

# GOD AND SUFFERING

A Theology of Hope and Healing

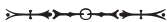


*For many of us, if not most, the subject of suffering and faith is a rather difficult and tricky one. In my view, however, Dr. Ojewale has done a thorough work in his book *God And Suffering*, one that is very biblical and enlightening. He reveals a comforting and mature understanding of suffering that has been hammered out upon the anvil of personal experience. It is my firm conviction that history will yet recognize him as one of the greatest thinkers and writers of our generation.*

BISHOP TITUS 'GBENGA DAVID,  
SOUTH LONDON, ENGLAND, UK

*The Rev. Mike Ojewale is a seasoned scholar and minister of God, spending many years standing with people and walking with them through their seasons of grief and suffering.... This book is one of the most balanced and powerful books I have ever read on Christian suffering....*

JULIUS ABIOLA, SENIOR PASTOR,  
CHRIST LIFE MINISTRIES, NEW YORK



# **GOD and SUFFERING**

**A Theology of Hope and Healing**

**Michael O. Ojewale**

*Essence*  
PUBLISHING

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Belleville, Ontario, Canada

# GOD AND SUFFERING

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- Blessed Are Your Tears: *Making Sense of Pain and Suffering Through Community and Storytelling*
- God and Suffering: *A Theology of Hope and Healing*
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The logo for Essence Publishing features the word "Essence" in a large, elegant, cursive script. Below it, the word "PUBLISHING" is written in a smaller, clean, sans-serif, all-caps font.

*To Olawanle*  
*My wife, my friend, and partner*



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## *Introduction*



# MAKING SENSE OF SENSELESS SUFFERING

### **Suffering and Meaning Making**

**I**f it were possible to eliminate all problems, pain, and suffering from society, would it be a worthwhile goal? Wouldn't the absence of problems result in a lack of challenges for growth in the arts, sciences, technology, and even divinity? It surely would. Advancement in the human journey comes from disappointment with the status quo. Consistent, sacrificial effort has helped to surmount obstacles in human pathways, and this has brought us to where we are today.

I doubt if we could appreciate the depths of peace and joy without the reality of their opposites. Yet it seems as if some suffering is unproductive, even counter-productive, senseless, and meaningless. Do these sufferings originate from sources that we can do something about? Some do. And we should work to eliminate the causes of suffering that we can change, and prevent pain wherever possible. But the real challenge is what we do with problems when they present themselves,

regardless of the source or cause. This book is really not about suffering and pain (do we need another book on that?), but about the process of healing from suffering.

Suffering is no respecter of persons; it is a common denominator in life. Each of us has different experiences, but our emotional scope is the same. Someone who teaches acting bases his philosophy on the fact that every person possesses the entire range of emotions possible to humans. Though many of these emotions are often suppressed or repressed, each person is capable of expressing them. This instructor will, therefore, not hesitate to engage an actor or actress in any capacity, even if that person has no prior experience like that of the character he is asked to play. A person who has not lost a parent may be asked to act the part of an orphan. As that individual imagines and talks himself or herself into that condition on the stage, he or she soon proves that the acting instructor is right by the feelings and emotions that come out. I believe we may also say that each person possesses the capability of all behaviors known to humans, even if they are never expressed or lived out.

In a way, suffering unites humanity and links generations. We can see this trend even on popular talk shows, such as “The Oprah Winfrey Show.” Oprah Winfrey’s selection of books for her “on-the-air book club” shows a recurring theme of suffering and dogged determination to make meaning of seemingly senseless suffering. Judging by the sustained and increasing interest in the book club, some readers’ life experiences are reflected by the authors’ writings (*Christianity Today*, December ’98).

Until recently, the word “healing” has been used generally to refer to the physical well-being following a recovery from physical ailment. It seems in contemporary circles,

however, that the word has been given a new meaning. The word is used here in a broader, contemporary sense to mean regaining emotional, mental, material, spiritual, and relational health. While the subject of this book is not physical healing, I am no stranger to illness, both personally and in my former profession as a hospital chaplain in the heart of New York City. My daily rounds put me in touch with suffering people. This book focuses on *the other side* of physical illness: underlying events, feelings, and issues, which, like the iceberg, are submerged below the surface but can have serious effects on our well-being.

