

REVISED & EXPANDED

CHARLES F. STANLEY BIBLE STUDY SERIES



ADVANCING THROUGH ADVERSITY

REDISCOVER GOD'S FAITHFULNESS
THROUGH DIFFICULT TIMES



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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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INTRODUCTION

ADOPTING A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ADVERSITY

Bookstores are lined with self-help books. This book, however, is better labeled a “Bible-help” book. When adversity strikes in your life, you will eventually reach the end of your ability to help yourself. Your end point is often God’s beginning point. The help that God offers you in His Word—the Bible—is eternal, but it is also timely.

My hope is that, as you engage in this study, you will find yourself referring to your Bible again and again. The Bible is God’s foremost communication tool. It is the wellspring of eternal wisdom. It is the reference to which you must return continually to compare what *is* happening in your life with what *should* be happening in you and what *can* happen to you.

So, as you engage in this study, I encourage you to mark specific words, underline phrases, and make notes in the margin of your Bible as you find passages that resonate with you. Although space has been provided in this book for you to record your answers to each of the questions, it may also be beneficial for you to record the insights God gives you in your Bible, which you will be reading regularly long after you have completed this study.

You can use this book alone or with several other people in a small-group study. At various times, you will be asked to relate to the material in one of the following four ways.

First, what new insights have you gained? Make notes about these insights as God reveals them to you, recording them in your Bible or in a separate journal. As you reflect on these new understandings, you are more likely to see how God has moved in your life.

Second, how do you relate to the material? You approach the Bible from your own unique background . . . your own particular set of understandings about the world that you bring with you when you open God's Word. For this reason, it is important to consider how your experiences are shaping your understanding and allow yourself to be open to the truth that God reveals—even if it isn't necessary what you expect. As you do this, you allow God's Word to be a lamp to your feet and a light to your path (see Psalm 119:105).

Third, how do you feel about the material presented? While you should not depend solely on your emotions as a gauge for your faith, it is important for you to be aware of your feelings as you study a passage of Scripture and have the freedom to express your emotions to God. Sometimes, the Holy Spirit will use your emotions to compel you to look at your life in a different or challenging way.

Fourth, in what way do you feel challenged to respond? God's Word may inspire you or challenge you to take a particular action. Take this challenge seriously and find ways to move into it. If God reveals a particular need He wants *you* to address, take that as His "marching orders." God will empower you to *do* something with the challenge He has just given you.

Start and conclude your Bible study sessions in prayer. Ask God to give you spiritual eyes to see and spiritual ears to hear. As you conclude your study, ask the Lord to seal what you have learned so that you will never forget it. Ask Him to help you grow into the fullness of the nature and character of Christ Jesus. Again, I caution you to keep the Bible at the center of your study. A genuine Bible study stays focused on God's Word and will promote a growing faith and a closer walk with the Holy Spirit.

LESSON 1



GOD HAS A PURPOSE FOR EVERYTHING

IN THIS LESSON

Learning: Why does adversity come into my life?

Growing: What am I supposed to get out of it?

Adversity has a positive side. I realize this isn't a statement you are likely to hear very often. Your response may be, "Oh, really? You don't know what I'm going through!" But seeing the positive side of adversity is not wishful thinking, denial of reality, or pie-in-the-sky optimism. Rather, it is a statement of faith. The positive side of adversity is rooted in two strong beliefs.

First, *God has a plan and a purpose for the life of every person—including you.* If you want God's plan and purpose to be accomplished in your life, the Lord will go to whatever lengths are necessary to accomplish

it. He will not go against your will, but if *your* will is to do *His* will, then He will move heaven and earth to see His will is done in your life. This means God can use adversity to accomplish His plan, further your purposes on the earth, or work His purposes within your life.

Second, *God can turn things to the good for you regardless of the situation you are facing today.* You may think that your life has derailed and crashed beyond any repair. But Scripture says, “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

The Lord has a way of arranging things so good comes from bad. That’s His very nature as Redeemer—to take what enslaves us and to use it to free us. When the Lord redeems a situation, He also sends a message to other people who observe what God is doing in our lives. That message may bring about many different reactions—from conviction to repentance to praise. What God does for good in our lives is never limited to us. It is always for others as well.

