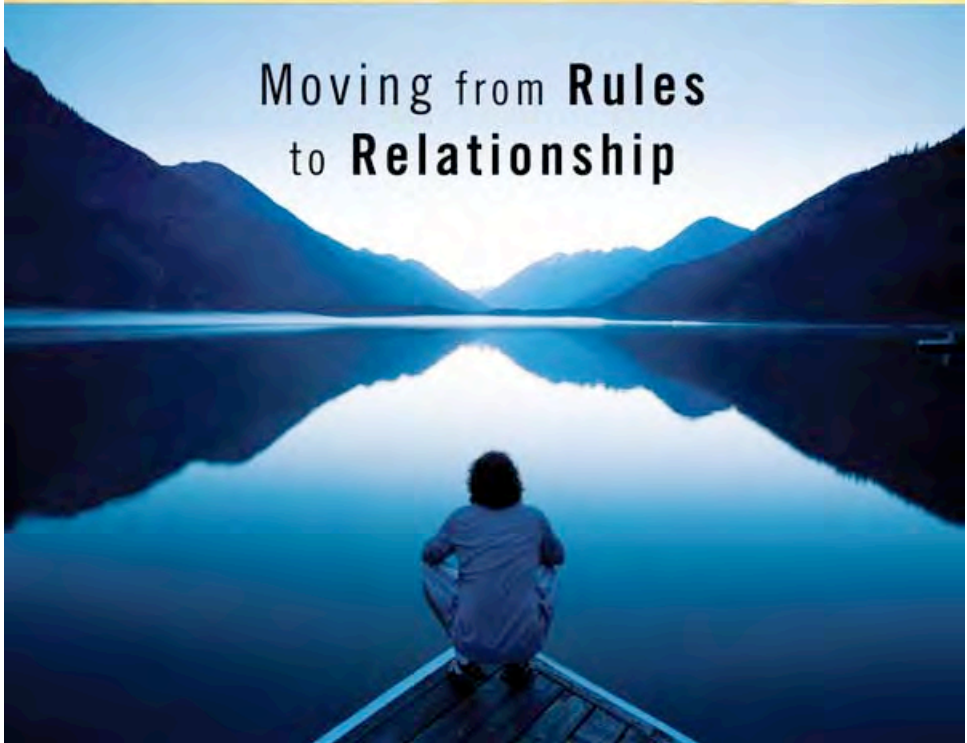


STEPHEN
ARTERBURN & JACK
FELTON
Coauthor of *Every Man's Battle*

MORE JESUS LESS RELIGION

Moving from **Rules**
to **Relationship**



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MOVING *from* RULES
to RELATIONSHIP

STEPHEN ARTERBURN
and JACK FELTON



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*This book is dedicated to Dick Ragsdale.
Rare is the person who has a mentor and encourager
full of wisdom, insight, and godly character.
Dick Ragsdale has been this for me.
Above his business acumen he is a loving husband,
a dedicated father, and an extremely proud grandfather.
Thank you, Dick, for all you are
and all you have done for me and my family.*

—S.A.

*This book is dedicated to my son, Jack, the “Iceman,”
my daughter, Christy,
and my wife, Robin, who keeps us all together.*

—J.F.

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A DIFFERENT WAY OF OPERATING

I have published thirty books in my writing career. Some have been best-sellers; others worst sellers. But of all the projects I've done, by far the most rewarding has been *Toxic Faith* (later printed in paperback under the title *Faith That Hurts, Faith That Heals*).

Just last weekend I was in Orlando among eighteen thousand women at a Women of Faith conference, a movement I was privileged to help create. But the only book of mine I heard anyone mention was *Toxic Faith*. One woman repeated something I've heard many times: "That book saved my life and my marriage, and it rescued me from a very unhealthy church where I felt trapped."

I'm so grateful that God helped me see that not everything about a church that makes us uncomfortable is "our problem." Sometimes it's the church's problem. Now, don't get me wrong. I deeply believe in church and I attend a very healthy, strong congregation about which I'll say more later. I believe God is doing a great work today in churches. But many times people never stop to think about whether their church builds them up or tears them down, whether it frees them to enjoy a loving relationship with God through Jesus or whether it's hampering and destroying that relationship.