How can you create meaning where there apparently is none? In my experience, while people of all faiths—and no faith at all—suffer similar afflictions, and struggle to find an explanation for their discomfort (often finding none), the person who has a vital relationship with God seems to cope better. He draws on divine resources to support himself, where the person who lacks a relationship with God cannot. Of course, this divine anchor in the storms of life may not be logical to those who do not share belief in God. Recent pastoral care research has not only buttressed the importance of religion in coping with distress, but also has shown differences in ability to cope among the major religious denominations.

The subject of healing provokes diverse reactions among Christians today, especially among leaders. Some of these reactions are based on denominational doctrines, personal experience, or both. Rarely are doctrine and personal experience divorced. Unsuspectingly, a competing voice came along and swept away—with ingenious eloquence—many church leaders: The new offer was *psychotherapy*. Christian bestsellers today carry titles that include words such as “healing,” “personality,” “inner healing,” “emotion,” or are infused with

ideas drawn from psychology. It has been found that women tend to buy this material in larger numbers than do men.

While psychiatrists, psychologists, and psychotherapists do not have the word “soul” in their vocabulary, they have more synonyms for it than can be imagined: inner self or being, psyche, subjectivity, cognition, consciousness, personality, essence, feelings, emotions, identity, mind, heart, thought—all secular substitutes for “soul.”

Many Christians who have shopped at the psychiatrists’ mall for their souls’ needs simply clutch at straws. It is to their credit that psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and others are indeed interested in helping individuals and society. The problem arises in defining the nature and direction of their help.

In most cases, the secular counseling model gives palliative help. It fails to get to the root of human problems, which is sin. Sin is the reason for man’s alienation from God, his Creator. This results in man’s alienation from other people, even from himself, and from his environment (nature). The arrival of sin in the world, through the wilful disobedience of Adam and Eve, introduced evil, suffering, disease, and death into human history. From that point on, life was punctuated with hatred, war, and bloodshed. It is the failure to recognize sin and its consequences that thwarts all secular efforts to help. Naturalistic explanations attempt to eliminate sin because secular society offers no answer for it.

## **The Book’s Premise**

Every person, be he pastor, counselor, therapist, physician, teacher, accountant, or other professional, has pre-suppositions about God (Theology), human beings (Anthropology), values (Axiology), and the source of

human problems (Etiology). Presuppositions form the premise on which people base their work. My presupposition relies on biblical principles and rejects whole-hearted endorsement of psychology. I am thankful for knowledge of psychology, but I do not consider it a substitute or replacement for biblical insight or a modern replacement for the Bible's ageless message. A minister of the Church who is first and foremost steeped in theology and continues to study, committed to a well-articulated, Bible-based philosophy of ministry and mission, will find his life and ministry broadened by the insight gained from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and the like.

I also believe that it is appropriate to openly give credit to psychology for the ways it has helped us unearth a great deal of data about human nature and personality. Even though the Bible long ago outlined various traits, we did not classify them until the work of psychologists was recognized. I believe it was psychologists who raised the Church's awareness about positive anger. Many of us were raised with the notion that anger was unChristian. But the Bible says a lot about positive anger, even God's anger. I also believe it is the psychologists' emphasis on human emotions that is currently awakening the consciousness of some Evangelicals. This is an awakening as to their de-emphasis on feelings and great stress on knowledge and intellect, having little to do with biblical imperatives but everything with Enlightenment, which deifies the intellect. But in the same way, it must be acknowledged that psychology is indebted in many ways to Christian roots for its inception, insight, and growth.

While a meaning to suffering may be hard to find, I have examined areas of human existence in which we need

the healing touch of a loving God and the healing support of God's people. Our pain and suffering are matters that God sees and cares about.

The premise of this book is that God has the answer to all questions about human pain; however, God's answer may not be the solution we expect. It may be something as intangible but indispensable as grace, community, courage, or strength. It is my opinion that, in order to find the biblical answer to life's problems, we do not have to fall into the error of balancing, modifying, or shaping our theology with our personal experiences. To do this is to follow the path of personal spirituality, not orthodox Christian faith.

Corporate experience of fallen individuals in an imperfect world is in itself an unrealistic yardstick for what is normal or biblical. We can take a better route by explaining and building on scriptural precepts. In remaining loyal to the Scriptures and to our God and Savior, we will find His healing balm for all our predicaments of life.