1. “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). What does it mean that you are God’s “workmanship”? What does this say about the plans He has for you?

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2. How do you tend to perceive adversity? When have you seen something good come out of a time of adversity in your life?

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ADVERSITY HAPPENS IN EVERY LIFE

Trials are a fact of life in this fallen world—for both the non-believer *and* the believer in Christ. Jesus said that God the Father “makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45). He also told those who wanted to follow Him exactly what they could expect from such a life: “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mark 8:34).

This was Jesus’ way of warning the people—and us—that if we lead a godly life, walk in His ways, and follow His will, there will be times we are going to have to deny everything that is within us—our desires, wants, goals, and plans—in order to do what He wants us to do. There will be times when we will have to face adversity for our beliefs. He wanted each of us to know that following after Him was not an easy path to take.

Jesus even said, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26). Now, what did Jesus mean by this statement? He certainly did not mean that we are to be angry, resentful, hostile, and literally hate our families. Rather, Jesus meant that for us to be obedient to God, there will be times when those we love the most will not understand when we say, “I know this is the will of God for my life—and I must walk in it.”

I’ve known students who have come to me and said, “The Lord has called me to preach. I’ve told my parents, and they are very upset with me. They don’t want me to preach. They are spending all this money on getting me an education to be an engineer, administrator, or whatever, and now I’m saying to them, ‘God wants me to preach the gospel.’ What shall I do?” My answer is always the same: “You must be willing to be obedient to God, even if you are misunderstood, and trust God to take care of you no matter what comes your way.”

Jesus went even further in His warnings about the adversity His followers will face in the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are you when they *revile* and *persecute* you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11–12). Many people believe that when you become a Christian, things just sort of clear up. But Jesus’ words reveal that some things clear up while some things cloud up. What matters the most is how we choose to respond to the adversity that we will inevitably face in life.

In particular, we have to ask ourselves whether we are going to make it our habit to just walk away when things don’t suit us or whether we are going to let God help us to *advance* through the adversity and benefit as a result. Jesus has promised us the best life possible. He has said to us, “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). But He never said that life would always be peaceful or full of contentment. Sometimes, He uses the adversity in our lives to point others to His redemptive work.

3. “Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ’s sufferings, that when His glory is revealed, you may also be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Peter 4:12–13). Why should you expect trials to come into your life—even if you are a follower of Christ?

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4. What does it mean to “partake of Christ’s sufferings”? Why would that be a cause for rejoicing?

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5. When is a time that you had to face adversity to pursue what you felt God was calling you to do? What helped you to persevere and follow God’s purpose for your life?

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A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON ADVERSITY

In the Gospel of John, we read how Jesus taught this lesson to His disciples by healing a blind man. “Now as Jesus passed by, He saw a man who was blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” (John 9:1-2). The disciples had been taught all their lives that illness was a sign of God’s judgment. They had no doubt that somebody had sinned to cause the condition of blindness.

Jesus replied, “Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but that the works of God should be revealed in him” (verse 3). There was purpose to the man’s adversity. The disciples saw his blindness as *being caused* by something bad. Jesus taught that the man’s blindness was *for the cause* of something good.

Note that Jesus didn’t say, “This man is blind because he sinned, but God is going to use it anyway.” That would be a much easier

statement for us to swallow. Rather, Jesus said that God had a purpose higher than anything the disciples had considered. God intended to use the miracle to bring about something positive and eternal in the man's life and in the lives of those who witnessed his healing.

That puts a new light on any type of adversity we may experience. There is good reason to be concerned about what causes adversity—which we will deal with later—but our greater concern must always be with what results from adversity. Do we allow adversity to throw us back, defeat us, or pull us down? Or do we see adversity as something that can make us stronger, better, and more whole?

Do we regard adversity as a destroyer, or do we see it as carrying the seeds that can produce something beneficial and helpful? Do we see adversity as linked to death, or do we see it as linked to growth and eventually to eternal life? Do we expect the results of adversity to be negative, or do we expect them to be part of God's miracle-working plan?

