

# **The Obstacle is the Doorway**

*By Bobby Schuller*

I want you to know today that there is no tragedy God can't redeem. That in every death and loss and trial that we face, there is within it the life of Christ that can bring forth even greater life, greater hope, greater joy than before, and whatever it is that you're going through, it's hard, nobody can understand it, but I want you to know that you will get through it.

Today, we are continuing the series on the power of our thoughts. That the way we think transforms everything in our life, particularly when we're going through obstacles, setbacks, and tragedy. The power of our thoughts is incredible. Doctors have to factor for the power of our thoughts when they test a medicine because thirty percent of people simply believing that a fake medicine will make them well will. Isn't that incredible?

I remember hearing a story about a man who locked himself in a freezer truck that wasn't running, and it never got below 55 degrees, and yet he froze to death because he thought he was freezing. I looked it up on snopes and they're unsure whether or not that story is real. But we all sort of believe it, don't we, because we have personally experienced what thinking can do to our body. We all believe that we could be tricked

into killing ourselves through thinking. You think like I do, you know that can be true.

Have you ever gotten in front of people for the first time to give a speech? What happens to your body? Your eyes get blurry, you're sweating in places you've never sweat before, your hands are trembling, but nothing physically has changed. The only thing that's happening is right up here. And yet everything in your body and your environment is different.

If you've ever been in a fist fight, and I've been in lots of them, not in awhile, but almost got in one a couple weeks ago when some kids were stealing our golf cart. I chased them down. I didn't get them, but I got close. If you've ever been a fist fight, you know, like something.. you go deaf. If you haven't ever been in a fist fight, your first fist fight you go like almost deaf, and your body gets almost numb. It's called punched drunk. It's this weird thing that happens where your body doesn't.. and what has happened? Before anybody has touched anyone, that's already happening. It's right up here. It's in your head.

Or there's a great journalist Claudia Hammond who talks about how when we're in near death experiences, time slows down. It literally does. And you can actually do things like ten times faster than you can when you're not in that mode. She used an example of a skydiver whose parachute didn't open and in thirteen seconds he was able to do what he needed to do to save his life, but he thought it was like five minutes.

The reason I share only a few examples, and only merely scratched the surface is to show that your mind has incredible power over your body. That your mind has incredible power over your environment. And that the way you think will change everything about your life.

Today, I want to talk about one of the most important types of thinking, and that is how do we think when we go through big suffering and little suffering. Big suffering, tragedy, you're going to have a handful of them in your life. Loss of loved ones, illness, things like that. What kind of thoughts do we foster when we are there. And then little suffering, like what happens when you lose your job, or when things don't go your way, or when a deal goes through.

But these things that happen, how do we think and how do we think we're in the midst. And I would just say it's easy to have good thoughts when things are going well, amen? That's not when it's hard. Keeping your thoughts right is hard when you've lost your job, when you're going through a divorce, when you're getting sued, when your kid is sick, that's when the thoughts matter the most. That's when it makes all the difference. So we're going to see what the scriptures say about that, and I'll just spoiler alert - they're going to say keep hope alive. They are going to say that God is faithful, and the scriptures are going to talk about this thing we call the Pasqual Mystery, or the Easter Mystery.

The Pasqual Mystery is a core doctrine to Christian belief, and it should be applied to everything in our life. The Pasqual Mystery is the

idea that when we put on Christ, we take on His death, but we also take on His resurrection. And somehow that resurrection power spills over into everything in our life. That every death we face, whether it's our literal death, every death we face can lead to something greater. The Paschal Mystery says within every death, there is greater life.

If you're going through a death right now, that's a sentence that might make you angry. It might make you feel anxious or you might deny it altogether. But it is true. We know it literally in our own deaths that when we die, we inherit the kingdom of heaven, which is even better than this life. It's more like waking up than falling asleep. It's the full glory of God. Its full revelation. People who have died and come back have said they didn't want to come back. So it is greater. But we also know that's true in terms of the little deaths that we face. That Christians are given, if they're truly walking in Jesus' way, a certain type of way of viewing the world, and that way of viewing is called faith. That our rabbi taught us if we have enough faith, we can say to this mountain move, and be cast into the sea, and it will be.

So how do we think when we are going through difficulty, whether we're perplexed or abandoned or persecuted or pressed on every side, how do we think? And this is what Paul says to the church in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians chapter 4.

Now before we read this passage, the Apostle Paul who was a Jewish rabbi, who met Jesus on the road, begins by talking about Moses.

He's talking to this church he planted, and there are these Jewish brothers of his who are also Christians, who are telling these new Gentile Greek Christians that they have to, because they converted from paganism, they have to get circumcised. So these guys are like what is circumcised? I would love to be there when the guy is explaining to them what they got to do as adult men.