Toxic Faith was primarily about unhealthy beliefs and what we need to do

to identify and move beyond toxic faith systems. *More Jesus, Less Religion* picks up where *Toxic Faith* left off. In the former book we spent only one chapter, the final one, talking about healthy faith; in this book we'll spend most of our time describing it.

It has become obvious to me since writing *Toxic Faith* that the way Jesus did things on this earth was so different from how many of us operate. Often we act in ways to make us feel good about ourselves or to support a tradition we've adopted or to uphold some cherished rule. But Jesus always valued relationships over rules. Whether it was healing a person on the Sabbath or sharing a meal with a known "sinner," Jesus acted in unpredictable, unexpected, and life-changing ways. And the fact is, wherever the Master traveled and ministered, two things inevitably happened: People's lives were changed and the established religious order was upset.

The most opposition Jesus encountered was not from sinners caught in horrible sins, but from the religious leaders who saw him as a threat to their power, position, and authority. Jesus tended to devalue human systems and rituals because they induced people to lose their first love. Men and women captive to such toxic systems focused on their own power, rather than on the power of God. And when they did think of God, they distorted his image. These people knew God only as a binder of lives, as a vindictive, angry Creator. It took the life and death of Jesus to reposition the image of God in the minds and hearts of desperate men and women. Through Christ they saw God's compassion, love, and grace.

Today, the toughest opposition to Christianity comes from what I would call legalists. Like the Pharisees, legalists are so caught up in tradition that they fail to see that mercy and grace are every bit as important as discipline and sacrifice.

Jesus used a verse from Hosea that I believe tears away the substructure of the legalist position. In this text our Savior lays the foundation of a healthy faith. In Hosea 6:6 the Lord declares, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Relationships, not rules, should take precedence in our lives. Love, not legalism, must reign. Many legalists in our own day, just like the Pharisees, don't think they should hang around "evil people." They think they should avoid them and thus avoid being contaminated. But the church today, just as Jesus did, must get beyond stained glass and gates and walls and get into the community and be light where it is so urgently needed.

Jesus was so authentic and real that the masses were naturally drawn to him. Unholy people flocked to him—people you would never imagine wanting to be in the presence of God. Because of who he was and how he ministered, they crowded the hillsides and jostled each other on the lakeshores just to be near him. As Luke tells us, "The tax collectors and 'sinners' were all gathering around to hear him" (15:1).

What those tax gatherers and sinners needed, we still need today. We don't need more religion; what we need, *what we must have*, is more of Jesus. As commentator Terry C. Muck has written: "Counterfeit spiritualities do not work. But their persistent growth and appeal should teach us two important lessons. First, human beings created for fellowship with God abhor a spiritual vacuum. And second, only the real thing will effectively scratch the spiritual itch."¹

We know that some who pick up this book might be offended by our assertion that we need "less religion" in our lives. In fact, when *Toxic Faith* was first released, some rejected the book on the assumption that we were "bashing the church." In reality, our book lifted up the Lord by seeking to build healthy churches and point people toward such fellowships. The only churches we bashed then (and still bash today) are those that have lost their first love, their passion for the One for whom the church exists.

It was Karl Marx who said, "Religion...is the opiate of the people." Religion, with all its rituals and trappings, can indeed be hypnotic. When all you do is jump through hoops to try to get to God, it is easy to either give up or to get weird trying to earn God's favor.

But if religion is a drug of the people, then a relationship with an all-loving God can keep each person truly full of life. Only when a relationship with God transcends all religious trappings does true fulfillment come. Religion and striving will not fulfill the empty places in our hearts. They will only dull the emptiness like a drug. It is only in a pure relationship with God that forgiveness can be experienced—and it is then no longer necessary to continue to run from pain. Jesus loves us wholly and forgives us completely. No drug can offer that!

