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The Next Thing

A Christian Model for Dealing
with Crisis in Personal Life

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The Next Thing

It was the worst day of my life. It was the day everything changed. Decades later, every single day has been colored and affected by the worst day.

And on that worst day of my life, there came a moment when my wife Sara and I were sitting in our car together. It was silent as

we prepared to exit the car and walk toward an uncertain future.

Sara turned to me and asked, “What are we going to do?”

And I told her, “We’re going to do the next thing. And then, we’ll do the next thing after that. And then the next thing after that.”

You see, we were in uncharted territory, faced with situations and decisions foreign to us. All we could do was to take the next step to see where it led, and then find the next thing to do – over and over and over. And that is what we did for months, even years.

This book is named after that moment. I’ll be talking about crises in your personal life and a Christian-based approach to reacting to them. It doesn’t matter what your crisis is, just as it really doesn’t matter what my crisis was on the worst day of my life. (However, I will tell you about that crisis later in this chapter and expand on it in future chapters).

In this book, I'll share a four-part model, designed to help you get through any crisis that you face. Along the way, I'll be sharing a variety of crises I have faced and how I applied (or in cases, didn't apply) these principles.

The Essence of Crisis

Life's hard. Put that in a screaming headline! Yes, life is difficult, and problems arise all the time. Some are run-of-the-mill problems; some are crises.

How do we define a crisis? Some definitions:

- ***A time of intense difficulty, trouble or danger.*** In other words, a bigger problem than normal.
- ***A time when a difficult or important decision must be made.*** By this definition, a crisis is more than just a bigger problem than normal. A crisis also demands more of us, calling upon us to make a decision.

- *A turning point; a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of future events is determined.* I think this definition aligns nicely with the concept of a Next Thing. You might call the Next Thing a turning point, when the crisis begins or reshapes. As we'll see, crises are not necessarily a single, linear, really big problem, although some crises are that way.

Felix Timtschenko adds these parameters to the definition of crisis:

1. It comes unexpectedly (at the level of a country, "unexpected" can also mean several weeks).
2. It has a great impact (damage).
3. It is limited in time.¹

What are examples of crisis? A crisis might be due to health, finances, relationship, legal troubles, natural disaster. Everyone could make their own personal list from life experiences.

¹ Timtschenko, Felix: "What Does Simplify the Crisis Mean?", <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-does-simplify-crisis-means-felix-timtschenko/>

Blogger Zarrine Flores listed hers as “immigration, divorce, the death of my father under strange circumstances, cancer, an autoimmune disorder, burnout, job loss – in that order.”²

My definition of crisis may not be your definition of crisis, though. I may even change my own definition as life unfolds. For example, as I was writing this section, I was interrupted when Sara (who is a diabetic) had a low blood sugar reaction. I recall that the first time I had to deal with her low blood sugar, it was a crisis for me! Instead of simply providing her some juice and crackers to sufficiently raise her blood sugar, I stuffed an entire meal down her! But after thousands of low blood sugars over the course of decades, the vast majority have become routine and are not a crisis. It’s only a crisis these days if I can’t control the low blood sugar, and we have to call an ambulance. That hasn’t happened in years.

² Flores, Zarrine: “9 Tips for Surviving a Personal Crisis,” <https://www.purposefairy.com/81088/9-tips-for-surviving-a-personal-crisis/>

I do want to separate crises from big decisions. For example, when Sara and I made the big decision to adopt our daughter, Rebecca, from China, that was not a crisis. Now there were a few twists and turns in the process that were very difficult and frustrating; perhaps one of those could be called a crisis. In reality, they were simply setbacks that only delayed but did not stop the adoption.

Crisis Types

For the purpose of understanding the Next Thing, I want to divide crises into types, along a couple of division lines.

The first division is by path. A crisis may be a straight path, or it could be a crooked path. To illustrate this, I'll remind you of alpine skiing events.

The fastest is the downhill. I wouldn't say the course is straight down the mountain, as there are curves and jumps. But as one announcer put it, you're trying to follow the same path as if you

rolled a bowling ball down the mountain. It's a relatively straightforward path.

The slowest and most technical event is the slalom. The skier weaves in and out of gates or flags set up fairly close together. The slalom has the most twists and turns of any event.

A crisis can be like the downhill, the slalom, or something in between. The curves and gates are Next Things that you have to deal with. Sometimes they are predictable. Sometimes, well, there's fog on the mountain, and it's hard to see where the next curve or gate is coming.

A second way to divide crises is by the number of simultaneous Next Things. Here, I'll use transportation as the analogy.

Sometimes a crisis is like the subway. There is only one track, only one Next Thing going on. At other times, a crisis is like a traffic jam, with multiple Next Things running in lanes side by side, competing for your attention and prioritization.

Another way to think of it is that you can have a new crisis either within, or side by side with, an existing crisis. I've seen the term "nested crises." An example: Since the Covid-19 pandemic crisis spread widely in the United States during an election year, there were calls to provide more options on how to vote. This spawned a new, divisive, parallel crisis over voting regulations that lasted well beyond Election Day 2020.

At times throughout this book, I'll refer to a crisis being a "downhill" or "slalom" crisis, or a "single-track" or "multiple-track" crisis.

Acceptance of Crisis

One of the main things we must do to effectively address a crisis is to accept it. This is harder than you may think.

First, few humans relish problems. As M. Scott Peck puts it in The Road Less Traveled, we don't want to accept that life is difficult.