For the pain that burns deep inside, the pain that we hide from everyone, there is yet to be found the biblical principles to effect change in our lives and to soothe our wounded hearts. Even when the unpleasant and the most unexpected happens, or we are bombarded by circumstances in which we are victims and not agents, or when we are thrown off balance by the inevitable circumstances of life, there is still a "*balm in Gilead*" (Jeremiah 8:22) that heals the soul.

I have deliberately avoided defining suffering. Suffering wears different faces, and means different things to different people. Believe it or not, a person's toothache is likely to agitate him more than the news report of 250 people who lost their lives and another 20,000 rendered



homeless from a natural disaster on another hemisphere where he has no family or friends. For this same reason, grandiose themes of suffering—such as war crimes, violent crimes, racism, the Holocaust, famine, hurricanes, tornadoes, and widespread floods—have not dominated this book, in favor of the commonplace, everyday experience of suffering.

I want to believe this book does not guarantee what the Bible has not promised. It is my prayer that the Lord sends forth His healing Word to every reader. In the light of my sentiments, you do not have to scrutinize this book for Christian psychology or even the murky water of integration of Christianity with psychology. But you may look for pastoral sanctification, Christian growth, and mental and emotional health.

Because suffering is highly individualized and specific, what is of assistance to one person may not be helpful to another in a similar context. For the same reason, what is helpful to an individual in one context may not prove to be beneficial to the same individual in a different context.

It is for this reason that some sections of this book may appear to contradict what I stated previously. While truth is unchanging, its application may differ from time to time, and an individual's response to the truth may not be consistent.

This book and its companion volume, *Blessed Are Your Tears*, take two different but complementary approaches to making meaning of suffering. *Blessed Are Your Tears: Making Sense of Pain and Suffering Through Community and Storytelling* takes an emotional perspective on suffering in relation to theology, while *God and Suffering* considers the topic from a rational and logical viewpoint. We need both routes to get a complete picture.

The thrust of *Blessed Are Your Tears* is the community, while *God and Suffering* is apologetic. Therefore, stories and human interests dominate *Blessed Are Your Tears*, while logic and reasoning feature in *God and Suffering*. Fictitious names are used where appropriate to protect the identities of individuals concerned.

This book is divided into two parts. It might be helpful to keep a general and a specific question in mind for each part. In part one, ask yourself: Of what value is religion? Specifically: In what way is help available from the Christian tradition? The question to pose in part two is: How is God affected by human suffering? Ask more specifically: What has God done about human suffering?

### **A Little Bit About My Religious Background**

I often attempt to pigeonhole an author or a book. I think we all do. But I am not sure I give enough information about myself to allow an honest understanding of who I am. It may seem as if I live simultaneously in many worlds. This dates back to how my Christian journey started and the relationships that have affected my growth and Christian worldview.

I became a Christian in 1972 in my last year of high school while I was president of the Student Christian Movement of Nigeria. As the name implies, the Student Christian Movement caters to the spiritual needs of all Christian students, irrespective of denomination. With its membership drawn from all denominations, only one thing mattered most to our young and inquisitive minds: *What does the Bible really say?* We were not theologically trained, but we questioned theologians. Such is the confidence of youth.

Each of us came to the group with a working definition of “good” or “bad” doctrine. Simply put, a good doctrine was one accepted by our parents, church, or a favorite preacher; a bad doctrine was one rejected by those same respected individuals. But, as much as possible, when we met for fellowship, we tried to lay aside our denominational differences and read the Bible without interpreting through our diverse background. Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, and members of indigenous denominations sat together around the Bible trying to decipher its message.

In the process, we were able to glean the best of all worlds from all sides of the denominational spectrum, or so we thought. The Anglican member not only learned something from the Pentecostal members, but also learned not to fear them or be suspicious of them. While still remaining a Baptist, the student came to appreciate commendable insights in the other denominations. We even went beyond this: if a denomination or preacher we considered “dangerous” emphasized a doctrine which we considered “good” and “biblical,” while we did not endorse that denomination or preacher, we embraced the teaching, having the wit not to throw away the “baby with the bath water.” The result was that we did not become less than our denominations wanted us to be—we became Christians! And many of us continue to serve actively in our local churches in spite of the fact that some core traditionalists look upon us with suspicion.

