

When Crisis Hits

Where to Turn When Life Falls Apart

C. John Miller



www.newgrowthpress.com

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404

www.newgrowthpress.com

Copyright © 2011 by World Harvest Mission.

All rights reserved. Published 2011

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®, NIV®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Cover Design: Tandem Creative, Tom Temple,

tandemcreative.net

Typesetting: Lisa Parnell, lparnell.com

ISBN-10: 1-936768-48-8

ISBN-13: 978-1-936768-48-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Miller, C. John.

When crisis hits : where to turn when life falls apart / C. John Miller.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-936768-48-6 (alk. paper)

1. Suffering—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Consolation.
3. Spirituality. I. Title.

BV4909.M495 2011

248.8'6—dc23

2011043177

Printed in the United States of America

18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 1 2 3 4 5

I was resting at home after a trip to the hospital when I heard that the stock market was crashing. I turned on the television and, from my bed, I could see—and almost feel—the gut-wrenching panic among the men and women on the New York Stock Exchange floor. At the end of the day the market was still on a roaring downhill slide. The trustworthy elements in the world of finance had disappeared and the irrational had taken over.

I was especially sensitive to the issue of failed trust that day because just two weeks before I was diagnosed as having an aggressive lymphoma cancer. The news was so shocking that it was hard to take it into my mind. You go for a routine examination and . . .

I don't think it's possible to go through a crisis like the stock market slide or a cancer diagnosis without feeling that somebody is trying to speak some kind of special message meant for you. When the bottom falls out of your investments or your family or your health, you can't escape the insistent question, What can you really trust in anyway?

At such critical times I have learned that you either trust in yourself and human supports or you trust in God.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, a famous American philosopher, opted for trusting himself. In his essay “On Self-Reliance,” he said, “Trust thyself; every heart vibrates to that iron string.” If all Emerson meant was to have confidence in your own training and abilities, fine. He was only saying, “Know what you can do and do it without fear. Don’t lose your nerve.”

But Emerson was saying a lot more than that. He meant that the potential for solving all your problems lies within yourself. That’s a very attractive idea. We like to be told that we have great human potential and that there is no difficulty we cannot overcome if we tap the resources in ourselves. Certainly there is a germ of truth in this idea. Each of us does have qualities we can draw upon to help us through our crises. But is it really true that we have in ourselves the potential for solving all our problems?

The Limits of Human Potential

Think about it. Can you change a positive test for cancer to negative? When your wife or husband walks out on you, can you win back your spouse by willpower? When your rebellious teenager

becomes alienated from you and you fear serious drug involvement, are you really able to find the potential to help him from within yourself?

When life falls apart, we feel deep confusion in the depths of our being. We discover that life is not under our control, and we don't like it at all. Our emotions may shatter no matter how strong we have been. Instead of being able to find unlimited resources within ourselves when the doctor says, "You have cancer," our minds fill with unanswered and painful questions like,

"Why me?"

"What did I do to deserve this?"

"Is there any hope for my future?"

"Do I even have a future?"

The illusion that you have within yourself the potential to cope with any problem can do more to defeat you at your point of crisis than almost anything else.

I once worked for a wealthy businessman, Paul Townsend.* The president of several successful

*All names have been changed.

companies, he believed that optimism and self-confidence was all you needed to succeed in life. He shared his views with me every morning when I came to work. The leading idea was always that your goals could be reached by rejecting all negative thinking and believing that you could accomplish anything in business and life.

He would often complete these little training sessions by reminding me, “Remember, don’t be negative; you can do anything you want for the future.” I can still remember him standing there. He was already past sixty-five and his graying hair was thinning, but his figure was trim, his manner vigorous, and his self-assurance absolute. He seemed to be his own best advertisement for his philosophy of success in business and ultimately in life.

A winner all the way, he had successfully pioneered various kinds of innovations in company management styles and had been for years a leading philanthropist. As my employer, he treated me well and allowed me time from my job to work on my doctorate at a nearby university.

But one day he had his own personal crisis where his world fell apart. He had neglected

to watch certain investments that supported the foundation I worked for. A large sum of money was lost, probably through the mismanagement of others. But Paul was the man in charge, and he believed he should have watched these investments more closely. He felt intense self-condemnation and guilt. Soon after, he had a stroke.

When he returned to his work after several weeks, our roles were almost reversed. The first time I went to his office to encourage him, he was sitting behind his desk looking old and exhausted. The glint in his blue eyes was gone; his face looked gray. At first I thought his physical appearance was entirely due to the stroke. But it soon became clear that, although he had made considerable progress in recovering from the stroke, the real problem was that he was filled with fears and negative thoughts. It was as if the bottom had fallen out of his life and nothing could help him. Life for him had become unsafe, threatening.

To help him, I tried some plain talk: “Look, Mr. Townsend. You need to shift your faith from yourself and your abilities. I believe it will make a real difference if you put your trust in God and in Christ, not in yourself.”

He began to ask me questions, something he had never done before. The help he began to receive didn't have much to do with me. God was beginning to speak to him, and tough-minded and independent as he was, Paul listened to what was said. From all I could tell he found a release in what I told him.

Pain Leads to Peace

“God whispers to us in our pleasures,” wrote C. S. Lewis, noted English author, “. . . but shouts to us in our pain.”¹

I believe this is what happens to all of us when we come up against our brick walls and we're left standing there with hurt and despair. God speaks to us at such times in megatons, and a whole new way of life can begin for us, one with wonderful promise for learning things that are beautiful beyond our dreams. If we listen to him, we can find purpose and joy in life—even at the toughest of times—that simply transcend description. I know about this because I have found it for myself. It does not mean there are no more crises or that sorrows or pains disappear like magic. No, you still go through the experiences of life. You may

still fear death in the night or keenly regret your divorce, but you do not go alone any longer.

Often our sufferings help us to see that our key human values have been confused and debased. In our pain we might sense that we have loved money more than God, and what really makes us happiest is basking in the glory of our career triumphs. Or we might sense that the highest desires in us have been neglected while we have sought our own comfort.

By themselves, sufferings don't bring you to this new kind of confidence in God. When I had my initial encounter with cancer, I learned that the pain of the situation can open you to listen to God, but in and of itself it can also leave you in despair. As I was lying on my hospital bed, God made it clear to me that he wanted me to undergo a deep change within myself. He wanted me to shift my whole confidence from myself to him. It did not come to me as a loud demand from God, but as a quiet pressure of love.

You might think that it would have been natural for me to do what God wanted—just to trust him all the way at that point. After all, what choice did I have? The lymphoma was massive, overwhelming

the kidneys, which had ceased to function. Unless the kidneys started working again, I would not be able to take the chemotherapy necessary to shrink my tumor and save my life. The doctors knew I had a weakened heart and were unsure whether it could handle the strain of the kidney failure and the growing cancer. But the temptation for me was to be overwhelmed by fear and passively give up the fight, even perhaps turning away from God to lapse into numbness, self-pity, and fear.

Mercifully, I felt instead a gentle drawing away from myself toward reliance on God. This shift in my confidence came to me through the prayers of the many people who were asking God to deliver me. As they prayed, I was able to put myself entirely in God's hands. Even as I spent four days in the Coronary Care Unit hooked up to life-support systems, I experienced peace amid waves of weakness.

A wonderful physical recovery followed. While many people prayed, my kidneys started functioning, and a few hours after exploratory surgery the doctors were able to give me chemotherapy. But the biggest change was in my deepened knowledge