

Children

Object: If possible some hair clippings, a pinch of hair will do, spread out on a piece of white paper. Also an ink pad and a piece of paper for each child

Does God really know and care about me? Do you think that God cares about someone as little as you? How important are you? Do you work, make things that are important, are you responsible for one of God's families or are you famous and do you make important decisions? Can God really remember who you are out of all the children in the world? Well, you know I know a lot of people who wonder about questions like that and not everyone of them think that God really cares about them. But when I turn to my Bible, I read that Jesus once said, when He was discussing this question, that God even knows how many hairs grow on our heads. Can you believe that? God actually knows, Jesus says, the number of hairs that grow on our heads. Well, when I went to the barber I asked him to save a pinch of my hair so that I could count just the ones in a small group that I had on my head. I even brought them along so that you could see that I was not kidding. Look at the number of hairs that I have in just this small group and to think that God knows how many there are on my head. I don't even know how many hairs there are here but God says He knows. If He knows that much about me then just think how much else He must know. I would have to be pretty important to Him for Him to know that.

But I really knew even before I read that in the Bible. Do you know why? Let me show you. God made only one person like you. There is not another Sally, Joe, or Pete in the whole world. That's right, you are the only one like you. There may be other people with your name, your color of hair, the same height, weight, and size of nose. But to show you that there is only one like you God gave you a very special print that makes you different from everyone else. Maybe you can guess what that is when I show you this pad. Every one of you has a fingerprint that only belongs to you and no one else has one like it. When the service is over I am going to fingerprint you and give you a copy so that you can take it home and put it on your desk.

Just think, there are three billion people in the world and God has never made another one exactly like you. There never has been one like you and there never will be another one like you. So do you think that you are important to God? I should say that you are and I want you to know it and remember it forever.

I

Some first graders were asked to draw a picture of God in their Sunday school class. Their finished products contained some interesting theology. One child depicted God in the form of a brightly colored rainbow. Another presented him as an old man coming out of the clouds.

An intense little boy drew God with a remarkable resemblance to Superman. The best entry, however, came from a little girl. She said, "I didn't know what God looked like, so I just drew a picture of my daddy." (1)

Today is Father's Day. It is our most fervent prayer that when our boys and girls look at their Dads, they see God's love reflected in their Dad's eyes. Of course, not every Dad is a great Dad. In fact, Dads don't get much respect in our society nowadays.

Some of you will remember the wonderful story of the family who had three small children who were determined to have their own little puppy dog. Mother protested because she knew that somehow she would end up caring for the pup. The children solemnly promised that they would take care of it, if only she would let them have their own puppy. Finally Mom relented and they brought their little puppy home. They named him Danny, and cared for him diligently . . . for about a month. Then time passed and Mom found herself responsible for cleaning and feeding the dog just as she predicted. She decided that the children were not living up to their promise so she resolved to find a new owner for Danny. Mom was quite surprised to find that the children's reactions were mild. One of them remarked matter-of-factly, "We'll miss him." "Yes," Mom answered, "we will miss him but he is too much work for one person and since I'm the one that has to do all the work, I say he goes." "But," protested another child, "if he wouldn't eat so much and wouldn't be so messy, could we keep him?"

Mom held her ground, "It's time to take Danny to his new home." With one voice and in tearful outrage the children reacted, "DANNY?" they sobbed. "We thought you said Daddy!" (2) Well,

it's true, Daddies would be easier to deal with if they wouldn't eat so much and wouldn't be so messy.

It's not always easy to be a Dad, but we know that we have many fine Dads in our church family and we give God thanks for them.

In today's lesson from Matthew's Gospel, verses 29-31, Jesus says something quite remarkable about his Daddy. After all, that is what he called his Heavenly Father—*Abba*, Daddy.

Christ is sending his twelve disciples out into the world where he knows they will experience not only opposition but persecution as well. He gives them these instructions: Not to be afraid.