The same type of relationship continued throughout my higher education, preparing me, I believe, for the kind of ministry I would later be engaged in. In my undergraduate days, I served in various capacities, such as: Bible study leader, organizing secretary, and president. The students

majoring in religious studies did not have any monopoly in interpreting biblical truths, or we did not grant them such rights. Engineering, medical, agriculture, or education students, we all struggled together to find the truth using the Bible and all available helps. Some of our favorite choruses which we sang, mingling and shaking hands with as many as possible, expressed our commitment to fellowship with one another, despite our different church or denomination affiliations.

When I became a university chaplain, the position made me a pastor to students and staff members belonging to different denominations. The core membership of the chapel when I resumed office was largely Anglican (Episcopalian) and marginally Methodist. I am Baptist by background. Before I vacated the position, however, membership of the chapel ran the entire gamut of Protestant denominations.

What I considered an essential truth, we centralized; what was marginal truth, we sidelined, but everyone still felt included. For Anglican and/or Methodist members who asked for the baptism of their infants, I either arranged for an Anglican priest to do it, or I performed the baptism myself by sprinkling; and once a year we presented candidates for confirmation performed by a visiting Anglican Bishop. For the rest, I performed baby dedication and the adult members I baptized publicly by immersion. We had both a baptismal pool for immersion and a baptismal font for infant baptism. Guest ministers came from the length and breadth of the Protestant persuasion.

We strove to take care of the spiritually expressive members who liked the high decibels, as well as reverentially introspective members who preferred stillness, as both dispositions were more related to temperament or background

than to levels of spirituality. In the Spirit of Christ, each one's freedom was, or was supposed to be, moderated by love for the next brother or sister in Christ; each one's authenticity in worship expression was to be limited by respect for the next brother or sister's right for the same.

We also encountered problems related to the generation gap, because what the elderly (or "orthodox," as the youth sometimes referred to them) wanted clashed with what the young ones wanted in a service. I once joked about this when I admonished that we should strive for mutuality and the center, as suggested by the title on one of our hymnbooks: *Ancient and Modern*. The joke was that one day our identity would be The Ancient and Modern Chapel of Christ Our Light, University of Lagos Campus, Nigeria. The hymnbook analogy resonated with many, so we tried to remain faithful to *ancient* themes and practices while at the same time operating with *modern* concepts.

It was always a joy when visitors from different cultural and denominational backgrounds reacted to the same worship service, saying the experience was like their Anglican (or Baptist or Pentecostal) church service back home. I knew we strove to make every service "a little bit of this and that." This is what you may expect from this book—a little bit of this and that with the singular goal of providing hope and healing. I appreciate the freedom to be able to do this.



*Part One*



MEANING MAKING  
THROUGH FAITH





## *Chapter One*



# PERSPECTIVES ON SUFFERING

**S**eptember 1997 was the first month of my clinical pastoral education. At that time, Jack (not his real name), age 58, was taken for an operation when I met his anxious, widowed mother in his hospital room. As soon as she acknowledged my identity, she pled, “Please pray for my son. He is about to have an operation for gangrene.” There was a sense of urgency in her tone and her eyes were imploring. I sat next to her, took her hand, and prayed.

When I finished praying, she began to speak mournfully, “Thank you. Jacky never listens to anybody. He does his own thing his own way. I told him, ‘You cannot eat certain things with your diabetes,’ but he does not listen to anyone. I lost his dad two years ago.” She began to sob.

She continued, “How am I going to cope? How is he going to cope? His father and I tried to help other people. Is this our reward for trying to be good? Some things never happen to bad people.” Then, in a resigned tone, she concluded,

“The happy ones are the unborn!” After a pause, she said, “How can they do this? He came in three days ago, and they are going to cut off his leg. How will Jacky cope? First, they said they would cut just above the ankle. Now it is going to be just below the kneecap.... What kind of life is that? Oh God! What kind of life is that? I am all alone.” She began to really cry. I put my hand on hers. “How is Jacky going to take it? What can we do for him now? I have not slept for two days. What do we do? How do we plan?” She looked into my eyes as if demanding an answer.

“I can see your anxiety is about what happens next.”