And they have to adhere to these strict dietary laws, and they need to do this, and they need to do that, and so they're dishing out a religiosity with no context of covenant or anything like that. They're trying to teach these guys to do something that Paul says they don't have to do. And Paul is like you have been given the spirit of God. You have been given the spirit of life in Christ Jesus. Why would you try to adhere to the spirit of the law of sin and death?

That's actually a different chapter, but in theory, in general, this is what Paul is saying. He uses the story of Moses, who is a great character for Paul, who again was Jewish rabbi, loves Moses. We love Moses, but he said.. there's this passage in Exodus where Moses, who is the giver of the law, is descending the mountain after being in the presence of the Shekhina glory of God, and he's carrying these tablets, and his face is radiant with life. Like the power of God was so incredible that his actual skin somehow took on the glory and was shining, and it was scary to people. And Moses would first, with his face unveiled, shining, would teach the people about the law, and then when he's done, and I only

caught this recently, when he was done with preaching, would then cover his face. And so many rabbis taught, well the reason he covered his face is because the glory was so radiant and scary that he couldn't just walk around like a glow stick all the time.

But what Paul says is he is covering his face to keep from showing others that the glory is fading. That the temporary thing he got from God is fading. That that glory that's on the outside is fading and not going with him. And then he says to you, you have been given a glory that's not fading, but that is growing! He says you've been given this power in earthen vessels that when you're pressed, when you're hurt, when you're cut down, when you're destroyed, that the death that you took on of Christ also brings forth the life of Christ! Why would you throw it away for religiosity?

Many of you've been burned by overly religious people who say faith is all about rule, and rules are important, it's all about morality and morality is important, but have forgotten the Shekhina glory, the power, the resurrection power that dwells in all of us. As Moses ages, his glory fades with him, but as a Christian ages, the glory grows. That for the believer, the follower of Jesus, the body may age like milk, but the spirit ages like wine. Can I get an amen? Or like whisky. I can't make whisky jokes. This is church. That within our very body, there is this amazing thing happening that unlike the rest of the world, we have this thing that comes from heaven called hope and it will not disappoint.

So he writes and he says to the church, for God who said let light shine out of the darkness, made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Moses? No, in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay. That's a reference in large part to our mortality. Another way to translate it is earthen vessels. That he's invoking this idea of Adam and Eve. In the story of Adam and Eve, God took the dirt and the dust out of the ground, and breathed life into them and made human beings. And the idea is that like in the Old Testament, it says from the dust you are made, and to the dust you will return. But Paul's sort of saying no, not really. You are made from the dust, and you're this earthen vessel, but now in Christ Jesus this thing has been put inside of you. That even though you're wasting away on the outside, even though you suffer, even though you feel pain, even though you get sick, even though you get persecuted, this power of Jesus Christ is inside of you and whenever you're hit, He's going to hit back. Whenever you're hurt, He's going to comfort. Whenever life comes at you, He will sustain you, and that's exactly what He says.

He says we have it to show that the surpassing power is from God and not from us. "We're hard pressed on every side." You feel pressed? Some of you do. No, we're pressed on every side but not crushed. "We're perplexed." Do you ever feel perplexed as a Christian? Like God, why is this happening? I'm so confused. I don't get this. I'm angry. "We're perplexed, but not in despair." We're not giving up, though. I still trust in

you. “We’re persecuted.” You ever been persecuted for your faith? You ever have people in your industry or your life or your circles look down on you because of your beliefs, your principles or especially your faith in Jesus?

“We are struck down but not destroyed. We all carry around in our body the death of Jesus” that you received in your baptism, right? “So that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake so that His life may also be revealed in our mortal bodies. So then death is at work in us, but life is also at work in you.” That is the Paschal Mystery that the difference between the believer is we walk by faith. If you are a true follower of Jesus you will suffer more because of it whether its persecution, or not taking certain opportunities, or challenges, or spiritual attack, which is a real thing. The promise of the scripture is that whatever it is you’re going through, the light of Christ will turn every tragedy into victory by faith. We take the death of Christ so that the life of Christ will be alive in us. Very simply, there is no tragedy God can’t redeem and we rarely know how He’s going to redeem it. Rarely.

When I look back on my life and my suffering and I think we’ve suffered a fair amount, in all of that suffering I was perplexed, I was hard pressed, I was cast down, I was persecuted and perplexed is the number one word. I didn’t understand. It didn’t make sense to me why I was going through so much, but I look back and I realized that He was

always with me, never left me and always asked me, son, I love you, never give up.

