

Man's Extremity is God's Opportunity by Robert G. Storm, C.S.

My wife and I moved from California to New York six years ago. We were asked by our daughter and son-in-law if we would move to Brooklyn to help with their two young daughters. Both parents were working full-time, and had demanding jobs. One particular morning after both parents had left for work, I was in their apartment trying to encourage little Phoebe to help pick up all the toys and books that were scattered all over the floor before we departed for her day school program. The more I insisted, the more she ignored; the more visibly irritated and impatient I became, the more passively defiant she became. Looking at the clock, I knew we were going to be late. Then this happened: I found her standing in front of me with sad and big round eyes and then, looking up to me, she said, 'I need a hug.' The irritation and impatience instantly melted. I said, 'Me, too.' I got down on my knees, held out my arms, and we hugged. After a moment, we were cheerfully cleaning up the floor together, and then out the door on our way to our destination calm and happy. I called this a 'Christ-hug' experience.

What happened? Wasn't this evidence of the saving Christ protecting us both from the claim of being separated from divine Love? I hadn't even thought about praying before this...it all happened so fast. But I sure gave a very heartfelt 'Thank you, God.' It's never too late to give God thanks. The ever present, irresistible Christ continues to shine forth in relevant and timely ways to meet the human need...sometimes when we least expect it. Let's know that Nothing can deny the power of the Christ working in us, even when we are not aware of it.

The title of my keynote address is "Man's Extremity is God's Opportunity." In my research, I discovered that this phrase is not found in Scripture. It is a quotation made by John Flavel, an English Presbyterian clergyman who lived during the 17th century. That same phrase shows up over two centuries later in the 1958 publication of The J.B. Phillips translation of The New Testament in Modern English which uses that phrase as a sub heading in 2nd Corinthians 1: 8-11. This scripture is in direct reference to the missionary work of Paul and his companions which oftentimes was filled with extreme and perilous hardships. It reads this way: *"Man's extremity is God's opportunity. We should like you, our brothers, to know something of what we went through in Asia. At that time we were completely overwhelmed, the burden was more than we could bear, in fact we told ourselves that this was the end. Yet we believe now that we had this experience of coming to the end of our tether that we might learn to trust, not in ourselves, but in God who can raise the dead. It was God who preserved us from imminent death, and it is he who still preserves us. Further, we trust him to keep us safe in the future, and here you can join in and help by praying for us, so that the good that is done to us in answer to many prayers will mean eventually that many will thank God for our preservation."*

Mary Baker Eddy makes a reference to the phrase in her textbook (S&H 266:6-16): *"Would existence without personal friends be to you a blank? Then the time will come when you will be solitary, left without sympathy; but this seeming vacuum is already filled with divine Love. When this hour of development comes, even if you cling to a sense of personal joys, spiritual Love will force you to accept what best promotes your growth. Friends will betray and enemies will slander, until the lesson is sufficient to exalt you; for*

"man's extremity is God's opportunity." And then she goes on to say: "The author has experienced the foregoing prophecy and its blessings."

I spent a career in public education; first as a classroom teacher and then finishing up the last eight years as a principal of an elementary school. One particular memorable morning was proof to me that God's protective power is accessible and immediate. I was out supervising the playground before the start of the school day. As the morning bell rang and students went to classrooms, I returned to my office to review my appointments and schedule for the day. Minutes later I received word that there was some sort of disturbance near one of the classrooms, and that I needed to investigate immediately.

When I entered the classroom, two adult aides informed me that an unknown teenager had walked onto the campus from a side entrance, stood in full view of the sliding glass doors, pulled out a pistol from inside his coat, and fired two shots at a car that had pulled up in a side parking lot of the school. This occurred in the same location where the very young special education students were expected to arrive soon. The aides saw this person leaving toward the front of the school.

I ordered an immediate lockdown of the campus; the police were notified and arrived moments later. There was no sign of the intruder, as he had been seen leaving the campus shortly before the police arrived. The police searched further and assured me that the campus was clear. I notified staff that lockdown status was discontinued and that regular routines could resume.

I returned to my office for what turned out to be the only private moments for the rest of the day. And I truly needed that time to pray about what had just happened. I was stunned and deeply saddened by the repulsive thought that someone had violated our school by shooting a gun. This put hundreds of innocent children and adults in serious danger, and I felt responsible for their safety. My anger and fear were overwhelming, and I felt I was losing the ability to think clearly. So I called my wife, a Christian Science practitioner, to pray with me. She spoke authoritatively about God's complete control of the situation, which, I saw, included my capacity to think normally.

Immediately, a rousing quote came to mind: *"Know, then, that you possess sovereign power to think and act rightly, and that nothing can dispossess you of this heritage and trespass on Love"* (Pulpit and Press p.3:7-9) by Mrs. Eddy. The aggressive feelings of depression and fear instantly vanished. I was thinking clearly again and was deeply grateful to God for this quick and dramatic turnaround in my thought. It was another Christ-hug experience.