Then he adds these beautiful words of comfort: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows."

We have heard those words so many times that we probably have lost a sense of how amazing they are, but think about it. There may be millions of sparrows in the world. The sparrow is such a common bird and so numerous that often it is considered a pest. But sparrows can be found nearly everywhere on earth. From New Delhi, India to Santiago, Chile; from London, England to Sydney, Australia; they are, indeed, ubiquitous. In the deserts of Kuwait there are sparrows. I used to feel sorry for them struggling to find food and water, I kept thinking how lucky the sparrows were at home. I used to leave bread crumbs and water for them.

Some studies indicate that, due to climate change, there are fewer sparrows than there used to be. In fact, a survey published last Fall in the *Journal Science* reported that there are nearly 3 billion—yes, I said billion with a b—3 billion less birds altogether than there were half a century ago . . . probably for a variety of reasons. We live in a complicated environment. Among those most threatened according to the survey are sparrows. (3) Still the number of sparrows in the world is still quite staggering.

Now think about Christ's statement: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care." Could God possibly care that much about one tiny sparrow among the millions that fill the sky?

And think of his second statement: "And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered." Now some of us don't have as much hair as we once did. But Jesus is saying that God's knowledge of each of us is so extensive (or should we say intensive?) that God knows every hair on our head. Wow, that's amazing!

We know God is capable of such love because we see such love reflected in His Son. Jesus loved in a way no other human being has loved. "The great church father philosopher/theologian, St. Augustine once observed that Jesus loved each one he ever met as if there were none other in all the world to love . . . at the same time St. Augustine noted that Jesus loved all as he loved each. The way he loved was not only individualized, but it was also incredibly universal." (4) That's a love that you and I cannot quite comprehend. We can only give God thanks for it.

Then Christ adds those beautiful words, "So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." Wow! What reassurance. "Don't be afraid . . ."

The Master was dealing with the subject of fear, as he often did. His disciples would be facing situations in which genuine fear was certainly appropriate. They would suffer much in the coming days. But his words were also meant for us. In fact, it is really quite extraordinary how often in the New Testament we read such admonitions as, "Don't be afraid" or "Fear not" or "Let not your heart be troubled," etc. Christ knew what a problem fear is. Do you know how many

times in Scripture it says not to worry or be afraid, 365 times One for each day of the year, so you can worry on leap day

There was an amusing incident in Oregon a while back in which deputies received a 911 call to a home for a “burglary in progress.” It seems that a woman was reporting that a stranger was in her bathroom, and that the stranger had the bathroom door locked. She said she could see shadows moving under the door. Within minutes several deputies surrounded the home, calling for a K9 team as backup. They said they could hear a rustling noise coming from the bathroom. After calling to the “suspect” several times over a loudspeaker, deputies went into the home with their guns drawn. After forcing open the bathroom door, deputies found the villain. “As we entered the home we could hear rustling in the bathroom,” the Washington County Sheriff’s Deputy Rogers wrote in his report of the incident. “We made several announcements and the ‘rustling’ became more frequent. We breached the bathroom door and encountered a very thorough vacuuming job being done by a Roomba Robotic Vacuum cleaner.” No burglar—just a very conscientious Roomba doing its job.

“No word on whether deputies filed charges in the incident,” said a local reporter, “but the suspect’s record appears to be *clean*.” (5) No pun intended, of course. Fear has a way of playing havoc with our imagination until a Roomba Robotic Vacuum cleaner becomes a robber.

In most places today in our society fear is up. And fear can make people act in irrational ways. I was talking to a pregnant black woman carrying a baby boy who expressed the worry that she would someday have the talk with him. Not the sex talk but the talk about being a black male walking down the street. Fear gets a hold on us when justified like soldiers going into battle or even when we know it doesn’t make sense like boarding a plane (explain to me when more people die in auto accidents than plane crashes that we are not fearful getting into a car), we can’t shake the apprehension that something bad is going to happen to us.

