

The Black Hole

Os Hillman • Adversity

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Chapter 3 Upside of Adversity by Os Hillman

The Black Hole

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness

2 Corinthians 12:9

On February 20, 1962, at 9:47 A.M., the spacecraft Friendship 7 rose on a pillar of fire, piloted by lone astronaut John Glenn. Leaving the coast of Florida far behind, the space capsule orbited the earth three times, traveling 81,000 miles in less than four hours. As the craft began its descent from space, mission controllers in Houston received a warning signal: A sensor indicated that the capsule's heat shield was in danger of detaching. If the heat shield came loose during re-entry, the capsule would burn like a meteor-and John Glenn would die.

There was no way to fix the problem in space. The capsule was already approaching the outer fringe of the atmosphere. As the tiny spacecraft fell toward Earth, the heat shield glowed red-hot-then white-hot. Soon, a hot cloud of ionized gas particles called plasma surrounded the capsule. Because radio waves cannot penetrate plasma, the spacecraft experienced a total communications blackout-what astronauts and mission controllers call a "black hole" (not to be confused with the black holes that form in space when a star collapses).

The minutes crawled by and the suspense mounted in the Houston control room. NASA engineers felt totally helpless. Finally, after five minutes of silence, mission controllers heard Glenn's voice crackling over the radio: "Friendship 7 to Houston-"

Shouts of joy shook the control room. John Glenn was coming home.

It turned out that the warning signal had come from a faulty sensor. Although neither Glenn nor the mission controllers knew it at the time, the heat shield was absolutely firm and reliable. The fears for John Glenn's safety during his black hole experience were unfounded.

If you've ever been through a Joseph Pit experience, you probably know what a communications "black hole" feels like. While you are in the pit of adversity, you feel that your world is collapsing, that your life is out of control-and that God is silent. You call out to Him and there is no answer. The silence of a black hole is deafening. You feel isolated and alone. You question God's love, His care for you, and even His existence.

But even when it seems that God is distant and silent, when you feel you are in a black hole of isolation and loneliness, your "heat shield" is still there, firm and

reliable. In your black hole experience, God is teaching you to go deeper into your relationship with Him. You may think that your life is out of control and burning like a meteor, but in reality God, your heat shield, still protects you from the fiery forces that surround you.

I discovered this truth during my own black hole, a two-year period from 1994 to 1996, the first two years of my seven-year Joseph Pit trial. The black hole usually occurs at the front end of a crisis when the heat is greatest-and when God seems strangely silent.

A Place of Total Nothingness

A black hole is a place of total nothingness. It's a time in our life when God removes the resources and supports that we normally rely on to feel secure-our careers, finances, friends, family, health and so forth. For years, we may have thought that we were trusting in God, but in reality, we were trusting in people and things for our own sense of safety. Suddenly, everything we have relied on vanishes-and we feel naked and defenseless against the world. We feel abandoned by God.

I'm sure that is how Joseph must have felt when he was in his black hole, at the bottom of a deep pit, with no way of escape. His black hole despair must have deepened when his brothers sold him to the Midianite slave traders who bound him in chains and forced him to march across the desert with a lash at his back. Later, when Joseph was convicted of a crime he never committed and sat for years in an Egyptian jail, he must have wondered why God gave him dreams of a bright future only to abandon him to a terrible fate in an alien land.

A black hole is a living nightmare. It feels as if we have no control over any aspect of our life. The fear is constant. We see happy, smiling faces around us, and we know that no one understands how we feel. No one can comfort us in a black hole. We're totally alone.

I publish a daily email devotional called TGIF-Today God Is First.¹ One day, I received a response from a TGIF subscriber who identified with the black hole experience. This subscriber wrote:

I'm sitting and crying as I read today's devotional. There's so much inside of me, and I don't know how to put into words the turmoil I'm going through. I have such a desire to experience the fullness of knowing and serving Jesus. I have so much love for Him and for His kingdom, yet I feel I don't fit in anywhere. I don't have a part to play in the body of Christ.

I feel like I'm dangling in mid-air, embracing but not being embraced, belonging but lost. I feel lonely and set apart, in love with Christ but disconnected from Him. It's as if I'm an alien even in my own church.

So your message today was a blessing. I still can't see the bigger picture, but there is one, isn't there? I do have a purpose. God does have a plan for my life, a destiny for me to fulfill.

I don't want to miss Him. So I die, I wait, I believe, I love, I trust, I live in Him. Thanks, Os, for your words of reassurance.

Like the writer of those words, you are probably full of questions as you go through your black hole experience. But even as you question, hold on to God. Keep trusting Him. Wait, believe, love and know that He is at work in your life, even in the silence of your black hole. This is a season of preparation.

