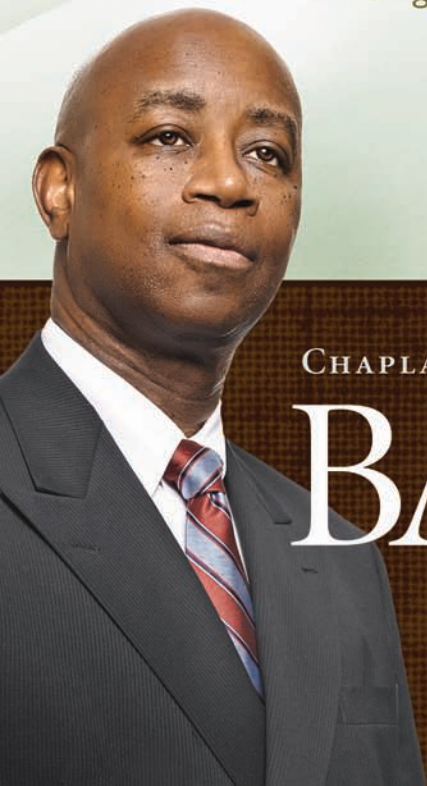


THE
Blessing
OF
Adversity

*Finding your God-given purpose
in life's troubles*



CHAPLAIN OF THE UNITED STATES SENATE

BARRY C.
BLACK

When I once lost a political race, my preacher brother-in-law said it might be a “reverse calling.” In that same spirit, the remarkable Barry Black has written a book that turns losses into wins. His storytelling and his devotion to Scripture create a captivating guide for anyone facing adversity, which is all of us.

LAMAR ALEXANDER

U.S. Senator (Tennessee)

The truth in this book comes with a capital *T*, and it will nourish and strengthen your soul. If you are serious about your faith, you will benefit from reading *The Blessing of Adversity*.

MARK PRYOR

U.S. Senator (Arkansas)

From growing up in a public housing project in Baltimore to counseling U.S. senators in the marble halls of Washington, Chaplain Black has truly lived and witnessed the blessings of adversity. In this book, he offers a compelling and uniquely American perspective on the power of faith and the resilience of the human spirit.

AMY KLOBUCHAR

U.S. Senator (Minnesota)

Barry Black is my counselor, my mentor, and my friend. His wisdom is built on life experiences and grounded in faith. *The Blessing of Adversity* is a guide to draw purpose from life’s troubles and strength from God’s Word. It is not just a book to read, but a roadmap to keep with you through life.

JOHNNY ISAKSON

U.S. Senator (Georgia)

Chaplain Black has written a book that answers the question, “Why me, God?” More importantly, it is a detailed guidebook on how to turn adversity into a positive.

MICHAEL ENZI

U.S. Senator (Wyoming)

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*To Dr. Frank W. Hale, Jr.,
who taught me that
faithfulness is more important
than success*

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Introduction

MOST PEOPLE SEE TROUBLE AS SOMETHING NEGATIVE and try to avoid it whenever possible. But I'm convinced that if we learn to greet our troubles with joy, we can turn our adversity into advantage and find God's purpose in our lives. That's right. If you learn to see God's blessing in adversity, you'll come to understand what King David meant when he wrote, "It is good for me that I was afflicted" (Psalm 119:71, *ESV*).

Maybe you've just gone through a painful divorce. You feel devastated and alone. Will you waste your pain, or will you permit God to use it for His glory? Or maybe you've just discovered that one of your children is addicted to cocaine. Can God bring any good out of your predicament? Can He enable you to overcome your season of distress? Perhaps you're facing a health challenge, or you've just been fired from your job. How do you deal with life's valleys? If "God is working for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28), is He not also able to empower you to find His blessings in your troubles?