This book is concerned with how we can *advance* through adversity. Adversity can be a teacher. We can learn valuable lessons from adversity that prepare us to be the people God created us to be—especially as we work through adversity by our faith and according to God's Word. Yes, God has a plan and a purpose for our lives. And yes, God can use whatever comes against our lives for our good.

6. “My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing” (James 1:2–3). What perspective about your trials does James advise you to take in this passage?

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7. James says the “testing of your faith” produces *patience* or *perseverance* in your life. Why is this an important trait for you to possess as a believer in Christ?

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8. How have you seen your specific trials lead to greater perseverance in your faith?

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GOD HAS A PLAN AND PURPOSE

Every follower of Christ can know that God has a plan and a purpose for their lives. He is continually preparing us to live forever with Him. He has a plan and a purpose for everything that affects us. His love for us is greater than anything we can ask or imagine. He has an infinite number of ways to bring us to new levels of maturity in Christ. He knows who and what to bring into our lives at any given moment in order to accomplish His very specific goals.

But the reality is that in many cases, the only way that some of us will submit ourselves to God’s plan is by first experiencing anguish, pressure, trials, or heartaches. For this reason, the Lord will often use adversity to lead us to turn to Him, to trust Him more, to be healed in areas where we need healing, and to grow in ways that we need to grow.

God whispers in our pleasure.

God speaks in our conscience.

God shouts in our pain.

*And He really gets our attention when the pain is intense and
beyond our control.*

I have seen the reality of this saying in my life and in the lives of countless people. We simply cannot know *every* detail of God’s full plan for our lives. From time to time we may receive glimpses of what He still has in store for us, but we are finite—and God is infinite. He alone can see the full scope of our lives and how we fit into His plan for the ages.

God is omnipotent (all-powerful), omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (ever-present and eternal), and totally loving. We can trust Him to know how each experience, circumstance, and relationship fits into His plan. We may not see any purpose for some of the troubles that come our way, but God always sees purpose in everything—an *eternal* purpose.

Given this, your first response when adversity comes must be to trust God to make a way through it, to trust God to have a “perfecting good” for you as a result of the adversity, and to trust God there is an eternal purpose for it. God has a purpose for *everything*.

- 9.** “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways. . . . As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8–9). How high above the earth is the nearest star? What does this teach you about God’s plans for your life?

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- 10.** In what areas have you struggled with the idea of adversity or suffering? How do you feel about the prospect that God may have a purpose for adversity in your life?

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TODAY AND TOMORROW

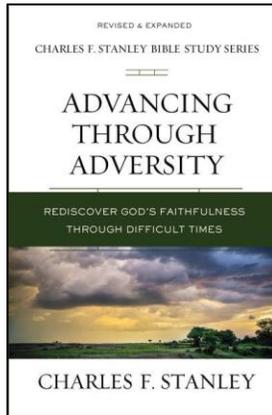
Today: God actually uses adversity to bring good things into my life.

Tomorrow: I will ask the Lord this week to change my way of looking at hardships.

CLOSING PRAYER



Father, we want to grow in You and become spiritually mature as believers in Christ. We want to learn the principles by which we are to live this life victoriously—triumphantly, excitedly, happily, joyously—and we know that as we open Your Word, this is what happens. We want to get Your viewpoint so that everything in our lives takes on the sense of delight and transforming joy. For this we thank You and praise You today, in Jesus’ name. Amen.



ADVANCING THROUGH ADVERSITY

by Charles F. Stanley

Why does God allow adversity?

God has a plan and a purpose for each of us, and He can turn things to good regardless of the situation we face. These two key principles—rooted in Scripture and evidenced in the lives of Christians throughout the ages—should color the lenses through which all followers of Christ view adversity. In *Advancing Through Adversity*, Dr. Charles Stanley provides a new perspective on the trials we face, revealing what questions to ask and what lessons can be learned from such times. Understanding God's role and bolstering our courage can help us advance through adversity rather than be overcome by it.

The **Charles F. Stanley Bible Study Series** is a unique approach to Bible study, incorporating biblical truth, personal insights, emotional responses, and a call to action. Each study draws on Dr. Stanley's many years of teaching the guiding principles found in God's Word, showing how we can apply them in practical ways to every situation we face. This edition of the series has been completely revised and updated, and includes two brand-new lessons from Dr. Stanley.

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