

THE BUZZARDS ARE CIRCLING

But God's Not Finished
with Me Yet



STAN TOLER

Bestselling Author

“[Stan Toler’s] writings do not come from a journalism classroom, but rather out of day-to-day experiences. His style is unique in that it does not take him long until he has you walking alongside him as he kicks the cans down a lonely West Virginia road, or cry[ing] with him and his brother outside the hospital in North Columbus, holding Linda’s hand with him as he prays for the love of his life, or cheering for a son at the stadium. He takes you with him in his everyday walk.

“You will not read Stan long until you know the real man. A man of sterling character, full of God, and filled with a love for everyone he meets. I have never read any of his books without being able to say, ‘I read Toler today for my daily faith lift.’”

Dr. Alton Loveless,
former president/CEO of Randall House Publications

“I have read all of the books by Stan Toler (and we wrote four together). But this is his best book ever, and funniest. You will love reading it because of all the humorous illustrations, but you will learn from reading it because of the many principles drawn from Bible references. Also, you will live better because of the multitude of practical observations, and finally you will become more holy because the book will draw you closer to God.

“Stan Toler has communicated Christian principles with humor, contemporary illustrations, and a writing style that reflects *USA Today*, i.e., it is crisp, contemporary, and compelling.”

Elmer L. Towns,
dean at the School of Religion, Liberty University

“*The Buzzards Are Circling, but God’s Not Finished with Me Yet* has enough humor to keep you entertained, enough stories and examples to keep you interested, enough Scripture to keep you grateful for God’s grace and goodness, and enough practical advice to make it a good investment of your time and money.”

Zig Ziglar,
author and motivational teacher,
Dallas, Texas

“With his typical warmth, wit, and wisdom, Stan Toler has written a book that will help you through the difficult days of your life. *The Buzzards Are Circling, but God’s Not Finished with Me Yet* is a book for these times. You cannot read it without being reminded of God’s constant love and care in the midst of a crisis.”

Norman G. Wilson,
former general director of communications,
The Wesleyan Church

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HARVEST HOUSE PUBLISHERS
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In memory of my lovely mother-in-law,
Nadine Carter 1925–2000

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FOREWORD

To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

ISAIAH 61:3 KJV

Stan Toler is undoubtedly one of the most gifted and brilliant people I know.

When he tells about wrecking his car in his own driveway, I figure not just anybody could do that. Such a feat definitely takes talent and plenty of brains, and I would know! I recently had a fender bender at my own curb. My housekeeper made the fatal mistake of parking her car in front of my house, too close to my driveway, at the exact angle where my “boat” van could mesh with her bumper. While the poor woman was inside blissfully cleaning my home, I smashed her bumper. I went inside and informed her of my brilliant undertaking. After about 15 minutes of head scratching

and analyzing, the two of us figured out how to disconnect our vehicles. My housekeeper wound up having to file on my insurance to have her bumper fixed. Looks like Stan isn't the only one who's got the level of talent needed to have a wreck at two miles an hour!

I was just as blessed to read about Stan's faux pas in preaching.

He claims that anytime he says, "Without a doubt" behind the pulpit, his two brothers understand that he knows nothing about what he is saying. Stan recounts the time he was preaching at the ripe old age of 17, when he said, "Without a doubt, the Ethiopian eunuch was a good provider for his wife and children." Of course, I screamed with laughter for several minutes when I read that one. Part of my laughter was from outright hilarity, and part of it was from relief. I'm thrilled to know that other speakers have made as many goofy mistakes as I have while standing behind the microphone. Like the time I said, "If you're looking for the Old Testament in Greek, you won't find it." Oh, duh!

While Stan details numerous hilarious stories to which many of us can relate, he also addresses the inevitable buzzards in everyone's life. For instance, that unexpected phone call about a fatal wreck—not just a fender bender in the driveway; bankruptcy; the grim line of a doctor's mouth when he says "inoperable"; getting fired; loss of faith in a compromising spiritual leader; divorce; a child who goes to prison—and deserves it.