“Yes! I don’t have the money. If I had the money, then I could plan. But I don’t have the money. I live in a one bedroom apartment.” She paused and then continued, “We have tried to be nice and to help people.” There was a long pause.

In my naïveté and discomfort with the silence, I began to “fish,” inquiring about Jacky’s marital status. His mother answered, “He was married for fifteen years, but his wife left him. I don’t know much about her, but Jacky is stubborn. He does his own thing. When his wife left him, that finished Jacky. He broke down—twice. He was losing touch with life before the aide came. And the aide has been so helpful. He cheers Jacky up....”

I took out a four-page compilation of *Poems, Prayers, and Psalms* that I had for another patient. I had intended to read some out loud to Jack’s mother, but she took the copy and read them all. Probably the title caught her attention.

“I like the poems. I write poems, too. I have a book of poetry, this size.” She indicated a space between her index finger and thumb to show the size of the book. I did not know whether she meant a book of poetry she owned or one that she had authored herself. She heaved a sigh as she

read the psalms that concluded the compilation. “I prayed for my husband,” she said mournfully. “I prayed. Maybe God didn’t hear. I have been putting Jacky in my prayers. I have no one else.”

At my next visit, the aide and Jack’s mother were present with the patient. Jack’s mother said the aide was like a second son. She told me that she was heartbroken, repeating the statement numerous times within a few minutes. She told me she was still reading the poems I gave her. She wondered again why God would allow her to live to see Jacky in his condition.

I also learned that she wore hearing aids. She told me of her own health battles with hearing and sight. In my subsequent follow-up visits, I was able to assist her in expressing her anger at Jack, herself, and the hospital system. The issue of her aloneness came up often. Jacky spent over three months in that hospital room, and his mother, a woman in her late seventies or early eighties, visited him every day. Jack was taken from the hospital to a nursing home.

Whenever I think of Jack’s mother, I remember the biblical character of Mrs. Manoah, mother of Samson (Judges chapters 13 through 16). The one child for whose birth she had prayed must have broken her heart. I believe that there were unspoken questions in the minds of Samson’s parents. What concerns filled the hearts of this godly couple as they watched their son, whose conception took place only after an angelic visitation and who had such great potential, divine favor, and heritage? But Samson, though he was an answer to prayer, kept making wrong choices, causing his parents anxiety. Undoubtedly, they asked themselves: Where did we go wrong? Is this what we asked for?

## Healing for the Heart

There is the story of an enterprising young man who walked the streets advertising and selling glue. He kept shouting down the streets: “This glue will mend anything that is broken in your house, anything—plastic, wood, glass, steel, furniture—you name it. Is there anything broken in your house? I have the remedy for anything that is broken in your house.”

A woman on the street looked out the window at this enterprising young man and shook her head. Before he passed out of sight, she called down to him, “I just want you to know that there is something broken in my house that your glue cannot mend.” The young man’s eyes glowed at the challenge. He said, “Madam, can I come in and demonstrate to you how this glue works? Madam, don’t pay me a *penny* if, in five minutes, the thing is not repaired. May I come in and prove it?” The woman said, “There is no need for you to come in, young man. I really appreciate your enthusiasm, but I just want you to know that there is something broken in my house which your glue cannot mend. That is all.”

The young man said again, “Madam, I bet my life on it: this glue *will* work. I can almost swear. What is it ma’am, just show me.” The woman asked him to come closer. She then whispered, “It is my heart.” The young man’s head drooped and he said, “I am sorry, madam, this glue cannot do it.” As the young man went down the street, he could not advertise his product until he was out of the hearing and sight of this broken woman.

No glue can mend a broken heart, but Jesus can. And His Church is called to help in healing. Many people today are broken, bruised, wounded, or crippled in spirit. Thank

God, there is a balm to heal them (Jeremiah 8:22; 46:11). A heart transplant is a great medical achievement, but even modern science cannot mend a broken heart. Jesus Christ declared His mission in plain terms:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4:18,19).*

This Scripture was indeed the manifesto of Jesus. We will focus on this reality: “*He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted*” (Isaiah 61:1); “*He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted*” (Luke 4:18). These are profound words indeed.