The rest of my day was devoted to explaining to staff, students, parents, and the community what had happened, and assuring them that the campus was safe from violence and that no one was hurt. I felt alert and composed for the remainder of the day which included interviews with four television news teams. Some teachers gratefully mentioned that they felt safe at school because of the confident example set by the school office and administration. The police remained on campus until dismissal time, and by then the intruder had been apprehended in the neighborhood without further incident.

This experience, along with others in my life-journey, has given me lots of opportunity for self-examination. Why did this happen? I couldn't find any satisfying human answers. It seems to be such a typical inclination to search only for human answers to make sense of a difficult situation. For instance, in the Bible, Jesus saw a man which was blind from his birth. The story goes on: *"And his disciples asked him, saying, Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him"* (John 9:2, 3).

Years later after my own experience on that day, I continue to pray for more insight to view the experience in a helpful way. From a spiritual standpoint, I was learning the importance of understanding the nature of God as divine Love, and my indestructible relationship with God, because this brings healing. Don't you love the response Jesus gave to the disciple's question who were searching for a cause and effect in matter? Jesus saw clearly that human reasoning serves no useful purpose and so denounced it as illegitimate. And he also affirmed that the law of God maintains perfect order, health, and harmony. As I continued to pray about my own experience, the purpose of the Christ was becoming more apparent. On page 332:9-11 of the textbook we read: *"Christ is the true idea voicing good, the divine message from God to men speaking to the human consciousness."* So with spiritual conviction, let's pray to know that Christly prayer neutralizes any evil intent to commit a violent act and protects individuals from becoming victims or perpetrators.

In light of several school shootings reported this year alone, it's vitally important that we do something about it. Sarah Hyatt shared some ideas she wrote in a Christian Science Sentinel (Nov 6, 2006) article titled, "Safety at School and Everywhere Else." It includes in part, *"After the Columbine (Colorado) shootings, a group of ministers got together and put out a call for people everywhere to pray in their own way every time they passed a school. Instead of having drive-by shootings, they said we needed to have drive-by prayer." It continues: Each time I go past a school, I try to envelop it in my prayers for the safety of the children there, treasuring their innocence and their teachableness. I acknowledge that there is a universal God who is present there to establish safety, to keep them from harm. A little short prayer like that does so much to counteract the fear that we are tempted to feel when we think about these shootings being so random, and threatening a place that would seem to be safe, even in our own communities."*

The Bible has many accounts of God protecting those in danger. Paul was a prisoner on a ship in the Mediterranean Sea facing a "tempestuous wind, called Euroclydon". In Acts 27:22, Paul tells everyone *"be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of any man's life among you, but of the ship. For there stood by me this night the angel of God....saying, Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee"*. As you know, the boat was shipwrecked just off the coast of the island of Melita. Verse 44 reads, *"And so it came to pass, that they escaped all safe to land."*

And then there were the extreme circumstances regarding the crucifixion of Jesus. We know how the story played out. The disciples' Master Teacher, Christ Jesus, was arrested, sentenced to death by crucifixion, and then executed. All but one of the disciples abandoned him. In the view of the disciples, his teaching and their learning had come to an abrupt and tragic end. They were afraid of suffering a similar fate and so, went into hiding. The prospect of living a safe and normal life was now gone forever--so they thought. That's a good representation of 'Man's extremity'.

Here comes 'God's Opportunity'! We know what happened next. Christ Jesus reappeared to the disciples. Much to their surprise, school was still in session. He still had important lessons to teach them. He was living proof that the so-called "death experience" was not what it appeared to be. They were ready to be comforted and enlightened; grateful to learn that their dear Teacher was not dead, but alive, and that they, too, could learn more about God's real nature, more about the nature of God's creation; and to see that this spiritual understanding of Being brings healing, renewal, and regeneration. They were no longer fearful about matter as the basis of life, safety, and health. Instead, they were learning that Life is spiritual and eternal and safe.

Our textbook gives us some important understanding about this experience with Jesus. *"We acknowledge that the crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection served to uplift faith to understand eternal Life, even the allness of Soul, Spirit, and the nothingness of matter"* (S&H 497:20). On page 34:20-23, in reference to the disciples...*"His resurrection was also their resurrection. It helped them to raise themselves and others from spiritual dullness and blind belief in God into the perception of infinite possibilities"*.

And in the Glossary (S&H 593:9-11) we find the definition of "Resurrection". *Spiritualization of thought; a new and higher idea of immortality, or spiritual existence; material belief yielding to spiritual understanding.*" It is paramount that we be firm that the resurrection of thought is happening right now and is ongoing. And what is doing the resurrecting and spiritualizing of thought? The Christ--- Right now!