Everyone goes through seasons of difficulty. Sometimes the challenge is financial, such as when the money doesn't stretch to the end of the month, or we're forced to lose a home to foreclosure,

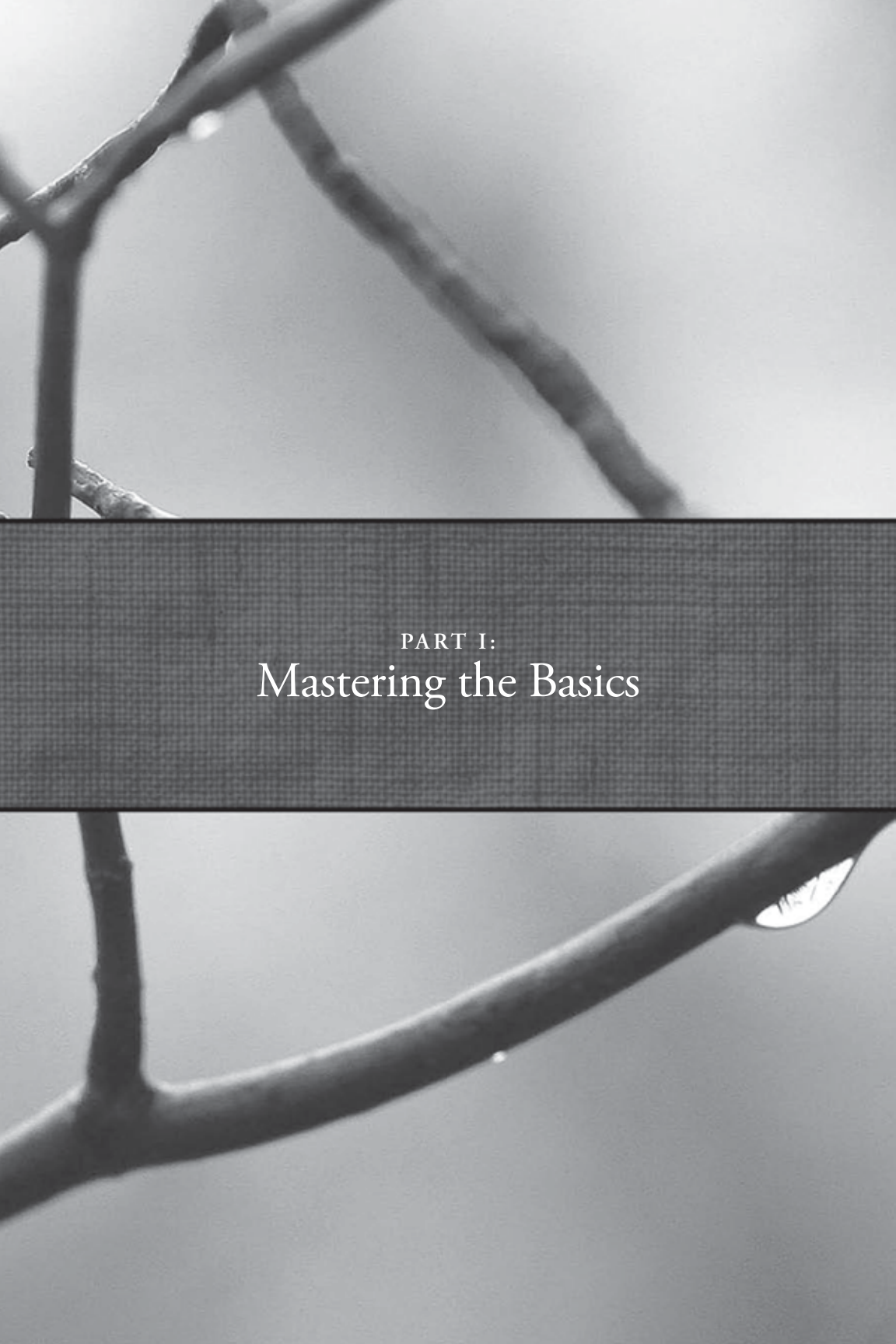
or we find ourselves suddenly unemployed. At other times the difficulty comes as wrenching grief, when what we once felt certain we would always have—family, joy, peace—is irretrievably lost in the midst of painful circumstances.

The Blessing of Adversity provides a blueprint for finding peace in the midst of tough times. If you are wrestling with life's trials, it will empower you to embrace your challenges and acknowledge the inevitability of trouble. For "all who live godly lives will suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12). In the pages that follow, you will learn how to deal with God's seasons of silence, how to encourage yourself in life's storms, and how to find God's blessings in adversity.