Angry at God

My Joseph Pit experience began when my then-wife said she wanted a separation. Three years into my seven-year trial, I was still fighting to stave off divorce. I had spent hours and hours in prayer, pleading with God to move on my behalf. But one day, the door slammed shut. It was my darkest day. Hadn't God heard my prayers? Didn't He care?

Feeling betrayed by God, I stormed out the door and walked up the heavily wooded hill behind my house. Reaching the hilltop, I raged at Him. "God!" I shouted, "Is this how you treat someone who is faithful to You! I've waited and waited. I've worked and prayed. And for what? For this?" My lungs hurt and my throat was raw-but I had one more thing to say to God: "I hate You, God! I hate You!"

I sat down on an old oak tree that had broken at the base and was lying on the ground. For the next three hours, I sobbed uncontrollably, unable to speak, unable to pray. I wondered how God could abandon me. I wondered if He even existed. Maybe I had wasted my life believing in a myth.

Finally, I got up to leave. When I looked over at the fallen oak that I had sat on, I noticed something interesting.

The fallen tree was pointed toward the base of another oak tree-a tree that stood strong and tall with wide spreading branches. At that moment, I heard a quiet voice inside me say, Today, like this broken oak tree, you are a broken man. But this brokenness was needed in order for you to become like the large, strong oak tree that stands before you.

I walked down the hill, my mind whirling with questions. What was my life going to be like as a divorced man? Would I ever have a ministry for God again? Surely my Christian witness was nothing but smoke and ashes. I was a failure as a businessman, as a Christian and as a husband and father. And yet God had spoken to me, hadn't He? That quiet voice within me had promised that my broken life would stand tall and strong again. I didn't see how that promise could be fulfilled. I wasn't even sure that the promise had come from God. Maybe it was my own wishful thinking.

Years later, I would look back and know that God Himself had spoken to me out of the darkness and silence of my black hole. Today, whenever I read Isaiah 61, I am reminded of God's faithfulness to me. Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord promised to

Provide for those who grieve in Zion-

to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise

instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD for
the display of his splendour (Isa. 61:3).

Even in my black hole when I raged at God and told Him I hated Him, God was faithful and forgiving. Today, He has replaced the ashes of my despair with the oil of gladness. He has planted me firmly like a strong and sturdy oak tree, and I live my life in gratitude for His mercy. But this didn't happen overnight.

The Death and Resurrection of a Vision

During my black hole, a friend gave me a book by Oswald Chambers called *Not Knowing Where*. It became my life preserver. In the book, Chambers recounts the story of Abraham's journey into an unknown territory. He writes:

God's method always seems to be vision first, and then reality, but in between the vision and the reality there is often a deep valley of humiliation. How often has a faithful soul been plunged into a like darkness when after the vision has come the test.²

We see this principle in the life of Joseph. God gave him a vision of being a ruler, but that vision died when his brothers tossed him into the pit. We see it in the lives of Jesus' disciples: Jesus told them that they would be leaders in His coming Kingdom, but that vision died when Jesus was nailed to the cross. The pattern is clear: First, God gives us a vision, and then that vision dies. Finally, God resurrects that vision in a new and amazing form.

We often become impatient in the black hole. The dream dies, and we are unwilling to wait for the resurrection, so we hurry things along. We see this in the life of Abraham. God gave Abraham a command and a promise:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:1-2).

God gave Abraham a dream that his descendants would form a great nation. But for Abraham to have descendants, he must first have a son. As Abraham's wife Sarah grew old, Abraham began to doubt God's promise. His wife was well past the age of childbearing, yet she had not given him a son.

At Sarah's suggestion, Abraham decided to help God fulfill His own promise. He had sexual relations with Sarah's maidservant, and the maidservant bore a son, Ishmael. But Ishmael wasn't the son God had promised; he was the son of Abraham's impatience. Later, God enabled Sarah in her old age to bear Abraham a son-Isaac, the son of God's promise.

When we try to do God's will in our own way and according to our own timetable, we are giving birth to Ishmael, not Isaac. We are not living according to God's promise, but according to our own impatience.

In 1996, when I was two years into my pit experience, I launched a new magazine called Christians in Business. I thought this magazine was my "promised son," my Isaac, the fulfillment of the dream God had given to me. I was wrong. The magazine died after two issues for lack of funding. After having already lost \$500,000, I could hardly afford another big setback, but the Christians in Business debacle cost me another \$50,000.

I was devastated and baffled. I felt that I was obediently following God's leading, yet my dreams continued to end in disaster. Today, I understand that the magazine was my Ishmael, not my Isaac. I was trying to do God's will according to my own timing. I was trying to hurry along through the black hole process instead of waiting on God.