Again, this passage, *'material belief yielding to spiritual understanding'* was illustrated when Paul and fellow prisoners were protected from the storm and shipwreck; that kept me from losing my mind during the campus shooting; that restored harmony with my little granddaughter and myself. Thank you, God!

What did the Master say about his teaching? Jesus refers to the Comforter as what he taught and prophesied. In John 14:26 we read, *"But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you."* This was a divine prophecy for all time, including our contemporary life experience today.

We know how Mrs. Eddy's love of the Scriptures led her to discover the healing presence in the Bible through one of her extreme experiences. After a severe fall on an icy sidewalk during a winter evening in Massachusetts, she was under the care of a doctor whose prognosis was that she would not survive the night. After asking for her Bible and turning to one of Jesus' Gospel healings, she was instantly healed. Was she grateful for the healing? YES! A Christ-hug experience? Indeed!

Did she understand how she was healed? Not really, but she knew it had to do with what she had read in the Bible. She continued researching her Bible, making notes, and practicing what she was learning about the laws of God on patients who were willing to be treated-- and being successful at it.

After three years of study and practice, she was encouraged to write a book about what she was learning and named it, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures. She wrote on p.55:27: *“In the words of St. John: ‘He shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever’. This Comforter I understand to be Divine Science.”* In the early days of her writing and practice, based on her research of the Bible, Mrs. Eddy had hopes that her discovery would naturally be accepted by mainstream Christian churches of her time. That was not to be the case. It was now apparent that she needed to start a Church designed to preserve and to protect her textbook which is essential to expanding one’s understanding and effective practice of Christian Science.

Had Mrs. Eddy only focused on the discovery of Christian Science and writing the textbook, where would the Christian Science Church be today? She needed a way to safeguard the textbook, and a process that would ensure the long-term publication of it. There needed to be designated public locations where the textbook would be studied and purchased. There needed to be Sunday Schools for the education of the children, and church sermons that nurse, comfort and heal. Her role as Discoverer of Christian Science was now expanding to include that of Founder of a Church movement. The Founding of a Church movement led to her writing our Manual of The Mother Church.

From the biography Mary Baker Eddy: Christian Healer (Amplified Edition) by Yvonne Cache, and Robert Townsend Warneck; amplification by Robert von Fettweis, this is written about Mrs. Eddy: *“In her eyes, the Manual was much more than a compilation of rules to operate her Church in an orderly manner. She also intended it to be a guidebook that, when understood and obeyed, would make its students better Christian healers. Like Science and Health, the Manual was to be applied to all aspects of one’s daily life”* (p.216).

Both the textbook and the *Manual* emphasize the importance of loving God with all our heart, soul, spirit, and mind, and “to love thy neighbor as thyself.” This is fulfilled by serving our branch churches through an organized church structure that is designed to prosper in our local communities which directly contributes to our spiritual growth and to supporting the great Cause, Christian Science, which contributes to what mankind not only needs but we pray to know that mankind desires it as well.

Could this be a good time for self-examination? Our Leader is quoted (S&H 496:9-14) *“We all must learn that Life is God. Ask yourself: Am I living the life that approaches the supreme good? Am I demonstrating the healing power of Truth and Love? If so, then the way will grow brighter “unto the perfect day.” Your fruits will prove what the understanding of God brings to man.”* Mrs. Eddy provides guidance to the readers of the textbook: *“Take divine Science. Read this book from beginning to end. Study it, ponder it”* (S&H 559:20).

In the book of Psalms 42: 11 we read *“Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God.”* To ‘hope in God’ is to know the Christ is forever enlightening and sustaining us. That it inspires, comforts, strengthens, and heals. Healing in Christian Science is not about fixing a problem or ‘getting better’, but the awakening effect of the Christ where man’s God-given health becomes more apparent. So hope in God is based on a solid conviction of our permanent, unchanging relationship with God, our Maker. As the textbook reveals (S&H 470:32): *“The relations of God and man, divine Principle and idea, are indestructible in Science; and Science knows no lapse from nor return to harmony, but holds the divine order or spiritual law, in which God and all that He creates are perfect and eternal, to have remained unchanged in its eternal history.”*

So, how do we discover more about the Christ and its ever present power and influence in our lives? So that ‘Extremities’ become much less impressive? And ‘God’s Opportunities’ become more natural responses to the Comforter which reveals God’s authority, God’s allness, and man’s oneness with God. That is, to be in complete accord with Him. The textbook explains to us how not to be impressed by error and its foolishness. To understand that evil is nobody and nothing. So we willingly, humbly, and obediently follow our Leader’s directive: *‘Take divine Science. Read this book from beginning to end. Study it. Ponder it.’* Let us discover those spiritual revelations that answer our questions, satisfy our yearnings, that heal us, and direct our motive and purpose to be about our Father’s business. In closing, and with gratitude from the beginning of the Preface from the textbook (S&H vii:1,2): *“To those leaning on the sustaining infinite, to-day is big with blessings.”*



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