Furthermore, you'll learn how to use your pain to bless others. Who better to offer comfort and understanding in times of trial or grief than someone who has already been through a similar experience? When you're suffering, would you rather talk to someone who can speak only theoretically about your pain or to someone who has already walked a mile in your shoes? In the same way, you can share with others the comfort you have received from God during your own tough times.

The Blessing of Adversity is designed to be a user-friendly guide for dealing with life's storms. It distills the wisdom I have gained from thirty years of pastoral counseling, and from doctorates in theology and psychology, and develops it into a practical plan of action that will help you find your God-given purpose in life's troubles.

Let's begin our journey.



PART I:
Mastering the Basics

I

CELEBRATE YOUR TROUBLES

HAVE YOU EVER LOOKED BACK at one of the difficult seasons of your life and seen more positives than negatives? Have you ever said hooray for your troubles? King David did. He said, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word” (Psalm 119:67, NIV). In other words, he found the blessing in his adversity.

If you’ve ever celebrated your troubles, you’ve followed the guidance given by the apostle James: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:2-4, NIV).

Isn’t that an amazing statement? “Consider it pure joy when you face trials.” In other words, greet your trials and tribulations as friends and allies, companions who will help to develop your maturity, preparing you to fulfill your God-given purpose for living.

One of my neighbors has wind chimes on his back patio. When a storm is imminent and the wind begins to kick up, I enjoy listening to the beautiful music of those chimes. And just as those chimes make music in the midst of a storm, so we should make music with our lives in the midst of our troubles. When you are facing your greatest troubles, there are six things you can do to help you celebrate your troubles: *guard your tongue*, *stay positive*, *be constant*, *grow up*, *use your map*, and *control your doubts*.

Guard Your Tongue

It's so easy to bemoan our predicaments. In the words of the old spiritual, we want to cry out, "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen." Jacob had this experience. For thirteen years, he thought that his beloved son Joseph was dead. Lamenting his terrible plight, he cried out, "All these things are against me!" (Genesis 42:36, NKJV).

The problem with bemoaning our troubles is that we can begin to speak self-fulfilling prophecies, convincing ourselves that our anxiety-laden statements must come true. Proverbs 18:21 says, "The tongue has the power of life and death" (NIV). The words you speak—to yourself and others—can bring good or ill, healing or hurt. So think about whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8, NIV), and lay the foundation for wholesome and edifying speech.

Stay Positive

Learning to celebrate our troubles begins when we view trouble as a positive force in our lives. Winston Churchill said, "A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty." Do you see opportunities in your difficulties? No matter what you're going through, strive to discover something positive.

The apostle Paul probably wrote his letter to the Philippians while imprisoned in Rome. But instead of complaining about his plight, Paul points to the opportunities he found in his difficult circumstances: “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ” (Philippians 1:12-13, NIV). Isn’t that fantastic? Paul saw his imprisonment and impending martyrdom as a means to advance the gospel. Talk about accentuating the positive! Paul is an amazing example of optimism.

How about you? Do you see your troubles positively? You can be like Paul and his fellow missionary Silas, who prayed and sang hymns to God when they were imprisoned. You can highlight the positive by remembering that “in everything God is working for the good of those who love Him” (Romans 8:28).

One of my minister friends visited a hospitalized church member whose leg had been amputated. He struggled to think of something positive to say to her, but drew a blank. As he sat in the woman’s hospital room waiting for inspiration, she broke the silence with a startling statement: “Pastor, thank God it’s as good as it is. I could’ve lost both legs.” Her positive outlook and optimistic words inspired my friend to more conscientiously seek to find life’s positives and look for blessings in his adversity.

Be Constant

When you think and speak positively about your troubles, refusing to complain about your fate, you produce constancy or steadfastness. The Greek word is *hupomone*, which reflects the constancy Paul writes about in Galatians 6:9: “Don’t become weary in doing good, for in due season you will reap a harvest if you don’t lose heart.” It was the attribute that nineteenth-century British prime

minister Benjamin Disraeli emphasized when he said, “The secret of success is constancy of purpose.”

King David succeeded because of constancy of purpose. The account of his anointing as king is recorded in 1 Samuel 16, but he didn’t become king until some fifteen years later (2 Samuel 5). During the intervening period, he was relentlessly pursued by the most powerful man in Israel at the time, King Saul. But David didn’t give up. He persevered. And from his troubles he produced memorable poetry and music, which make up much of the book of Psalms.