More than half a century ago Alfred Hitchcock’s classic horror film *Psycho* burst on the movie scene with its infamous shower scene. Behind that iconic shower curtain was the late Janet Leigh. Her attacker was played by Anthony Perkins. According to an interview Leigh did with *The New York Times* before her death, she said the scene had a dramatic effect on her—in spite of the fact that, above all people, Janet Leigh knew it was “just a movie.” After viewing the famous shower scene, in which she was repeatedly stabbed, Leigh says she was seized with an overwhelming and lasting terror. “I stopped taking showers,” she said in the interview, “and even now I take only baths.” In fact, when the actress stayed in a hotel or at a friend’s home, she was given to panic attacks. “I make sure the doors and windows of the house are locked,” she confessed, “and I leave the bathroom door and shower curtain open. I’m always facing the door, watching, no matter where the shower head is.” (6)

Fear. What a tyrant it can be. How much misery it can bring into our lives. Human beings seem to be uniquely susceptible to blowing fearful situations completely out of proportion to any real threat. This is to say that, even in situations where fear is perfectly appropriate, we would do better if we learn to manage it. Fear, which is after all a survival mechanism, can sometimes actually impair our response to the event causing our fear. So Christ says to us, “Don’t be afraid. God knows every sparrow that falls from the sky and you are worth more than many sparrows.” Let me suggest a couple of ways that God can help us as we manage our fears.

First of all, in any difficult situation, it helps to know we’re not alone.

Marcus Bales in his book titled *Speak-Confident: A collection of stories and advice on overcoming social anxiety* tells about a viral video that made its rounds not too long ago. It featured an autistic boy singing “Let it Go” from the movie *Frozen* at his school’s talent show. Not an easy feat for anyone, says Marcus Bales, let alone someone with autism.

About 30 seconds into the song, however, it became evident that this young man's nerves were starting to kick in. He starts to forget some of the lyrics. This is a treacherous moment for any performer. This is the point at which your imagination creates all kinds of negative thoughts about what will happen next.

Then something surprising happened. The crowd began to sing along. Their participation was soft at first but it continued to increase in volume as he continued to sing. Then, as the young man with autism senses the support of the audience he begins to sing with more confidence. And, says Marcus Bales, "Before you know it, the whole crowd is singing and clapping along encouraging him to continue. Finally, he finishes the song standing proudly to a roar of applause." (7)

Fear comes from a runaway imagination. And the consequences of failing are usually not as severe as we imagine. People use a phrase nowadays that is actually quite reassuring. The phrase is "It's all good." In fact, the phrase has gotten so popular that it has recently been chosen by the National Basketball Association as its official slogan.

Some people trace the origins of the phrase "It's all good" to Rap performers in the 1990s where it is featured in several recordings. I choose to trace it all the way back to the writer of Genesis when he says God looked out on all He had created and declared "It's [all] good."

If we could just believe that—that life is ultimately all good because God is in charge of everything—our lives would be so much less complicated. Fear would no longer be an obstacle. And why is it "all good?" For the believer it's because a loving God never takes His eye off of us. He is with us in everything we do, and whether we win or lose, it's all good. We can relax and be at our best, confident that He is in charge. We are not alone.

Wrapped in God's love we can walk confidently into any situation.

Story about a woman who was going through some very difficult and trying circumstances. There were serious problems in her marriage, as well as in her job. She was so lonely, dejected and isolated that it seemed pointless to try to keep going. She tried everything she knew of to better her situation but nothing seemed to work. In fact, things invariably seemed to grow worse. She was so low she was convinced that she would never again experience joy in her life.

