and suffering sometimes matter far more to us than iniquity, because our focus is so firmly fixed on this life.

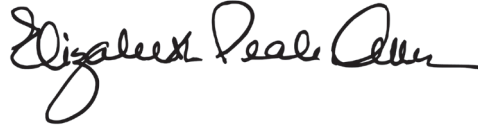
When we are in the midst of extreme challenges, echoing Job’s moan that “the churning inside me never stops; days of suffering confront me” (Job 30:27), it is hard to find solace in the fact that eventually “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Agony darkens our vision of what lies ahead. There is no shame in this; of the seven things Jesus said on the cross, two were focused entirely on his suffering. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46) is a cry of abandonment. “I am thirsty” (John 19:28) is a cry of distress. If we are trying to live like Christ, we can expect to have feelings like these, too, at times.

Yet Jesus teaches us, by example, the context in which we must place these difficult feelings. We are neither to resent suffering nor bluff our way through it with stoicism. What He wants is humble acceptance. We may plead (as He did) for a reprieve, but we must always end up at the words, “Yet not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). In doing this we imitate Christ and commend ourselves to God entirely. Jesus’ last words, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46) indicate a complete letting-go. That, indeed, is surrender.

Lent is a good time to ponder the role that feeling comfortable has in our lives and in our faith. The cross of Good Friday lies ahead, terrible and fierce in its brutality. It should make us uncomfortable. If it doesn’t, we need to ask ourselves why. And then we need to do something to draw

closer to it, so that we see more clearly how we can imitate Christ when our own crosses arise.

Faithfully yours,



Elizabeth Peale Allen

P. S. Here are some verses to add to your *Personal Bible Treasury* this month:  
Hebrews 13:5, 2 Corinthians 5:1, Amos 6:1, Matthew 26:11, 2 Corinthians 12:10, 2 Corinthians 1:9, Job 30:27, Revelation 21:4, Matthew 27:46, John 19:28, Luke 22:42, Luke 23:46.

### Outreach Update

*The Lord has worked wonders through "A Prayer for Every Need" and Guideposts. I volunteer in nursing homes and hospitals and always bring the magazines for the residents / patients. The stories are very uplifting for people who have no visitors. I brought 20 copies of the pamphlet on a cruise with me and they are now using them with Bible and Prayer services. These small books make a big impact on lives. - Juanita*

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