No matter what form the buzzards take, the pain is universal. As I travel across the United States and speak, I repeatedly meet devout saints who have seen the buzzards circlin'—or perhaps they've tasted the ashes and are straining to find the beauty.

As Stan would so eloquently say, "Without a doubt" we all have adversities. Or perhaps he'd say, "I'm certain that life is full of uncertainties as well, but I could be wrong about that." Yet one thing stands true. Jesus loves you. And He will strengthen you to withstand the attacks of any buzzards that might try to devour your life.

God really isn't finished with you, despite the circlin' buzzards. He really will give you beauty for ashes, joy for mourning, and praise for the spirit of heaviness. He really will glorify His name in your life. And Stan Toler will encourage you to stand and embrace life anew with the zest of one who has survived the storms, come through with a firmer faith in Jesus Christ, and pledge to break forth with joy. As Stan so beautifully underscores, no buzzards can prevail in the face of Christ's victory; no ashes can remain in the wake of God's joy. Divine victory is yours to embrace. Embrace it and find a power for living you have never known before.

—Debra White Smith



INTRODUCTION

As I write this, a flock of buzzards is flying in formation over the Toler household.
My mother-in-law passed away.
My father-in-law is in the hospital.
My stepfather is in the hospital.

I just wrecked my new car (in my own driveway while I was trying to pick up the newspaper). Like a nearsighted driver's ed student, I nailed the brick wall by the house and took all the light potential out of our yard lantern!

Besides that, when I arrived at the office the other day, I discovered that the faithful custodian at my church had mopped the tile floor in the foyer—and didn't tell me! I took a vigorous step onto the tile and immediately took flight, one hand outstretched (my briefcase was flapping in my other hand). Now I've got bruises in places that haven't even been declared "bruisable" by the government!

Some of you are bruised as well. Life, at its worst, took a swing at you while you weren't looking. And now the buzzards are circlin' overhead. If so, you're the reason I put these words on paper.

Have you ever seen buzzards fly south for the winter? Neither have I. It's my understanding that they are migratory birds, but I have no idea if they head south to Miami, west to Capistrano, or pack their onboard luggage for some other sunny climate.

I can just imagine them flying along in a V formation until one of them spots lunch. Suddenly the hungry bird banks right and immediately ruins the configuration. The ravenous culprit wrecks the air show with no sense of remorse. His fellow buzzards aren't too critical, though. They know that their fellow snowbird is only doing what buzzards normally do: feeding off the infirmities of others.

I have seen undertakers fly south for the winter, however. Some of them are my dear friends, and I've ridden in the coach section of an airplane with one or two. I don't want to offend either buzzards or undertakers. But I'll go on record as saying that undertakers have one thing in common with buzzards: sharing part of the title of the last chapter of this book (and, I must admit, the fact that I am spending the remaining days of my life trying to evade the mission of both groups).

This is a sequel to my book *God Has Never Failed Me, but He's Sure Scared Me to Death a Few Times*. In that book, I refer to the list, "You Know It's Going to Be a Bad Day When . . ." One indication that you're going to have a bad day: "The bird singing outside your bedroom window is a buzzard."¹

Let's face it: There are times when our circumstances weaken us. There are times when it seems to be "us versus life," and life is up by three points with less than two minutes to go in the last quarter. This book is a playbook for the two-minute warnings of our lives, because it's during those two-minute-warning situations that the buzzards rev up their engines for a flight over our circumstances.

This book isn't filled with all the answers. No earthly author has all the answers (no matter what it says on the dust jacket of a book).

It is filled with God's answers, though—answers that are as relevant as the sunrise, and just as dependable.

God has spoken into the circumstances of our lives—buzzards circlin' or otherwise. We don't just get His voice mail when we cry out to Him in pain, confusion, or grief. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, He instructed over 40 writers to express His concern and His promises of deliverance through the book of all books, the Bible.