However, one day when she was sitting in her kitchen weeping her heart out she noticed a small sparrow. Somehow it had gotten into her kitchen. That's such an unusual experience that a believing heart might wonder if it was a messenger from God. Anyhow she opened the door thinking the sparrow would simply fly out, but that's not the way things turned out. There was a closed window just above the door. And instead of flying out of the door, the sparrow kept trying to fly out through the closed window. Several times the sparrow flew at the closed window; each time it would collide with the glass and each time it would become weaker. Soon the little bird was so weak it was aligned not with the window, but with the door beneath. Finally it got so weak that it could no longer fly; it could only walk. But the story has a happy ending. When it could no longer fly, it simply walked out the door to freedom.

It was as though God literally opened [this woman's] spiritual eyes. She realized in just about every area of her life she was behaving just like this sparrow. She was trying in her own way to get out of the confining situations she was in, each time being knocked down in defeat. In reacting harshly to her family members—knocked down! Not giving her best at work—knocked down! Paying back evil for evil done to her—knocked down! Saying and doing things she knew were wrong—knocked down! She finally realized that all she had to do was do just like this sparrow, to very humbly walk in the power of God's grace and mercy and allow Him to work out all her heartaches and difficulties." (8)

And that's what she did. And that's what you and I can do as well. On this Father's Day 20/20 let's pray for a new consciousness that we are not alone and let's so wrap ourselves in our Heavenly Father's love that we can walk confidently through every difficulty. "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care . . . Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." It's all good. Amen.

1. Contributed. Source unknown.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The Los Angeles *Times*, September 20, 2019.
4. The late Rev. Dr. John R. Claypool, http://day1.org/464-loving_as_jesus_loved.
5. <https://katu.com/news/local/deputies-surround-burglar-in-oregon-home-find-out-suspect-is-roomba-trapped-in-bathroom>.
6. Date unknown.
7. (Kindle Edition.)
8. http://pluto.matrix49.com/16065/?subpages/zzz_sermon_2010-06-13.shtml.
ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., Dynamic Preaching Second Quarter Sermons, by King Duncan

II Fr Joseph Pellegrino

It was the beginning of the sixth century before Christ, about the year 590. The Kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem were terrified. The Babylonians were on the march. They had conquered the Assyrians. Tarsus and Damascus to the North had fallen. All of Mesopotamia, the nations between the Tigris and Euphrates had fallen. Now Jerusalem was threatened. How could the tiny Kingdom of Judah withstand such a huge enemy? What should the King do? He looked to his counselors. They told him to consider treaties with their pagan neighbors. This would mean trusting in the pagans rather than trusting in God. The King looked to God. There was a prophet in Jerusalem whom he respected, the prophet Jeremiah. The king saw him as someone who knew the truth and was not afraid to proclaim the truth. Jeremiah told the King that the Babylonians were agents of God about to punish the Jewish people for adopting pagan ways. The King needed to lead the people in trusting in God rather than in the pagans.

That is why the King's counselors hated Jeremiah. Today's first reading, from one of the sections of the *Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* referred to as the *Confession of Jeremiah*, relates how the King's counselors were looking for ways by which they could denounce him to the King, condemn him, even have him killed. Jeremiah is tested. Should he go along with the counselors and preserve his life? Should he get out of Jerusalem with its deadly politics? Or should he give witness to God and chance persecution from those gathered around the King. He decided to fear God rather than be afraid of men.

Fear God. That is a biblical concept that is often misunderstood. It does not mean that we should be afraid of God. It mean that we should respect God, reverence God, and be more concerned with fulfilling the Law of God than with the way others might respond to us.

In the Gospel reading for this Sunday Jesus says, "Do not let others intimidate you." He tells us to keep our priorities straight. He tells us that we should not even be afraid of people

who could kill us. "Do not fear those who deprive the body of life but cannot destroy the soul." In one of the most beautiful passages in the New Testament, Jesus says, "Are not two sparrows sold for next to nothing? Yet not a single sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's consent. As for you, every hair of your head has been counted; so do not be afraid of anything. You are worth more than an entire flock of sparrows."