I'm grateful that Jack Felton has once again joined me to help in writing this book, as he did almost a decade ago with *Toxic Faith*. Whenever the stories or anecdotes we use in *More Jesus, Less Religion* come from his experience, his name will appear in brackets, as in "I [Jack] have a son..." Otherwise, the experiences relayed are my own.

While toxic faith of whatever stripe will always appeal to tradition and established religion, healthy faith will always appeal to those who want to know the true and living God. To that end Jack and I write this book, focused more on Jesus and less on religion. Our ultimate goal is that, by reading this, you will grow in your relationship with Jesus and you will come to know that his love really is unconditional, that his yoke really is easy, and that his burden really is light.

And then you will have discovered the essence of healthy faith.

—Stephen Arterburn

THE WAY THINGS ARE

A Healthy Faith Is Based in Reality

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.

1 Timothy 4:7

David wrote, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Psalm 23:4).

That's the expression and expectation of a healthy faith. Not only that God's presence will go with us, but that there are some dark, deadly, shadowed places on this old planet of ours. The valley of the shadow of death exists in this world. I have seen it. So have you. It exists because we live in a fallen world. A healthy faith gets us through that dark valley. Unhealthy faith makes us pretend the valley doesn't even exist!

The same David also penned these words:

For troubles without number surround me;
my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see.
They are more than the hairs of my head,
and my heart fails within me. (Psalm 40:12)

That, too, is an expression of a healthy faith. David told God (who already knew) the precise condition of his heart. And it wasn't pretty. Earlier

in that same psalm, he described this incident from his own life story: “I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God” (verses 1-3).

Slimy pits exist in our world just as dark valleys exist. And just as surely as believers must pass through dark valleys, so they occasionally fall into “the mud and mire,” needing rescue, cleansing, and comfort.

It’s true. It’s real. It’s the way things are—and David never shrinks from telling it all. Healthy faith helps us embrace who we are, what we are, and where we are. David declares a failing, fallible humanity and a loving, powerful God, who chooses to involve himself in the lives of individual men and women. A healthy faith acknowledges that we are neither infallible nor omniscient nor omnipotent nor omnipresent. (I have met some capable people in my life, but to this day I’ve never met anyone who could be in two places at the same time!) It’s only by dependence on a loving God (who is all those things) that we can get through the shadowed valleys and out of the slimy pits.

Reality says we are the creatures, not the Creator.

We are vulnerable, not invulnerable.

We are flesh and blood, not steel and stone.

We are men and women, not cherubim and seraphim.

We are his sons and daughters; we are not *him*.

We have to embrace the fact that we are a people who must live by grace through faith every day of our lives. I’m impressed that the writer to the Hebrews urged his flock to “encourage one another daily...so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness” (Hebrews 3:13). In other words, we need grace, encouragement, wisdom, and mutual accountability *every day of our lives* to keep from being hardened or deceived by sin.

That’s the way it is. That’s the black and white of it. That is reality. And we must either deny our vulnerability or *deal with it*.

REALITY CAN HURT

Discomfort is reality. Pain is reality. Conflict is reality. Spiritual warfare is reality. Healthy faith helps us embrace all of these biblical realities, *constantly availing ourselves of the reality of Christ's help and presence*. Unhealthy, toxic faith denies the dark side, thus creating an even greater conflict.

A healthy faith accepts who we are and where we are rather than trying to conjure some artificial image for people who are not comfortable accepting us as we are. If we're based in reality, then the reality is that we've *all* failed, we're *all* sinners, and we're *all* stumbling along the way. We thrash about in slimy pits now and then; we feel fear as we walk narrow trails in dark valleys.

In other words, we are 100 percent, certifiably fallible—that is, human. David reminded his readers that God never forgets that fact (even though we may). He wrote: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13-14).

Some branches of evangelical Christianity teach that believers can achieve a level of “sanctification” where they no longer sin. That is not only unbiblical, it is just plain unrealistic. Reality means seeing, understanding, and accepting the truth about who I am. And how could the old apostle have said it any plainer?

If we say that we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves, and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he can be depended on to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.... If we claim we have not sinned, we are lying and calling God a liar, for he says we have sinned.