In the next pages, you will experience a light look at some pretty heavy subjects:

World-crumbing situations
Letting God take control
Testing times—building times
Learning to copy
Finding a purpose in the pain and more...

I pray that these pages will be informative as well as inspirational; thought-provoking as well as funny; motivational as well as spiritual. But most of all, I pray that this book will be faithful to the Word of God. The Bible is the only book that has truly helped me face times of joy, grief, pain, adversity, or advancement in my own life.

And I hope that when the buzzards start circling over the two-minute-warning times in your life, this book will serve as a reminder that God isn't finished with you yet.

*You are loved,
Stan Toler*

WHEN YOUR WORLD CRUMBLES, YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE ONE OF THE CRUMBS

(YOU CAN SURVIVE YOUR SITUATION)

David Hopkins felt as though the eyes of a thousand demons penetrated his soul as he walked across the campus of Emmanuel College in Franklin Springs, Georgia. Thousands of beady-eyed buzzards arrogantly shifted along the bare tree limbs as if they were waiting for him to drop dead and furnish their lunch. My friend Dr. Hopkins, the college president, said his skin crawled as he thought about the six years of torture that had come from the predators who arrived each October and lingered until April, infesting the college property. With the crunch of his every footstep on the leaf-strewn ground, he relived the staff's repeated efforts to scare away the birds. Devoted employees tried banging pots and pans—and even firing warning shots into the air. Nothing worked. And killing the ebony beasts was against the law. According to local officials, the tormentors were endangered. Destroying them would result in a hefty fine.

The cold autumn wind tearing at the trees seemed to mock Dr. Hopkins, and he was certain one swooping buzzard grinned with glee!

Indeed, the buzzards seemed a metaphor for the spiritual warfare of the last six years. As the winged menaces invaded the school, year in and year out, David's wife almost died of cancer. He suffered from the sometimes-fatal Crohn's disease. The college, in the throes of necessary but difficult change, struggled for financial survival. Dr. Hopkins wondered if and when the buzzards would smell the death of the college and swoop in. He shook his fist toward the feathered foes and declared, "You won't win!"

Yet just when it looked like he was finished, 25 prayer warriors arrived on the campus to pray for the college—and for the rapid departure of the carnivorous creatures. The next day, Dr. Hopkins received a call from a donor who said, "I'll give one hundred sixty thousand dollars toward the construction of a new science building." Another donor called and said, "We'll give five hundred thousand dollars toward the new science building!" What's more, his wife was declared cancer free!

President Hopkins told me that he was so happy about the news that he nearly floated home. That's when he made a startling discovery. As he looked around, he noticed the trees were void of those dark adversaries. No buzzards! Gone! Gone! Gone! For no apparent reason, they had vanished! At that moment, he recalled Abraham's sojourn from Ur to the promised land. Abraham had paused to worship and to offer a sacrifice to God as a sign of His covenant. (It should be noted: The buzzards came down to steal Abraham's sacrifice before he could seal it. Abraham had to *shoo* the winged predators away!)

Someday, you're going to spot buzzards circling in your spiritual no-fly zone. There is going to come a time when you're hit with a crisis, one that you didn't see coming. And it may cause your whole world to crumble like an old cookie under a big sledgehammer.

But take heart; you don't have to be a *crumb* in the midst of the crumbling.

WORLD CRUMBLING IS NOT AN OLYMPIC SPORT

The Old Testament character Job reminds us: “Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). It's a fact of life. We didn't inherit curly hair, brown eyes, and a propensity for arthritis from Adam. We inherited trouble. Adam's disobedience to God started a chain reaction of suffering and sorrow that won't be broken until the eastern sky splits and the Savior returns. The Bible says, “In Adam all die” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

So our family tree is more like a prickly cactus than a pristine maple. But how does it play out in the landscape of life? What is it that makes our world come tumbling down like a planetary Humpty Dumpty? There are several factors that can play a part in the world-crumbling times.