And so that word is for you. Whatever suffering you're going through, it is so easy to fall into one of two sides that is either.. and both of them are worldly, neither of them are from the Lord, and there's like two sides of a pendulum. One side is despair and self pity, where it's just like pajamas and Netflix for months, and if you don't call anybody back and just ordering pizza and piles of Oreos. This isn't me, I've just heard this is what some people do; this self pity, spinning your wheels.

And then there's the other thing, which is just as harmful, and that is denial which we call positivity. Now I think it's good to be positive most of the time. It's good to be, you know, I'm one of the most positive people you'll ever meet, but when you're going through tragedy, to shrug off tragedy as though it doesn't happen, or it's no problem, well that will put you out of touch with your spirit, with your emotion, with others, and both are bad.

So what does the scripture call us to do? Do what Paul did. You call it what it is. I'm perplexed, I'm pressed, I'm struck down. You call death what it is. It's a death! You call tragedy what it is. It's a tragedy. But when you assign death to something, you also assign new life, resurrection, hope, the belief that although this thing is happening to me, or happened to me, I trust in the name of the Lord who loves me. Who hasn't abandoned me. Who has a plan. Who will endure. I believe. I

believe. I believe. I believe that God can raise the dead. There is no tragedy God can't redeem.

Jesus said when He was teaching about His own life to His disciples that He would be not only killed, but tortured, naked, in front of people in a horrible way. That He would be raised to life again and that through that He would bring new life to the whole world. And He said "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." That's the farmer's dilemma, isn't it. You can either eat a kernel of wheat or you can plant a kernel of wheat. And if you plant it, you get more wheat.

So many of us, we don't realize that God can turn our deaths into victory, and even if you said there's no turning this into victory, I want you to know you can endure stronger, smarter and more joyful. That's not why. God didn't cause it for that, but God will turn your tragedy into new life. Are there any saints in here who know that to be true? Can I get an amen? That we serve in our suffering and we all suffer. The longer you live, the more you suffer, that through our suffering God brings us to new life. He loves us. He loves us. So how we think in our suffering is paramount. It's easy to think good thoughts when things are going well. It's hard when you're suffering.

So you call it what it is. Lord, this is a death. Lord, this is a loss. Lord, I don't know how to handle this illness. Lord, I don't know how to handle that my kid is sick. I can't do anything. Lord, what do I do with

this? And the Lord says keep hope alive. He can turn any tragedy into victory.

I love this principle that came from Ray Dalio. He's not a religious guy, he's a famous businessman, but he wrote a terrific book called *Principles* and he said "suffering plus reflection equals growth." And I want to be the kind of person that I refuse to allow my suffering to break me. If I am pressed, I will not be destroyed. If I am perplexed, I will not fall into despair, if I'm persecuted, I will not be abandoned, and if I'm struck down, I will not be destroyed, and neither will you. That's not who you are. God will carry you through. Amen? So keep your thoughts here in the hope of the covenant of God, and the witness of scripture.

Now most of us are probably not going through tragedy. We need to be prepared when we go through it, but most of us we go through sort of little sufferings, and I just want to finish with this sort of thought. I want you to first see that God calls us, I believe, to be the kinds of people who believe that obstacles can be from the Lord, and that hidden within the obstacle itself can be a great treasure. Now again, I'm not talking in terms of big loss, if you've lost a loved one or something like that. I'm talking about things like if you lose your job, or if you go through a bad breakup, or you get sued. That there is this idea that also permeates through the scripture, and has also been taught in philosophy, that sometimes the obstacle is the way.

Now that title came from a great book by a guy named Ryan Holliday. It's a sports book. I can't recommend it because the language isn't terrific. But he asks this question and I think it's really useful and it aligns perfectly with what we believe as Christians and that is what if inside the problem were certain benefits only for you? He's feeding off a philosopher from the Roman Empire. It was the good guy from Gladiator, Marcus Aurelius, the old man who once.. you guys don't care. Anyway. Gladiator.

And Marcus Aurelius says.. this is like his final crescendo to his work in meditations. He said "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way." Most people, when they get to an obstacle and it stands in their way, they take the path of least resistance. They either turn away, or they curse the darkness, or they blame someone else, or they try a little bit and then give up and walk away. But there is that certain type of person, you know who that is? Like all the titans are this way. That certain kind of person that when they get an obstacle, not only are they able to get through that obstacle, they're somehow able to turn it to their benefit. And this is the kind of thinking that I think Christianity does. When we live in the kingdom of the heavens, we're able to not get so bothered by losing our job, for example, and able to wonder what if God is not just in my steps, He's also in my stops. What if in this thing that I think is so horrible that maybe God is in this and has a new opportunity available for me, and I

never had the faith to step out and so He's pushing me. What if I can see in every obstacle an opportunity from heaven.