What success have you forfeited because you lacked constancy of purpose? Think of the thousands each year who pursue academic degrees but who give up when it gets difficult and fail to complete the program. Or think of the millions who begin a diet but falter before they achieve their goals. Those who learn to celebrate their troubles will produce constancy from their hardships and overcome their tough times.

Time and again, I’ve seen people with ordinary talents possess a constancy of purpose that enabled them to achieve far more than their more gifted colleagues. They plod along patiently, like the tortoise racing the hare in *Aesop’s Fables*, and with steady perseverance surmount every obstacle and win the race.

Grow Up

Saying hooray for your troubles can also help you grow up. The apostle Paul declares, “When I grew up, I put away childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11, NLT). This is what James is talking about when he says, “Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything” (James 1:4, NIV).

Nearly everyone has rough edges that need to be smoothed on the journey toward maturity. We all need to put away childish

things—and trouble may be just the prompting we need. Joseph's brothers were transformed by hardships, and so was Joseph himself (Genesis 42 and 50). They all became more gracious and caring after enduring some of life's trials and uncertainty, pain and setbacks.

I had a friend in the military who reminded me of Joseph's brothers. This man had many rough edges. He spoke impulsively, refused to be punctual, missed deadlines, and struggled with grammar. As the years flew by, we'd see each other from time to time and interact. With the passing of time, I saw positive changes in this man. He began speaking with judicious forethought, embracing punctuality, meeting deadlines, and using correct grammar. He talked to me about the hard work required to bring about these improvements. He had put away childish things and developed maturity.

Are you moving in the direction of maturity? Eleanor Roosevelt provided a guide for measuring our maturity: "A mature person is one who does not think only in absolutes, who is able to be objective even when deeply stirred emotionally, who has learned that there is both good and bad in all people and all things, and who walks humbly and deals charitably with the circumstances of life."¹ That's a worthy destination, isn't it?

Use Your Map

Like most journeys of any great length, it's easier to get where we're going if we have a map. What map do we need to reach the destination of maturity? We need the map of God's wisdom. James talks about this map in the context of his discussion about rejoicing during tough times. He writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and

not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind” (James 1:5-6, NIV).

Solomon sought such wisdom. At the beginning of his reign, he asked God to give him the ability to discern right from wrong, the requisite wisdom to guide the Israelites. God was pleased to grant his request (1 Kings 3). Solomon could have asked for many other things—long life, victory over his enemies, or great wealth. He didn’t. He simply asked for wisdom, believing it was the key to everything else he needed.

We, too, need such wisdom. Plato said, “Wise men speak because they have something to say, fools because they have to say something.” How often have we spoken when we should have kept silent, and kept silent when we should have spoken? God’s wisdom is like a GPS, guiding us through the twists and turns of life. In order to find God’s purpose in life’s troubles, we must request wisdom from our generous God.

Seeking God’s wisdom shows humility and honors God. We’re basically confessing, “Lord, I’m not smart enough to know which road to take without Your guidance and providence. I need You to show me what to do.” Why wouldn’t God move heaven and earth to honor such a petition?

Control Your Doubts

God’s wisdom comes at the price of controlling your doubts. James reminds us that those who doubt will receive nothing from God (James 1:6-7). Don’t miss the blessing of wisdom because of doubt.

In Mark 9:14-24 we find the story of a father who asked Jesus to heal his demon-possessed son. But the father expressed doubts that disappointed Jesus. When he saw Jesus’ disappointment, the father said, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24, NIV).

Like that distressed father, our doubts are sometimes complicated and nuanced, hindering our faith. Belief and unbelief are engaged in a civil war within our hearts. C. S. Lewis once described how complicated our doubts can be. He said, “We’re not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us: we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.”² By conquering our doubts when facing our troubles, we prepare ourselves for God’s best work in our lives.

AN ACTION PLAN TO HELP YOU CELEBRATE YOUR TROUBLES

- > *Guard your tongue.*
- > *Stay positive.*
- > *Be constant.*
- > *Grow up.*
- > *Use your map.*
- > *Control your doubts.*