LIFE CHANGES

We are spiritually and emotionally vulnerable when we face changes in the routine of our lives. Vocational, housing, relationship, physical, or financial changes—all may reduce our stability to zero (to put a new slant on the fog report). In the Old Testament, Abraham faced unsettling uncertainty when God called him to leave his homeland and take his family to a new country.

He responded obediently, but I'm sure there was a king-sized knot in his stomach when he packed his luggage: “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). The phrase *did not know where he was going* is key to

what he must have felt. Everything familiar would soon be set aside, and he would leap like a skydiver into the unknown.

The focus on Abraham comes from the patriarchal emphasis in Bible times. But think about how his family must have felt. They would have to leave familiar department stores and playgrounds, forfeit soccer team membership, subscribe to a new cable television service.

Sad farewells.

Financial uncertainty.

Strange roads.

This wasn't going to be a picnic for Abraham's family.

Change never is a picnic, but it happens. Sudden layoffs. Diving stocks. Rising gas prices. A doctor with a somber face, holding an alarming medical report in his hands. And when change does happen, our world often crumbles.

Happiness is inward and not outward;
and so it does not depend on what
we have, but on what we are.

HENRY VAN DYKE

DELAYED PROMISES

Look again at Abraham's life story: "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:9-10).

Abraham was looking forward to the city.

So, where's the city? All he saw was desert. No skyscrapers here,

just dusty tent dwellings at the end of long travel days spent looking at the backside of a camel.

This was supposed to be the promised land. But for Abraham, it must have looked like it was mostly *land* and little *promise*. For the moment, milk and honey looked more like curds and whey.

Delayed promises are world-crumbling situations. We gather together the hopes and pledges of the Bible like a pile of prescriptions from an immediate-care clinic. We haul out our inheritance claims. We thumb through the Rolodex of advice from near and far. “Just a little while.” “Sunday’s coming.” “Somewhere over the rainbow . . .”

But we’re used to instant coffee and microwave popcorn. Delayed promises? We’ve been promised a celestial city, but we can’t see it for the storm clouds. The realization sets in and causes our hearts to break. We’re stuck in the now, like Abraham and his family, trying to eke out an existence in an unfurnished promised land apartment.

PERSONAL PROBLEMS

Abraham also had to look for a promise beyond the horizon of personal setbacks: “By faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore” (Hebrews 11:11-12).

Wouldn’t it be awful to face life when you’ve already been declared “as good as dead”? Maybe you have!

The buzzards of age and infirmity had been in a holding pattern over Abraham’s life. God had made the promise: Abraham’s descendants would be as numerous as the stars. But Abraham couldn’t see the stars because of the smudges on his trifocals. His family would become as numerous as the sands, but the sands of his own hourglass had settled quicker than an elephant in a lawn chair.

We've all been there. Personal difficulties crowd out our hopes of a tomorrow. We can't do *that* because of *this*. "If only I could . . ." "I just wish I didn't have to . . ." "If it weren't for . . ." We dialogue with life, wishing we could erase the effects of time. Personal difficulties swarm around us:

Grudges that poison us
Jealousy that gnaws at us
Loneliness that isolates us
Inadequacies that paralyze us
Finances that bind us
Sorrows that plague us.

SUDDEN TRIALS

Abraham's life would have been so different if it weren't for *that day*. He had been sailing along—working out the issues of a new home, bringing his family to a consensus, driving fresh-cut stakes into the promises of the new land. Then, the Scriptures say, "God tested Abraham" (Genesis 22:1).

A sudden trial arrived like a five-hundred-pound gorilla. God was applying a litmus test to Abraham. He wanted His protégé to see that faith works when we face *that day*. God told Abraham to take his son to a remote place and prepare an altar of sacrifice—and then sacrifice his son, his only son, back to God. Leaving his servants behind, Abraham took the materials for the altar, along with his only son, and began the longest journey of his life. The trip from Ur was a piece of cake compared to these few steps.