The Lord also says in that passage, "Fear Him who can throw body and soul into Gehenna." This is not a popular concept in our society. We emphasize God's compassion and mercy, and this is good, but we tend to refuse to acknowledge His justice. In our own minds, we transform God into an imaginary figure that will not respond to our rejection of His life and laws. For example, a man commits adultery, leaves his wife and children, and then says, "God understands." Well maybe the *god* of his imagination might understand, but the real God was present when marriage vows were made to Him and to his wife. God sees the turmoil the selfish man thrust upon a good wife and their beautiful children. God's mercy is always available, but if the man, or if any of us refuse to acknowledge our sins and seek forgiveness, we are committing the deadly sin of presumption, and, in effect, denigrating God to a creature of our imagination.

But if we live with a reverence and respect for the Lord, the biblical Fear of the Lord, if we do all we can to be God-fearing, then we do not have to be afraid of anything. When we live with a reverence and respect for the Lord, then all those concerns that the media delights in frightening us with will diminish. Will the corona virus destroy half the population of the world similar to how the Black Plague destroyed half the population of Europe? We certainly pray that it will not, but we also know that live or die what matters is that we belong to the Lord. Will the world end this year? Everything else seems to be going wrong in 2020, so maybe, but probably not. The end of the world does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will World War III erupt when we least expect? Maybe, probably not. Nevertheless, it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will Hurricane Mojo devastate the west coast of Florida destroying our homes? Maybe, probably not. But it does not matter as long as we are united to God. Will people attack us for being Christian? Absolutely. In fact there are many people in sections of Africa and India that are being attacked for being Christian every day. Will we be disparaged because we are against abortion, against capital punishment, against euthanasia, against taking children from their parents? We certainly will be attacked for promoting the totality of respect life, but disparagement does not matter as long as we are united to God.

We have nothing to fear as long as we fear the Lord. We are a lot more important to our Loving Father than a flock of sparrows; yet not one sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father's concern. How much more does God value those creatures who are made in His image and likeness? We are worth infinitely more than many sparrows.

The devil has three terrible lies with which he assails us, sometimes directly, sometimes subtly. The first of the devil's lies is: You are not good enough. To that God answers, "I have made you good enough. I became one of you. I died for you; so I could raise you up with me to eternal life." The second lie of the devil is: You are alone. God answers, "I am with you always. I know you. I know every hair on your head. I know what you are going through. Together we can conquer all challenges, all fear." The third lie of the devil is one which all liars try to convince others of, that lie is simply: the other person is lying. In the case of the devil, his third great lie is that God has deceived us. He used this to great effect in the biblical sages' story about original sin. The devil told Adam and Eve that God was deceiving them to keep them from being like God. In our modern times, some people question that there might be other ways

to live than that presented by the Church. To the accusation that God lies, God answers, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

"Fear the Lord and do not be afraid of anything." the Lord says. You are worth more than many sparrows.

///

A large train pulled by two engines was making its way across America. While crossing the Western mountains, one of the engines broke down. "No problem, we can make it to Denver and get a replacement engine there," the engineer thought, and carried on at half power.

Farther on down the line, the other engine broke down, and the train came to a standstill in the middle of nowhere. The engineer needed to inform the passengers about why the train had stopped. He didn't want the passengers to get too upset and so he tried to look on the bright side of things. He made the following announcement: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that both engines have failed, and we will be stuck here for some time until the additional engines arrive. The good news is that you didn't make this trip in an airplane!"

Well, that would be good news under the circumstances. If you're going to lose both your engines, better to do it on a train and not a plane. But I have some even better news for you today. God's love for you and me is intimate and it is unimaginable.

In Matthew 10:29-31 we have one of the most important Scriptural reminders of the love of our Heavenly Father for His children. It tells us how far reaching God's love is: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" asked Jesus. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." What a moving testimony to the very intimate love that God has for each of us.

A second grader once asked his teacher how much the earth weighed. The teacher looked up the answer on the Internet. "One thousand trillion metric tons," she answered.