There are many broken, wounded, and bruised people in the world today. The burgeoning popularity of psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, counseling, and related disciplines testify to this truth. Just a few decades ago, getting counseling or seeing a psychiatrist was an indication that a person had lost control, or was mentally unfit. Not any longer. People talk openly of therapy. Sadly, visiting a therapist is the only opportunity many have to be listened to or cared for, and they pay dearly for that service. For some emotionally troubled people and their concerned family members, these disciplines and their experts are a last resort. Christ came to earth to mend, to heal, and to soothe.

Jesus is the Healer, but we must bear in mind that His Church, and, in fact, every Christian, has been enrolled in His healing ministry. We are Christ’s agents of healing. Jesus will heal those with broken spirits, bruised emotions, and wounded personalities in our world if we make ourselves available

for Him to use. Regardless of advances in medicine or psychiatry, and despite the advantages arising from improved environment, Jesus Christ's Church should be a healing community where people are ministered to on a deep level.

### **Why Do People Suffer?**

The question "Why?" is the bedrock of science, just as "What?" is to philosophy. Answering why about suffering transcends philosophical investigation. Even the Book of Job, that ancient classic which addresses human suffering, offers no reply to the why questions asked in the book. Because giving a definite explanation is difficult, if not impossible, we must theorize, with the guidance of Scripture.

### ***Not Necessarily Caused by Personal Sin***

Human problems and heartaches may be traced to numerous sources. First, we need to acknowledge the fact that the source of suffering and problems may not necessarily be due to personal sin or reflect in any way a person's degree of sinfulness. For example, Job's suffering was not caused by sins he had committed. Suffering may even result from obeying God. Much of the hardship experienced by prophets in the Bible (Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Peter, Paul, and even Jesus), came because they chose to please God, which did not necessarily please their fellow men.

The church in Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11) experienced "*tribulation, and poverty,*" but not because of sin in the church. In prophetic warning of the suffering that was to follow, the church was admonished:

*Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer:  
behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison,*

*that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life* (Revelation 2:10).

This was the word sent to them by the risen Lord, Himself. There was no promise of deliverance from the impending imprisonment and suffering. But their Lord knew all the sufferings that they already experienced or would experience. And the Lord encouraged them to be faithful to the end, assuring them that their tribulation would not last forever. Our faith *in* God, or our faithfulness *to* God, does not deliver or prevent us *from* crisis; mostly, it delivers us *through* crisis.

His disciples asked Jesus about a man born blind. “*Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?*” Jesus answered that it was neither the man nor his parents that had sinned “*but that the works of God should be made manifest in him*” (John 9:1–3). This blind man stands with those who have suffered intense pain their entire lives, and whose routine has frequently been interrupted with trips in and out of the hospital for diseases or birth defects. Jesus said the man’s condition was not a punishment for any sin.

Jesus said there was no connection between the man’s blindness and the morality of the man (in his pre-birth state) or that of his parents. Of the Galileans killed by Pilate, Jesus said their fate was not because they were the worst of sinners (Luke 13:1–3). Our Lord Jesus also said that there were eunuchs “*which were so born from their mother’s womb*” through no fault of their own (Matthew 19:12).

In His response to the causes of suffering in these texts, Jesus challenged the popular misconception that

tied all suffering to specific sins. Jesus cited another disaster—the death of eighteen construction workers on whom the tower of Siloam fell—stating that these disasters had not occurred as judgment on the victims for some particular sin. He focused attention on something more important by saying, “*except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish*” (Luke 13:4,5).

From this response of the Lord, we are immediately reminded that personal disaster is not necessarily a result of personal sin, and pain and suffering are part of the inevitable consequences of living in a sin-cursed world (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8; Romans 5:12–21). Personal suffering and tragedy should drive us to God. No one is exempt from tragedy and death. Disasters should serve the purpose of reminding us of our mortality and accountability to God.

### ***Suffering Is a Mystery***

Before we explore further the reasons why we suffer, we must again recognize our human limitations. There is a mystery to pain and suffering which no one can unravel. Any theology or philosophy that omits mystery in the problem of suffering should be suspect. The Bible speaks of the “*mystery of iniquity*” (2 Thessalonians 2:7), and also of “*the mystery of godliness*” (1 Timothy 3:16). We do not have all the answers. No sufferer ever did. David cried out in Psalms, “*My God, my God, why...?*” (Psalm 22:1). Our Lord Jesus, the Son of God, used exactly those words to express His agony on the cross. If David did not know, and Jesus, in His humanity, did not know, why should *we* expect explanations?