Instead, (people) moan more or less incessantly, noisily or subtly, about the enormity of their problems, their burdens, and their difficulties as if life were generally easy, as if life *should* be easy...Life is a series of problems. Do we want to moan about them or solve them?...What makes life difficult is that the process of confronting and solving problems is a painful one. Problems, depending upon their nature, evoke in us frustration or grief or sadness or loneliness or guilt or regret or anger or fear or anxiety or anguish or despair.³

As a result, it happens often that we want to deny that a crisis exists; this can delay our response or make our response less

³ Peck, M. Scott, *A Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979.

effective. I worked for nearly a decade for a Japanese high tech company whose culture it was to deny that a crisis was emerging, thus delaying the response. In the fast-moving world of high tech, delaying a response was potentially calamitous. After observing this behavior for awhile, a new member of the company commented, “We spend a lot of time admiring the problem.”

On the other hand, readily accepting a crisis and addressing the Next Thing in front of you can be very effective. Let me give you an example of a brief but bizarre crisis that was effectively handled simply by accepting that it was happening.

My wife, daughter and I were driving on an interstate highway out in the country when a crazy thing happened: A bird flew through the windshield! The beak of the bird hit the windshield at just the right angle to puncture the windshield, and the poor little bird died, wedged halfway in, halfway out. (Later, the adjustor and the repair company representative both said they

had never seen this happen in a combined 35 years of analyzing auto damage).

At impact, a lot of things happened at once in my mind.

- First, what just happened? I realize that the bird is not coming through any farther, and I could see around it to drive. I notice that the windshield was badly damaged.
- So I'm thinking, OK, life just changed. The windshield is toast. Can I drive like this to make the 70 miles back home? No, it's probably going to collapse at highway speeds, so I need to pull over.
- With shattered glass spread all the way from the dashboard to the very back of the SUV, and a lot of it on me, I'm wondering, is anyone hurt? I glance at my wife – she's apparently OK. I hear my daughter screaming in amazement in the back seat, but she seems uninjured. I feel like I have some small cuts on me, and I did, but luckily I was uninjured – you can imagine the tragedy that would have happened if I had been somehow incapacitated by this bird or the flying glass.

I slow down and pull to the shoulder, but I realize the car is running fine, and the windshield seems to be holding – for now. I see an exit and a truck stop a mile away, so I decide to get back in the right lane and drive to safety.

I asked my family later, “What did I say during that time?” They replied, “Nothing!” I was so focused that I didn’t even speak or react verbally! Meanwhile, Sara said as things raced through her mind, she kept coming back to the phrase, “There’s a bird in our windshield!”

The crucial moment was the realization and acceptance that I wasn’t going to be able to drive normally anymore, accepting that life had changed, realizing that the windshield was too unstable to get home or even much farther than the next exit. And this is the key point of my story: The simple but critical thinking I was doing, was based on the acceptance that life has just changed. I don’t want this situation, but it’s here, I’m going to make the best of it, I’m going to get to a safe place, and then

we'll think about Next Things such as damage and a tow truck and how we're going to make it back home.

In addition to accepting the crisis, I was using a technique of Simplifying, which takes us to the four-part model of this book.

The Next Thing Model

There are four components of this model, this response to crisis, that help you through whatever your next thing is:

Simplify....Trust....Rest...and Grieve. We:

- Simplify to focus on the Next Thing.
- Trust that God and others will help you get through the Next Thing.
- Rest, so you are ready for the Next Thing.
- Grieve, so you can accept and act on the Next Thing.

These elements may seem simple, but in reality, the execution is difficult. We tend to NOT do these things when under pressure. I

have applied them in my life and benefited. When sharing these techniques with others, people have resonated with them. So now I share them with you.

In each of the upcoming component chapters, I'll start with a story, much like the one I began at the start of this opening chapter. I'll describe a Practical Faith approach to enacting the component, using examples from my life and from others' lives. Then I'll turn to the Bible to provide some "scriptural wrapping paper" to place around the Practical Faith concepts. While I will use a number of scripture passages in each chapter, there will be one Core Passage that I'll primarily lean on. Each component chapter will end with a summary of the chapter, so that you can quickly refer to the model's concepts.

Before I present the component chapters, there is a promise to keep, telling you about the crisis that triggered the worst day of my life.

The Worst Days of Our Lives

Even though it's not necessary for you to know, Sara and I have decided to tell you what the crisis was on the worst day of my life, because we believe it's a vital topic to discuss.

The crisis was that Sara had experienced the worst day of her life the day before: She had tried to commit suicide. On this worst day of my life, I was fully realizing that the overdose of the day before was intentional, and medical personnel instructed me to take her to a psychiatric hospital. When we were sitting in the car together, we were parked outside the psychiatric hospital, about to enter an unknown world and its procedures, and not knowing what would happen when they locked the door behind Sara.

The overdose was the first of numerous attempts on her life and the start of a shattered illusion, as Sara had secretly held her depression in for decades and seemed normal on the outside. But on the inside, she was doing quite terribly.

Mental health is a tremendous issue with a substantial stigma attached to it. It also affects a person's overall health, as the mind is interconnected with the body. And mental illness causes significant stress for those around the person.

It's estimated that one in six people in our country suffer from mental health issues, which means it's very likely someone reading this book is affected, either for themselves or due to a loved one. As a society, we need to be more open about mental health because you feel such shame when you're not mentally healthy. Sara urged me to be open within this book about her story, in the brave desire to help others. If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, we pray that you're inspired by our openness to become open yourself, and we pray that you receive love and respect in dealing with your mental health crisis.