The little boy thought for a minute and then asked, "Is that with or without people?"

Viewed from one perspective, it might very well seem that people don't really matter very much in the grand scheme of things. After all, we are but microscopic inhabitants of a somewhat miniscule planet orbiting a relatively obscure star in a small galaxy among the billions and billions of stars and galaxies that make up creation.

Yet the God of creation has counted the very hairs of our heads. Wow! What a magnificent picture of the love of our Heavenly Father.

But wait. There is a troubling side to Jesus' teaching about the sparrows, and it has to do with those two engines that failed on that train: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?" asked Jesus. "Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care."

This text acknowledges that sparrows do fall from the sky. It happens all the time. Jets suck them up in their engines. Predators prey upon their young. Sudden storms or droughts can deprive them of their food. Here they eat the ants and the ants eat them.

God's love does not protect those tiny sparrows from life's tragedies. Neither does it protect us. Engines have been known to fail on trains as well as planes, and it makes no difference in the world how many Christians were on those vehicles of transportation.

Mature Christians realize this truth, but there are many preachers who speak of Christianity as the path to ease and prosperity in our society that the point needs to be made. It is a troubling truth but it is truth. Sparrows, innocent sparrows, do fall. Soldiers get killed in war no matter how strong their faith.

Thornton Wilder dealt with this hard truth in a story titled, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. A village has been hard hit by a pestilence. A priest, Brother Juniper, tries to understand the meaning, if any, of this tragedy. He draws up a chart of the characteristics of fifteen victims of this pestilence and fifteen survivors, rating them for such qualities as goodness, piety, and usefulness.

When he adds up the total for the victims and compares them with that for the survivors, his figures show that the tragically dead were five times more worth saving than those who lived through the pestilence. This unexpected result causes Brother Juniper great distress of mind. *

And it causes us much distress as well. God's love does not protect us from life's problems. It is the most difficult dilemma that Christians face. Why do the righteous suffer? There is a common phrase: only the good die young. Scoundrels seem to go on forever. That's not always true, of course, but that is sometimes how it seems. Why in Heaven's name, should that be so?

One answer may come from ordinary family life. Those of you who are parents, let me ask you a question. Would you protect your young from all life's problems if you could? Without thinking many of us might answer yes. And it would be tempting. Deep in our hearts we would like to build a protective bubble around our children. After all, when they hurt, we hurt. When someone abuses them, it is we who are angry. When they are confronting a crisis, it is we who toss and turn in our beds with sleeplessness. We would like to protect our young from any and every hurt.

But what would happen if we did? They would never grow into responsible, competent, mature adults. Overcoming obstacles produces character and competence.

God has placed us in a world that is designed to bring out the best within us if we deal with life in an attitude of faith and love. That does not mean that God has forsaken us or forgotten us. It simply means that this world is a training school designed to produce souls fit to share eternity with Him. Sparrows do fall from the sky.

There is a second truth related to this one. **God's love does not protect us from life's problems, but neither are life's problems God's punishment for our sins.**

This truth is made obvious in the book of Job. Job was a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He was "blameless" and "upright." Yet God allowed Satan to torment Job to test his faith. You know how the story goes. Job's livestock, servants, and ten children all die due either to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. When all this happens to Job he tears his clothes and shaves his head in mourning, but he still blesses God in his prayers.

Then, on top of all this, he is afflicted with horrible skin sores. His wife encourages him to curse God and to give up and die. Job refuses. Job curses the day he was born, but he refuses to curse God. Three of Job's friends come to visit him. A big help they are. They accuse him of deserving his wretched condition. But Job knows he has been a righteous man and he believes that his redeemer lives. He refuses to give up, and the result is that Job's faith is finally vindicated and God blesses him more than before.

The book of Job still leaves many questions unanswered, but it is a mighty affirmation that adversity does not come as a punishment from God for our sins.

