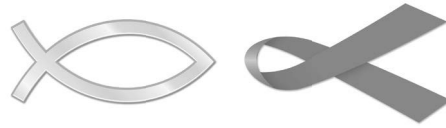


Lesson Seven



THE WHIRLWIND BEGINS

When my spirit was overwhelmed within me, Thou didst know my path.

—Psalm 142:3

Have you ever noticed when disasters strike they bring with them an unsympathetic and indiscriminate to-do list? The immediate aftershocks following a disaster stir up an unexpected whirlwind, spinning us 'round and 'round until it finally stops, leaving us breathless and dizzy. There is no denying—the whirlwind is real. It is unavoidable, unrelenting, and all-consuming.

What is a whirlwind anyway? According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, it is “a small rotating windstorm of limited extent; a confused rush; a violent or destructive force or agency.”² Let's adapt that definition to look at it from a different perspective. For the newly diagnosed cancer patient, a whirlwind is an accelerated pace of life involving a maze of doctor appointments; medical tests; frequent hospital, clinic, and pharmacy visits; confusing medical terms; mind-boggling decisions; schedule rearrangements; work adjustments; lengthy phone conversations; sleepless nights; and hours of reading and research. And that only scratches the surface. It doesn't come close to describing the sudden overwhelmed feeling one experiences during the whirlwind do-this, do-that period.

As you might expect, looking upward into a whirlwind's rotating funnel results in tunnel vision. My tunnel vision could be described as a temporary, apathetic attitude toward the rest of the world's affairs apart from my own. For example, I usually like to send cards of encouragement, support, or commemoration to family, friends, and church members, but that seemed an impossible task in light of my circumstances. Another example was my surprising postponement of compassion and sympathy toward a national disaster in which several people lost their lives. This tragedy occurred the day after my diagnosis, but I wasn't able to concern myself with such things. I was in my whirlwind period. Even after the initial whirlwind period, I didn't turn on the car radio for months. It seemed too worldly, too intrusive, and irrelevant. I either drove in silence or listened to an instrumental CD.

THE EMOTIONAL WHIRLWIND

At first, the whirlwind seems almost as equally encompassing as the disaster itself. That's because the whirlwind contains the list of immediate things which must be attended, things that become a non-stop blur of action. I view this as the physical element, the visible whirlwind. It eventually completes its course, usually lasting but a few weeks. However, the greater, more powerful, and potentially destructive element of the whirlwind is the one that cannot be seen. That is the emotional whirlwind. It must be soothed and tamed with gentle strokes of patience and conscious acts of discipline. The emotional whirlwind cannot be satisfied with the physical fulfillment of checking off a to-do list. It must be dealt with on a more personal level. The emotional whirlwind doesn't have a definitive time frame like the visible whirlwind; it can last for months, even years.

Parker and I received my diagnosis on a Friday afternoon, allowing the shock to be absorbed over the weekend. At my surgeon's advice, we opted not to make any decisions about surgery until we'd had a chance to talk it over and sift through our thoughts. We spent a quiet weekend at home with our dogs. Saturday night, Parker took me to a nice Italian restaurant. When Sunday came, we attended church as usual. I filled my seat in the choir loft and Parker counted the first-of-the-month Sunday offerings. It appeared on the outside to be as any other Sunday in the Allen household. However, that was far, far from the truth. At my request, we kept the news of my cancer to ourselves until I had a chance to inform family and close friends. Plus I wanted to soak in the last Sunday of being "normal" before being "converted" to a cancer patient.

Rather than subsiding, the emotional whirlwind grew more turbulent for Parker over the next few weeks. His mother's increasing health needs diverted his attention. My mother-in-law, who lived forty miles away, had been hospitalized for several weeks, and now Parker and his sister, Cindy, faced the difficult decision of whether or not to move her into an assisted-living facility. Meanwhile, my own emotional whirlwind was in full rotation as I experienced a widespread gamut of emotions: fear, relief, anxiety, peace, sadness, trust, apprehension, disbelief, acceptance, grief, and love, to name a few. Life as I knew it had ceased, and now I had to find a way to cope with this new "thing." Although Parker and I were both enmeshed in our own personal emotional whirlwinds, we shared common ground, finding solace in one another.