(1 John 1:8-10, TLB)

Do you see what John was saying about living in reality? If we choose the path of deception and deny the obvious truth, in so doing we call God a liar!

If, on the other hand, we walk in reality, that is, “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (verse 7). That’s where I want to be. Walking in the light. Admitting who I am. Enjoying the companionship of Christian friends and the Lord Jesus himself, experiencing daily cleansing from sin.

Sometimes a believer, while not outwardly denying his own sin, gets so caught up in focusing on the faults and shortcomings of others that he becomes oblivious to his own problems and blind spots. A wife, for instance, may absorb herself in the task of “helping hubby grow and change.” Under such pressure, however, that husband may decide he will *never* change or yield ground. But if that wife would begin to face the truth of her own weaknesses, discovering strength and help in the living Christ to gain spiritual ground, she might find she has freed her husband to grow and change in the same way.

THE WAY IT REALLY IS

Growing Christians strive to see the world and their lives as they really are, not through some stained-glass filter, not through the grid of some externally imposed myth or make-believe worldview. They do not feel compelled to “explain away” hardships or events that mystify them, but are willing to live with some ambiguity, trusting God to rule the world in righteousness—even if that means difficulty for them. As with Job, we must sometimes come to that place of humility before God where we say, “Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4, NASB).

Healthy faith refuses to sweep suffering, daily struggles with the sinful nature, and inevitable relationship difficulties under a rug, pretending they don’t exist. Instead, it brings those issues into the light of Scripture, the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit, and under the mutual counsel and care of trusted

brothers and sisters in Christ. Unhealthy faith, on the other hand, denies reality. For those who subscribe to such false belief systems, faith is not based on a belief in the supernatural power of God, but on a desire to see magical solutions that stop pain. They hope in a servant God determined to make life easy.

Healthy faith acknowledges the supernatural power of God and does not need miraculous intervention to prove that God is real. The healthy believer does not look for God to magically change the circumstances, but looks to him in the midst of trials.

Because faith grows strong, there is no need to deny reality. Believing God is faithful to help them through their trials and tribulations, healthy believers have no need to run from reality. They see the problems before them, do what they can to resolve them, and trust God to do the rest. It's dangerous to live any other way. Just ask Rebecca.

REBECCA'S STORY

Rebecca Grant had lived a hard life in the hot desert town of Barstow, California. Her father died when she was very young, and her mother struggled to keep her and her sister in clothes. They rented a small house and her mom worked two jobs. During the day, her mother sold tickets at the Greyhound Bus depot; at night she sold tickets at the theater. On her days off she cleaned the house and did chores. It wasn't a wonderful existence, but her persevering spirit kept the family going.

Rebecca loved her mother and knew how hard she worked to provide the family with the basics of food and clothing. Some of her friends made fun of her because she didn't have a dad and because her mother had to work so much. Their comments bothered Rebecca, but they made her respect her mother even more.

At fourteen, Rebecca began to work. All the money she earned went

into a bowl along with her mother's money. They took out only what they needed for the essentials. Rebecca's mother put the rest in a passbook account for the days when Rebecca and her sister would need assistance with college fees.

Rebecca's mother was a woman of faith, a Christian who believed God had a plan for her life. If she was faithful, she believed she would see that plan and God would bless her faithfulness. She didn't waver from her beliefs. In the toughest of times she didn't doubt God's love for her. She trusted him to take care of her and her two daughters. She would do all she could to provide for her family and would leave the rest up to God. She never worked on Sunday and always took the girls to church, where they prayed and sang together.

Rebecca was close to her mother, but not to her mother's God. She enjoyed going to church because of the people there. It was something out of the ordinary routine of the week. She liked it, but she didn't become a Christian. In fact, she doubted there was a God; if he did exist, she felt distant from him. He had never spoken to her or shown himself to her, and he certainly hadn't made life easy for her. She wanted to believe, but she rejected what she heard in church.