Jesus' disciples were undoubtedly familiar with the book of Job, yet when they saw a blind man begging on the street, they asked Jesus, "Who sinned that he should be in this condition?"

How often people blame themselves, and ultimately blame God, when life deals them a difficult blow. "God must be using my child's sickness to punish me for some sin," we hear someone say. What a petty God they must have--to injure a helpless child in order to punish that child's parent. No, a thousand times no! Grief is tragic enough without adding to it the crushing burden of guilt.

Here is where our theology of the cross of Christ becomes critical. You and I live under the rule of Grace. That is, we believe that something happened on the cross of Calvary that has forever changed the relationship between God and humanity. Because of what happened there, the believer in Christ has all his or her sins forgiven.

Now, to be sure, as free moral agents living in a lawful world we have to live with the consequences of our misdoings. If I abuse my body, sooner or later it will catch up with me. If I cheat on my income taxes, Uncle Sam may punish me. In terms of my relationship with God, however, those sins are buried at the bottom of the deepest sea never to surface again. They are gone forever. If you believe that Christ has atoned for your sins, you cannot believe that God is using some adverse circumstance to punish you. The two are mutually exclusive.

There is a story about actor Henry Fonda that can help us here. Fonda's father disagreed with his son's decision to become an actor. Only grudgingly did he attend his son's debut performance with the rest of the family.

After the performance, Fonda's mother and sisters glowed with pride and were effusive in their praise. His father, however, said nothing--until one of his sisters made a tiny criticism of Henry's performance.

"Shut up," said the elder Fonda, "he was perfect!"

Now of course Fonda was not perfect. No one is. But his father saw him that way.

You and I are not perfect either, but that is the way God sees us. That is what it means to live under grace. God's love does not protect us from problems. Neither are our problems God's punishment for our sins. As the Gospel of Matthew puts it, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (5:45).

Sparrows do fall from the sky. That is not because they have been good sparrows or bad--if sparrows can be good or bad. They fall because they are part of a lawful universe in which unfortunate tragedies do occur. But listen, here is the good news.

The little sparrow never falls beyond God's watchful eye. The child of God who knows that he or she is under the watchful eye of the Father can, by His grace, bear any burden, triumph over any tragedy, get on top of any circumstance because he knows that he is not alone.

Remember St. Paul's litany of his misfortunes? "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I

have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.” (II Corinthians 11: 24-27)

Yet, in all that, St. Paul heard the Lord’s voice saying, “My grace is sufficient for you” (12:9)

For many of us the injustice of this world, combined with the love of the Father, is the best assurance we have of a world beyond this one. Someday, somehow, somewhere accounts must be settled.

In Marjorie Rawling’s beautiful novel, *The Yearling*, set in rural Florida, there is a scene in which friends and family gather around the grave of a little disabled boy named Fodderwing. Fodderwing could not do the things other boys could do, but he had a wonderful way with animals.

There was no minister present at Fodderwing’s burial, so one of the men of the community offered up this simple but moving prayer: “Almighty God, it ain’t right for us to say what is right. But if we had been making this boy, we would never have made him with his back bent and his legs crooked. We would have made him straight and tall like his brothers. But somehow you made it up to him. You gave him a way with critters.

“It comforts us to know that he is in a place where his being bent doesn’t matter no more. We would like to think that you have taken that bent back and those crooked legs and straightened them. And Almighty God, if it ain’t asking too much, we pray that you will give him some critters to play with--maybe a few redbirds and a squirrel or two. Thy will be done. Amen.”

I don’t know what heaven will be like. But I know what God is like. He is a God who cares for a child like Fodderwing. He is a God who notices a little sparrow fall from the sky . . . and He cares for us much, much more than He cares for sparrows. That means even though we still must face obstacles and crises, we do not face them alone, and someday, somehow all that which is hurtful will be turned into that which is helpful, and we shall live with joy in God’s house forever.

* Harriet Sarnoff Schiff, *Living Through the Mourning* (New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1986).