The meaning of our suffering is to be found in the after-life. We do not have all the solutions, but we have sufficient



enough answers for anyone at all to “take the leap of faith.” More important than the mystery of suffering is the mastery of pain and suffering. “We do not know why we suffer, but we know the God who does,” wrote a sufferer, Dr. William Goulooze. Having no doubt about the justice of God, Abraham quizzed rhetorically: “*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” (Genesis 18:25b).

### ***We Live in a Fallen, Cursed World***

Another foundational truth to suffering is the fact that we live in a cursed world, groaning for deliverance (Romans 8:20–23). We suffer because something is wrong with the world in which we live. As a result of sin, creation is not as God originally planned it. Even nature suffers the consequences of sin. We are subject to, and are affected by, our environment. Our souls may have been redeemed, but our bodies have yet to experience redemption. And we live in a world that has yet to experience redemption.

When God said to Adam, “*cursed is the ground for thy sake*” (Genesis 3:17), nature immediately came under a curse and began to undergo changes not originally intended. The earth was cursed “*for thy sake*,” meaning as a consequence of Adam’s sin. None of us has any idea of the far-reaching effects and ramifications of the curse on creation. Creation is in a state of frustration, groaning for its release from the curse. Living in a sin-cursed, demon-infested, and death-prone world is hard enough in itself, but man’s continued abuse of nature and the environment has further aggravated the situation.

To the question, “Why do the innocent suffer?” Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, in his book *Why Does God Allow Suffering?* replies that there is no such creature as an “innocent person.”

We are all sinful. We have all sinned. We are members of the human race, inherently sinful people. We all sin through our personal choices. We all deserve punishment and death.

### **“All Have Sinned”**

We suffer because sinful men and women presently “run the show” on earth. Beneath the skin of even the best of us lurk the twin devils of selfishness and greed. As long as man is in control, there cannot be peace on earth—not until Jesus comes again to rule and to reign. Much of the evil of our time is the result of man’s inhumanity against his fellow man. Many church people look for a better world in which to live, one of peace and brotherhood. They believe this can be achieved through a worldwide revival, or through some international maneuvering. Nothing can be further from the truth in light of the Scriptures.

The Bible’s tone, concerning the future of the world, is pessimistic. The Bible predicts wars, rumors of wars, famine, pestilence, earthquakes, lawlessness, and wickedness. We suffer, therefore, because we expect what God has not promised—and, as a result, we set ourselves up for frustration. The premise of the Bible is that things will get worse and more difficult in the world. But the individual who trusts in Christ is promised God’s peace and security in this unsure world.

For the Christian, God’s grace and presence and hope of the promised heavenly Kingdom are the key ingredients for optimism. The peace of God, “*which passeth all understanding*” (Philippians 4:7), has been promised to all who put their trust in Christ, regardless of world affairs. If this world could ever improve through our efforts for world peace, Jesus would not have to return. It is a paradox that, as believers in Christ, we are commanded to work for peace on earth even

though its possibility has not been guaranteed. The only hope for lasting world peace is the return of our Lord, Jesus Christ, and the establishment of His Kingdom. Only He can fix the mess into which sin has plunged the world.

### ***Satan's Attack***

While not using Satan as an excuse, Christians do suffer as a result of satanic attacks. Satan's three-fold ministry is declared in John 10:10a: "*The thief* [referring to Satan] *cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.*" The Christian is a ready target for Satan. Job's story has been retold in the lives of many sincere children of God. Satan is a real, diabolical force with which we "wrestle" in spiritual combat (Ephesians 6:10–13). Most of Jesus' miraculous healings involved deliverance of people from satanic control. Where it is clear that Satan has caused the problem, we need to continue to resist him, trusting God and relying on Him for victory.

Unfortunately, a branch of well-meaning modern Christianity has rationalized Satan out of existence. It teaches that Satan and his demons are presently in limbo as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection. For those who believe that, evil can be accounted for only by the depravity of man and the wickedness of his heart. Not surprisingly, the Christian who subscribes to such a doctrine rarely experiences spiritual victories. In this hostile, secular world, he cannot discern the intelligent, diabolical mind behind the scenes. How can a person successfully engage in spiritual conflict with the powers of darkness to which he is ignorant?