What Rebecca heard in her mother's church was a gospel that many preachers dispense, a distortion of truth that is sometimes manipulative. She heard that if a person becomes a Christian, life will become easy. God will take care of everything. Miracles will occur and there will be no more problems. She was told that true believers in Christ are protected from the evil of the world. Faith in Christ was presented as an insurance policy against pain in the present. Rebecca couldn't help but wonder, *If God is so loving, why does he allow my life to be so hard? Why does he force my mother to struggle so much? If there really were a God, he would help us.*

The expectation that faith in God would yield a problem-free life caused Rebecca to abandon her search for truth and latch onto anything that

would bring relief. First, she turned to alcohol. Then drugs. Finally, she became so promiscuous that she contracted incurable genital herpes. Her maladies only proved to her that God either did not exist or was not interested in her. Her toxic faith caused her behavior to become increasingly self-destructive.

THE MYTH OF PROBLEM-FREE LIVING

Rebecca's experience is not uncommon. The expectation of an easy life from God has produced more agnostics and atheists than has any other false belief. When people live faithfully but suffer pain and discomfort anyway, many turn from Christianity. They never grasp that a healthy faith does not shield a believer from pain, but rather gives a new perspective on life and a renewed trust in God that lessens the pains of existence. Each time a negative event occurs, God can use it to bring greater faith and deeper peace.

But what many people hear is entirely different. They hear that acceptance of Christ or belief in God causes all problems to vanish; they learn that present problems go away once a person has turned his or her life over to God.

But it just isn't so. That isn't reality.

Those who cling to this unbiblical myth insist: A strong faith will protect me from problems and pain.

How so?

Did it protect James, the brother of John, whom Herod put to death with the sword? Did it protect Jim Elliott from being murdered by Auca Indians in Ecuador? Did it keep Navigators founder Dawson Trotman from drowning in a lake as he attempted to rescue another swimmer? Did it protect Cassie Bernall when she said, "Yes, I believe" to the murderers at Columbine High School?

For many, a belief in God and the practice of faith are just fine until tragedy strikes. Then comes the realization that the practice of faith does not accumulate brownie points of protection. It does not guarantee God's intervention. Bad things do happen to good people, and it has nothing to do with degrees of faith. We live in a world where big animals eat little animals. Decay, rot, and death are realities. Faith provides perspective, perseverance, and purpose through the tough times, but it will not invariably protect anyone from the hard realities of life.

Those who have walked with Christ through the centuries have always been beset by pain, poverty, tragedy, illness, beatings, and other hardships. But the problems helped build their faith, not destroy it. The trials drew believers closer to God because their faith was real *before* the difficulties started.

Those who believe because they want infallible protection have picked the wrong faith; in believing, we often invite problems that we would not have otherwise. So Paul writes, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Philippians 1:29).

This is one of the problems with faith healing on television. Now, don't get me wrong; I believe God can and does miraculously heal people. But true miracles, by definition, happen rarely. If a healing occurred every time a preacher stood in front of an audience or a television camera, it would not be a miracle, but the norm. Supernatural healing is not the norm. It happens, but usually when the cameras are off.

The problem with claiming "common healing miracles" is that it produces false hope in some and shame in others. Some think that if they can just be good enough, God will heal them. That is not reality. You can't be good enough, because we all mess up every day. If God heals you, it is by his grace, not your goodness. Others think that if they are not healed, then

God is angry with them or their guilt is greater than that of others. This is not reality either. I know personally of instances in which God healed someone in the midst of his or her sin. Their sins were the worst of the worst, but God's grace touched these people, they were healed, and he drew them to Jesus.

The theology of many faith healers has caused serious problems in the Christian church. A great friend of mine is the wife of a man who pastors a charismatic church. They believe in speaking in tongues and in a God who is powerful enough to heal anyone, anywhere, any time. But this dear friend and her husband are rooted and grounded in reality. They believe it is far more important that a heart be healed than an ingrown toenail. They believe God is more concerned about the secrets of the soul than the length of a leg. She said that she and her husband got tired of the show of people falling backward, so they stopped the show and went to work with Jesus on the hearts of their people. They have never been the same, nor has their church.

Be sure that what you look to as evidence of the power of God is real. And do not draw conclusions about God from people who are more focused on a rolling camera than a real God.