It's a great story I heard in China and it's a story about a king who found that the people in his city were becoming like apathetic, lazy. And so one day there was one entrance into the city and he decided to block it with a giant boulder. And then he hid in the woods to see what would happen and so his people from the village would come up and they would try and move the boulder, and they couldn't get in, and they would get frustrated. They would curse the king. They would try and get a bunch of people to move it and they couldn't. And they'd eventually just turn around and walk away. And the story goes that finally one peasant comes and he pulls a branch from the woods and he uses it as a lever. And using leverage he's able to pry the rock out of the way. And under the rock is a bag of gold. And along with the bag of gold, is a note from the king and it says "the obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve our condition."

Guys, I'm giving you a gift. If you can change your thinking to become like this, if you can believe that what Jesus said, anyone who says to this mountain move and be cast into the sea, it will, your life will be radically different. If you choose to ask the question if you're fired, if you're sued, if you go through bad breakup, if you're going through a hard time in your economy or your house or something happens, and you look at whatever the obstacle is, and you merely ask the question of

the Lord, Lord, is there a hidden opportunity in this thing that's driving me crazy? Your whole life will be different. Your whole life.

It's like life is like driving on the street, right? It's like we think we want to have green lights all the way, but there are red lights sometimes. It doesn't mean the journey is over. It doesn't mean the journey's over. God is in our steps, but He's also in our stops.

And I've just seen so many times of these major setbacks in my life, how God was in it. And one of the first big ones was when I went to seminary. When I came to work at the Crystal Cathedral as a 24 or 25-year-old man, my grandpa offered to pay for my seminary, and all the pastors said you have to go to seminary if you want to be a Reformed pastor. And I said I can read my bible. It's not seminary, its cemetery. I'm going to go there and die spiritually. I'm going to be like all those old weathered pastors that are all super religious. And that seemed like such an obstacle to me at the time, going to school for four years. I look back and I go that wasn't an obstacle, that was an opportunity. I only went because Hannah made me go. Like free school, you got to go. She's like its free. I'm like it's not free, it costs like hours of.. anyway, you get it.

And even honestly, I mean, just to get personal here. Honestly when I look at the.. many of us came from the Crystal Cathedral, I remember what it was like towards the end. It had lost so much of its life and its vigor. And I remember when it went to bankruptcy feeling so crushed and thinking what will people in Orange County think of my

family and our reputation, and what will people think of this story that had such a great beginning but such a tragic ending. It seemed like such a horrible obstacle.

And now I look at what God has done through that; I'm not saying it's a good thing, but I'm like if that hadn't happened, we wouldn't be here right now. Towards the end, there were like 200 people in that church and they were struggling, and they were faithful, good people. Many of you were there. But I guess what I'm saying is like even for me personally, I wouldn't be here. And the fact that we're able to create out of that tragedy a tremendous opportunity, and I believe it's just the beginning. I think this church, in many ways, has recaptured what it means to be a church: a group of people who love one another, who are on mission for Jesus. And we still have many of the things that we love. Our music and many of our traditions, but I feel like the core is back in a way. I hope that doesn't sound self.. because it's not me.

I'm just saying, and I think that at the heart of it, there are so many of these things in my life that I look back and it's heartbreaking. Crystal Cathedral obviously is a great example of that, but I think God is building a better church than it was. And my hope is that from generation to generation, this church keeps getting better and better well after Hannah and I are gone. And it will!

And the same is true of Tree of Life. You know, we had this church in the American Legion, and we were doing stuff with homeless people,

and it was relaxed, and it was very hip, and it was like what are we going to become now? And so that young congregation coming here, it's like you just see how God was in all of that. And at the time, so much of it was so confusing, and before it just all the loss. I've learned to just trust. Just trust. That very often within the obstacle is hidden a tremendous opportunity and to realize that very often God is in the waiting and that He is working to do something great.

So change your thoughts. Be patient. Call whatever it is you're going through what it is, but don't walk away, and just ask, Lord, is there something in this greater than what I see, and I think almost always there is.

Let me pray for you: Lord, I'm praying for two types of people in this place: those who are going through tragedy. By no means do I believe that's an obstacle that they can work to their advantage or anything like that. I pray if anybody who's going through tragedy, Lord, you'd bring comfort and hope so that they can emerge with new life. Somebody is here has a new sickness or has lost a loved one, or has a loved one that is sick, I just pray an abundance of hope, Lord that we would not fall into despair, and wisdom, Lord, and knowledge and revelation to make the right decisions. I pray Lord you would show and reveal the opportunity in that and you would change our thinking to be like Jesus. It's in His name we pray, amen.