Even as they walked together, the questions began to fly: "Father, where's the sacrifice?" Abraham's heart was pounding. He was committed to obeying God's command: to make his own son that sacrifice. Abraham replied, "God will provide." But deep in his heart

the doubts must have swirled like an oak leaf in a whirlpool. *That day*—that sudden testing time in the life of the patriarch that would be unlike any other day. “By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son” (Hebrews 11:17). Abraham passed the test. He trusted God beyond what common sense or his own will would have led him to do. Then God instructed Abraham not to lay a hand on his son and provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice.

Perhaps you’ve had a day like that. Life is pretty uneventful, then suddenly everything changes. A sound of metal crushing metal. A telephone call. A knock on the door. An ambulance siren. We who are children of promise suddenly face a horrendous situation. Something is expected of us. Not one of us is exempt.

I’M HAVING A “WHOLE LIFE” CRISIS

Our reactions to world-crumbling events vary.

Sometimes we feel helpless. For the most part, we’re used to being in control of things. But when life is suddenly out of our control, a sense of vulnerability sets in. Until now, we’ve been able to fix most everything else, but we can’t fix this. It’s just out of reach, like that burned-out lightbulb in the 20-foot ceiling chandelier. We can see it, and we know that changing it would make a difference. But without some assistance, we’re powerless.

Sometimes we feel abandoned. Alone in the hospital room, waiting for loved ones. Alone at the table that once was also occupied by a spouse or parent. Alone in a courtroom hallway, waiting for the lawyer. Alone. Abandoned. “Why me, Lord?” we inquire. But often, heaven is silent—not because there isn’t any concern up there, but because we make such loud groaning noises down here that we cannot hear the still, small voice of assurance.

Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet.

Only through experience of trial and suffering
can the soul be strengthened,
vision cleared, ambition inspired,
and success achieved.

HELEN KELLER

Sometimes we feel worthless. World-crumbling events have a way of sucking the self-esteem out of our lives. Our pride and dignity are temporarily gone. Our once-secure finances are tenuous. Our once-strong bodies are frail. Our once-happy homes are in shambles. Our once-respectful children have rebelled. We feel about as significant as an eyelash on a mosquito.

Sometimes we feel ashamed. Sometimes we have made a personal contribution to the world-crumbling situation. We've been players, not just bystanders. Sometimes we make wrong choices. We cross the line. The pain in our foot comes from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. We stand in our self-made ruins and weep over what should have been, or what might have been, if only we had kept the law of God or if only we had let our conscience give the final answer.

One day, Jesus came across a man who was a poster child for world-crumbling events:

Jesus went up to Jerusalem for a feast of the Jews. Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed.

One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”

“Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.”

Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked (John 5:1-9).

For 38 years of his life, this man had been carried, pulled, or pushed to the pool beside the Sheep Gate on the northern side of the Jerusalem temple. There the unnamed man, with so many unnamed others, waited to be healed.

The invalids believed that an angel of the Lord occasionally stirred the waters in the pool and the first person to step into the water would be healed.

This poor man had never made it. Though he had helpers to transport him and put him close to the edge of the pool, he had never been *first in*. This day was no exception. It was “miracle time,” and he was tardy.

Time after time, he was toenail close to a miracle. But still, he went to the pool!

Think of the cruelty. A heavenly messenger makes a house call every now and then but brings only enough healing power to cure just one person: the first one in.

Jesus saw and approached this man. He learned about the man’s plight, and the Lord healed him. And the fact is, when our world crumbles, Jesus never fails to see it, and He is never far away.

God believes in me

Therefore my situation is never hopeless.

God walks with me, Therefore I am never alone.

God is on my side, Therefore I can never lose.

ANONYMOUS