THE MYTH OF "INSTANT PEACE"

Another form of denying reality often says words like these: "If I am truly faithful, I will not experience grief, sorrow, anger, or confusion in the face of tragedy or loss. Instead, I will keep my chin up, my eyes dry, my lips smiling, so others will see how strong I am as a Christian. When tragedy strikes, true believers should have real peace about it."

Really? Since when? This serious problem leads to unresolved emotions and a complete split from reality. I have heard people who have lost children,

spouses, fortunes, and dreams say that they have this “wonderful peace” just moments after they hear the awful news. What they have is shock, not peace! Shock is a natural reaction designed to protect us, to cushion the reality and depth of our pain and other feelings. Those who profess instant peace will suffer a troubled future full of a greater pain than the original loss and disappointment.

Often those who express their anger and disappointment are challenged to be stronger, to trust more, to find peace. It is true that the genuine believer *will* find peace, but it will be on the other side of resolving the rage that comes with almost every lost expectation. I have heard “spiritual giants” tell people in pain to have more joy. But these sufferers cannot even *spell* joy while trying to grasp a life with the pain of divorce or the void of a lost child. People need time to resolve emotions. Instant peace delays and prolongs the time it takes to adjust and move on to a new life.

Someone will say, “But doesn’t Scripture tell us to be thankful in everything?” Yes, it does. But while true faith will lead a person to gratitude for adversity, it is *not* instantaneous. Scripture does not demand that we be grateful instantaneously. It takes time, often lots of time. Those who experience instant peace are not showing instant gratitude to God; they are denying how God made them as physical, spiritual, and emotional beings.

Tragedies bring various responses. God does not seem to deal with them or the people affected by them in a predictable manner. For some, there seems to be a gift of peace that prevents a total collapse. For others, that peace does not surface for months or even years. Whatever the reaction, those who experience peace early are no better or worse, no stronger or weaker. The experience of one person should not be demanded for another. Lack of peace does not mean lack of faith. People in pain do not need sermons on peace. They need love and care and assistance. Remember, faith in God will produce a peace that will go beyond all understanding. It probably won’t be an instant peace, but it will be a *real* peace.

THE POLLYANNA MYTH

In this version of warped reality, believers tell themselves, “Everything that happens to me is good.”

Who says? Where does the Bible state such a thing?

A godly woman married a man, lived with him ten years, and watched him die of cancer. Another woman in her church insisted she be happy about it: “God has done a good thing. Everything he does is good.” Two years later, the woman was married again, and after one year of marriage, her husband died. Again, the lady from church demanded her friend claim this as a great and good victory provided by God. The bereaved woman recovered from her loss, married for a third time, and shortly afterward discovered that her husband had cancer.

This was not good; this was horrible. It comes under the classification of catastrophic loss. There is nothing good about three dead husbands. There is nothing good about a disease that eats your flesh and organs and then leaves you for dead. There is nothing good about watching three men die. To throw this at someone in the midst of such horrible loss is gross insensitivity.

Can God produce something good from it? Oh yes—and he will. That he can take something this horrible and transform it into something powerful for this woman is part of his wonderful and miraculous nature. But first, when we are with someone like her, shouldn't we just be with her? Shouldn't we leave our pat answers at home and just be there and share her grief? I think so. If Jesus can weep at the death of a friend, I think we can weep too. And I think we can weep with others rather than sweep their trauma under the rug of shallow faith.

Some church people believe everything is an immediate blessing. To them, only a real Christian is able to say, “Praise the Lord!” as the house burns down, the car is totaled, a child is hurt, or the cow dies. I believe if you told

these people that they were going to be fried in oil, they would grin and say, “Praise the Lord anyway!”

Is this real? Can a person in touch with reality be grateful for times of crisis? Is it a measure of one’s faith to be able to greet each new piece of bad news with a big grin and a trite expression? I don’t think so. I think it is evidence of unreal people manufacturing an unreal response. They try to rationalize that everything is good, even though it looks bad, feels bad, and is bad. They grow up believing that a positive attitude must be used to face every crisis. They deny how they really feel and thus delay dealing with the pain and agony.