What emotions have you felt during an emotional whirlwind? It may be about something other than a cancer diagnosis.

How did you handle those emotions?

A BIBLICAL BLOW-BY-BLOW

God knows exactly the kind of human whirlwinds we endure. Look at the description given in Proverbs 1:27–28: “When your dread comes like a storm, and your calamity comes on like a whirlwind, when distress and anguish come on you, then they will call on me.”

It may surprise you to discover how frequently whirlwinds are mentioned in the Bible. First of all, we see that God orchestrates whirlwinds and displays His sovereignty in them. “Before your pots can feel the fire of thorns, He will sweep them away with a whirlwind, the green and the burning alike” (Ps. 58:9).

God also used whirlwinds in specific ways such as,

to scatter: “Thou shalt winnow them, and the wind shall carry them away, and the whirlwind shall scatter them; and thou shalt rejoice in Jehovah, thou shalt glory in the Holy One of Israel” (Isa. 41:16).

to give a descriptive comparison: “Its arrows are sharp, and all its bows are bent; the hoofs of its horses seem like flint, and its chariot wheels like a whirlwind” (Isa. 5:28).

to bring calamity: “But I will kindle a fire in the wall of Rabbah, and it shall devour the palaces thereof, with shouting in the day of battle, with a tempest in the day of the whirlwind” (Amos 1:14).

and to spare a prophet from death: “Then it came about as they were going along and talking, that behold, there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire which separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven” (2 Kings 2:11).

My favorite way of how God used whirlwinds is seen in the following two verses.

“Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.” (Job 38:1)

“The sound of Thy thunder was in the whirlwind.” (Psalm 77:18)

What is the common denominator for these verses?

God is always in the midst of the whirlwinds. Isn't that amazing? Doesn't that bring you comfort? Like Job, He will speak to you out of your whirlwind. Hopefully it will not be like thunder, but you can be sure He is speaking. Will you hear Him? In order to hear, you must listen, which requires you to set aside time from your chaotic to-do list and discipline your out-of-control emotions. Only then are you more apt to discern His voice and receive His comfort.

That's not all. Not only does God orchestrate the whirlwind, is in the midst of it, and speaks out of it, but His way is found in it. “The Lord is slow to anger and great in power, and the Lord will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. In whirlwind and storm is His way, and clouds are the dust beneath His feet” (Nah.1:3).

Wait. There's more. You'll be glad to know that the whirlwind has a limited lifespan like the Webster definition says. It will eventually pass. Notice the word *when* in this verse: “When the whirlwind passes, the wicked is no more, but the righteous has an everlasting foundation” (Prov. 10:25).

THE WHIRLWIND BEGINS

Which aspect of the whirlwind described above do you most relate and why?

Let's recap. We have learned that God orchestrates and displays His sovereignty in the whirlwind, He is in the midst of our own personal whirlwind, He speaks to us through it, His way may be found in it, and the whirlwind will end.

Let me leave you with one last thought. Chariots are mentioned numerous times in conjunction with the whirlwinds God sent (Isa. 5:28, 2 Kings 2:11, Isa. 66:15, Jer. 4:13, and Dan. 11:40). Remember the song "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot?" I like to envision God sending His chariot deep into my whirlwind to symbolically invite me to be His passenger. The chariot doesn't have to be taking me "home," but it would certainly provide a glorious ride with a dependable driver holding the reins. Now that's what I call sweet.

Meditative Thought

How will you apply what you have learned today to the whirlwinds of your life?



This lesson is dedicated to the memory of Annette Ramey, a hard working mother who endured more than her share of life's hardships. She faced the end of life with courage and honor before succumbing to brain cancer at an early age.