When our vision dies, we often panic! We try to give our vision mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. We are too impatient and distrustful to simply wait and see how God is going to restore our dreams in His own time, by His own power. In *Not Knowing Where*, Oswald Chambers states:

Whenever God gives a vision to a saint, he puts the saint in the shadow of His hand, as it were, and the saint's duty is to be still and listen. . . . When God gives a vision and darkness follows, waiting on God will bring you into accordance with the vision He has given if you await His timing. Otherwise, you try to do away with the supernatural in God's undertakings. Never try to help God fulfill His word.³

In the book of Proverbs, Solomon warns us not to rely on our own fallible wisdom while trying to do God's perfect will. He writes:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make your paths straight.

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil (Prov. 3:5-7).

God places us in black holes to teach us to trust Him with all our hearts-and that means He wants us to learn to trust His timing. God wants us to wait for His deliverance. Painful though it is, the black hole is God's gift to us. It is His means of bringing us to spiritual maturity so that we will be able to discern the difference between our own self-deliverance and God's authentic deliverance in our lives.

It's a paradox, but it's true: God often calls us to a ministry and then deliberately thwarts our efforts to achieve our goals! We see it in Exodus 5 when Moses met with Pharaoh. In obedience to God, Moses told Pharaoh, "Let my people go!" How did Pharaoh respond? He said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." Again and again, Moses returned and demanded freedom for his people. Again and again, Pharaoh refused.

So Moses complained to God, "You called me to go to Pharaoh, but You are not freeing the people!" Moses grew discouraged because God had called him to

fulfill a vision—a dream of liberation for his people—and the vision seemed to die. But God was teaching Moses and the people of Israel to wait and trust.

The Crisis that Defines Us

God may also place us in black hole situations in order to give us a message to share with the world. Jesus said, "Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops" (Matt. 10:27, NKJV). Oswald Chambers reminds us that "song birds are taught to sing in the dark" and that the darkness is not a place for talking but a place for listening and learning. "If you talk to other people," he says, "you cannot hear what God is saying. When you are in the dark, listen, and God will give you a very precious message for someone else once you are back in the light."⁴

One way to look at a black hole is to see it as a defining moment. A defining moment is a time in our life when everything changes and we know that there's no turning back. A defining moment crystallizes us and shapes us into the kind of people we will be. It's an event in our lives that gives form and meaning to our existence.

The defining moment in the life of Moses came when he heard God call to him from a bush that burned but miraculously was not consumed. The defining moment for Daniel came when God delivered him from the lions' den. The defining moment for Joshua came when the Jordan River parted and he set foot in the Promised Land. The defining moment for Peter came when by faith he stepped out of a boat and walked on water toward his Lord.

My defining moment was my black hole. That intense time of trial reshaped my thinking, transformed my relationship with God, and redefined who I was as a Christian and a businessman. It redirected the course of my life. My life was never the same after that. I could never go back to being the man I was before—and I didn't want to.

The longer I live, the more convinced I become that those whom God uses in a great way experience three stages of life. First, there is the life they live before their crisis with God. Second comes the crisis that defines them for the rest of their lives. Third comes their post-crisis life in which they live out the calling God has placed on their lives. Where are you in your journey?

Salvation is only the beginning of God's plan for our lives. He doesn't merely want us to be saved. He wants to use us in a mighty way as partners in His vast plan for restoring the universe from the effects of sin. But before He can use us, He must refine us and define us. Once we have experienced our defining moment, we will never be the same.

What to Do in a Black Hole

When we find ourselves in a black hole experience, we shouldn't just sit and brood. We need to take stock of our life. We need to take a look at our relationship with God. We need to take action!

First, we must ask God if there are any sins, habits or attitudes that He might be judging in our life. When we go through adversity, it's important to discern whether the

trial we face is the result of God's discipline for our sin or if it is preparing us for a future leadership role. We need to constantly make sure that our lives are pure before Him. The Bible states that Satan has a right to sift us if there is sin in our lives (see Luke 22:31; 1 Cor. 5:5).

Second, we have to trust God when we enter a black hole. We can't trust our feelings, for they will tell us, "God has rejected you. Abandon hope. He has left you utterly alone." Feelings change; God never changes. Feelings come and go; God is always with us. His promise to us is the same today as it was in Joshua's day: "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Josh. 1:5).

Third, we must remember that our black hole experience is not only intended to refine and define us; it's also intended to influence and change the lives of hundreds or even thousands of other people. Our adversity is not just for us but also for others in our sphere of influence. Knowing this may not make the black hole experience any less painful or lonely, but it may change our perspective and enable us to see beyond our own suffering.

Fourth, we need to ask God for the grace to endure this trial. We need to ask Him to enable us to learn the lessons of adversity. We shouldn't try to hurry the black hole process along or try to deliver ourselves through our own efforts. Remember, when Joseph was in the depths of the pit, there was nothing he could do about it. He couldn't climb out, jump out, levitate out or talk his way out. All he could do was pray, wait upon the Lord, and learn the lessons of adversity.