The woman who lost two husbands and was about to lose another was not grateful for their deaths, nor did she believe the events were good. She was quite angry until she resolved her hurt over the losses. Years later she looked back and said that none of the problems was good, but that God used each one for her good. He took the crisis and made it a faith-building experience.

The widow’s perspective is much more accurate than the lady who demanded each new loss be viewed as a good thing. They were not good; they were terrible losses. But God takes such losses and over time makes them into something good. God will work everything together for our good if we will allow him to do so. Bad things provide God with a stage to produce something good.

Consider the first time the phrase “not good” is used in Scripture. God himself uses it to describe Adam’s condition without a wife. The Lord said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him” (Genesis 2:18). Surely if the Lord himself could say it was “not good” for Adam to be alone, we do not have to say it *is* good when a wife or husband is left alone through an untimely death. The Bible does not insist that we call “good” every event that happens in this fallen world. What it does insist is that God will take even the bad events of life and work them together for the good of his children. And that’s quite a different thing.

People in pain have enough problems without some well-meaning folks trying to short-circuit the grief process by declaring that everything that happens is a good event sent from God. While God *allows* bad things, he does not *cause* them. The toxic thinking that all things are good makes people wonder whether God might not really be cruel. It forces them to see God as a grim joker who inflicts pain and expects his followers to be happy about it.

This Pollyanna perspective may produce quick relief, but it blocks reality. A loving God wants the best for us and is grieved when we miss it. True faith in him allows these bad things to be woven together in a protective covering that grows stronger in fiber and softer to the touch.

NAIVE FAITH

My mother grew up with a version of warped, unhealthy faith. She believed that dedicating her sons to God would spare them the heartache that other children were forced to endure. She felt that somehow her prayers and faith vaccinated us from evil, that temptations would not likely come our way or, if they did, we would not succumb.

Then her father committed suicide. His death hit her much harder than it would have most people, because she thought she and her family were protected. Still, despite her devastation, she didn't give up her belief in a God who would prevent the natural course of nature or evil from harming her family.

But when my brother contracted AIDS and eventually died, my mother was confronted in a most painful way with the fact that her faith provided no supernatural vaccination against terrible events. She struggled with my brother's illness; she struggled with her faith. She slid into a deep depression, and at times I didn't know if she would return to being the wonderful woman we had always known.

Fortunately, she did recover. How? She dealt with her confusing ideas about faith. She yelled at God. She told him it wasn't fair. She admitted she had come to her faith as a way of making life easier. As she shared her anger and frustration with a God who did not do things according to her fondest wishes and expectations, she slowly recovered from the death of my brother. She also recovered her faith.

Today that faith is whole. It has brought my mother into a new understanding of who God is and how he works. Today she is more deeply committed and better equipped than ever to help others who are looking for someone who understands.

As I look back on that time, it seems to me that God was building her faith, rooting her more deeply in reality than ever before. When my father died suddenly of a heart attack at the age of sixty-eight, it became apparent that she would need the deeper faith God's grace had forged within her through the death of my brother. My mom and dad loved each other dearly and their lives were each other's. To be left alone so suddenly was a burden she never could have carried with a naive faith. But she did carry that burden, even growing under it. Within a year of Dad's death, Mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. She sailed through what would have wrecked a weaker person. Her ability to accept reality equipped her for a tough turn of events. And through those tough times I watched her grow in wisdom. I am so proud of her and what she has become through the power of God's grace!

YOU'RE NOT ALONE

If you're disillusioned because you were sold a form of faith that didn't pan out, you're not alone. Your pain is shared by many others who must deal with tragedy and at the same time resolve many issues of toxic belief. Their disappointments in God increase their pain, just as they may have increased yours.

Let the Great Teacher use your pain to bring you closer to him. It does not have to be a barrier to God. It can be a bridge.

Jesus, the real Son of God who calls us to live in reality, gives us this counsel: “I have told you all this so that you will have peace of heart and mind. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows; but cheer up, for I have overcome the world” (John 16:33, TLB).