Fifth, we must lean on God. Even when we don't feel like praying, we need to pray. Even when we don't feel like reading His Word, we need to read. Even when we don't feel like singing songs of faith, we need to sing. And when we pray, we shouldn't just talk, but also listen. We need to be silent before God and listen for His still, quiet voice. We can't trust in natural reasoning or human wisdom. Logic told Abraham that his wife Sarah was too old to bear him a son, so he did the logical thing and had a baby with another woman-and that's where he went wrong. As the apostle Paul observed, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Cor. 1:25). We can't lean on our own understanding, but only on God.

Sixth, we must be alert to new truths and new perspectives. During a black hole experience, God often leads us to amazing new discoveries. A black hole can be a storehouse of unexpected riches for the soul. As God tells us:

I will give you the treasures of darkness,

riches stored in secret places,

so that you may know that I am the LORD,

the God of Israel, who summons you by name (Isa. 45:3).

Bible teacher F. B. Meyer once observed, "Whenever you get into a prison of circumstances, be on watch. Prisons are rare places for seeing things. It was in prison that Bunyan saw his wondrous allegory and Paul met the Lord and John

looked through heaven's open door and Joseph saw God's mercy. God has no chance to show His mercy to some of us except when we are in some distressing sorrow. The night is the time to see the stars."5

One good thing that came from my black hole trial was that I began to write. I started producing the TGIF--Today God Is First daily devotionals. Today, those devotionals are read daily by hundreds of thousands of people around the world. Writing has become a central focus of God's work in me. If I had not gone through that experience, I wouldn't be an author today.

Seventh, we must live each day to the fullest. We can't live in the past or in the future. We must live in the moment God that gives us right now. Our time of deliverance will come according to God's schedule. Meanwhile, we need to be faithful in doing what God has given us to do and be content in the place where He has put us.

We shouldn't think of the black hole experience as an optional add-on to our life-an extra blessing designed to make us in better Christians. When we go through a trial of adversity, we need to understand that God is performing radical surgery on our life. The purpose of this surgery is not to destroy us, but to give us a new heart. God is making a fundamental change in who we are and who we will be.

From Adversity to Destiny

We all avoid pain. We keep our medicine cabinets loaded with pain relievers. We couldn't imagine major surgery without an anaesthetic. Because we are so averse to pain, we think that God must desire that we experience pain-free lives. After all, a loving God surely wouldn't want us to suffer pain, would He? Although God takes no pleasure in our pain, we have to acknowledge that He sometimes allows painful circumstances to occur in our lives in order to shape us and make us more like Christ.

I once came across the following poem written by an anonymous Confederate soldier, a devout young man who fought in the American Civil War. The lines of this poem express the soul of a man who has learned the lessons of a black hole experience:

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.
I asked God for health, that I might do greater things;
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.
I asked for riches, that I might be happy;
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men;
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life;
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.
I got nothing that I asked for but everything I had hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.

I am among men, most richly blessed.⁶

Do we trust God to lead us even though we can't see the pathway in front of us? Do we trust Him to be all-knowing, all-loving, and all-powerful? Do we believe He does all things well? As Paul wrote, "Everything that does not come from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). That's why God leads us through the darkness and silence of the black hole.

Only in the darkness do we learn to walk by faith.

Questions for Reflection

1. Think of a time when you prayed and God didn't answer your prayers as you thought He should. How did that disappointing experience affect your faith?
2. Have you ever been angry with God? What did you say to Him? How do you think God responded to your expression of anger?
3. Do you ever feel that God owes you an explanation for the difficult or tragic experiences you've gone through?
4. Think of a recent, major decision you made in your life. What was the basis for the decision you made? Was it based on trust in God's wisdom or reliance on your own logic and understanding?
5. Are you going through a black hole experience right now? If so, you are probably eager (if not impatient) for this painful experience to end. What do you think might happen if you tried to remove yourself from this black hole experience before God's timing?

Notes

1. To subscribe for free to Today God Is First, please visit <http://www.marketplaceleaders.org/> and click "Subscribe to TGIF Daily Emails."
2. Oswald Chambers, *Not Knowing Where* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1957), p. 83.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
4. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest: An Updated Edition in Today's Language*, ed. by James Reimann (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1992), February 14 entry.
5. FR B. Meyer, *The Life of Joseph* (Lynnwood, WA: Emerald Books, 1995), p.45.
6. "Prayer of an Unknown Soldier," quoted in Austin Pryor, "Trusting God to Answer Our Prayers," *Crosswalk.com*.
<http://www.crosswalk.com/family/finances/1386973.html> (accessed April 24, 2006).