### ***Satanic Agents***

Satanic agents can cause suffering. I am a Nigerian, and I grew up in a fetish culture. In spite of how rational

I may want to be, I would have to be lying to say that I don't believe that witchcraft, sorcery, and occultism exist. I have observed mysterious downturns in health, wealth, and fate, and the sudden reversals of the same, which have been explained by the activities of witch doctors, witches, wizards, and other agents of the devil. These satanic agents function by invoking evil spirits or demons and placing curses on their victims. Mysterious deaths, accidents, and incurable sicknesses have often been traced to this source, but they cannot account for all cases—and, maybe should not account for as many cases as have been attributed to them. But it cannot be ignored.

In these satanically-initiated instances of suffering, recovery from misfortune often comes when the agent(s) are directly appeased through an intermediary god or goddess, or when a higher agent in the demonic hierarchy intervenes. But this is really not relief. It boils down to exchanging one form of enslavement for another in the service of the same master. True deliverance is achieved only when the Lord Jesus becomes the new Master of the individual. *"If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed"* (John 8:36).

The good news is that satanic agents may attack a child of God, but their attacks are usually unsuccessful. The Christian may be totally unaware of the spiritual battles occurring on his behalf. The testimonies often come from the agents themselves, either when they wonder why their powers fail to be effective, or when their curiosity eventually leads them to saving faith in Christ.

I am convinced Satan and satanic human agents are at work in all cultures of the world. This is especially noticeable in worship and belief (or unbelief) systems, forms of entertainment, and sports. But people have been blinded to the spir-

its behind these activities. The current revival of Satanism, fraternities, cults, and occultism in the West, and the huge investment and attention to entertainment, are forms of bondage that have seriously affected the national psyche. Satan is more interested in twisting a person's mind than in twisting the person's arm. He does not parade himself in a dark suit, long tail, protruding teeth, and horns as depicted in ancient fairy tales. Today, Satan is enthroned behind the scenes in theaters, amusement parks, big corporations, reputable centers of learning and technology, and religious worship centers.

The devil offers different things to different cultures, depending on what is appealing to the people. But the goal is the same: to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). Modern man engages in intellectual debate over demons, and distances his thoughts from Satan. What he wants is to retain the notion of power to control his own destiny, to be the architect of his own fate. A firm belief in spiritual forces will definitely rob him of any claim of self-determination.

### *The Individual's Sins*

We suffer as a result of our personal sins and dangerous lifestyles. This is at the heart of suffering for a person who is not in a right relationship with God. We are our own worst enemies. Whatever a man sows, he will reap (Galatians 6:7). I cannot imagine how many people I have come across, who know that a certain food is not good for their health, and yet crave to eat it. Though they are adults, they often steal away from concerned relatives to indulge themselves. Many have been jailed for use of illegal drugs or alcohol abuse. They know that substance abuse is killing them, but they have become enslaved by it. Some have been admitted into the A.A./N.A. Twelve Steps recovery or rehabilitation program

more than once, only to fall back to their old self. To use the popular phrase, they have not “worked the program.”

Some problems are actually self-inflicted. Because God holds us accountable, we suffer for abusing or misusing our bodies. Regardless of how often we pray, and how much others try to help us, problems resulting from irresponsible living may not go away unless we change. The beauty is that God forgives, and often gives us a second chance, when we repent of our sinful ways. However, some effects cannot be reversed. The sin may be forgiven, but its consequences may be inescapable. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes in his book *Why does God Allow Suffering?*,

Sin always leads to suffering, misery and shame, whether in a quiet or in a spectacular manner.... Punishment is not altogether postponed to the next world. Here, in this world, we bear some of the punishment for our sins.

### ***Principle of Cause and Effect***

The physical world is governed by the principle of cause and effect. Whatever a man sows, he reaps (Galatians 6:7–9). Our relationship with God, and with our world, is governed by the same principle. In Deuteronomy 28, Moses put before the Israelites the rules for the land of promise: blessings for those who obeyed, and curses for those who did not. Moses gave the same principles in Leviticus chapter 26, under an “if-but” principle. The Israelites were told the rewards of obedience and the results of disobedience. Their behavior directly affected their future.

There is a sense in which we are our own devils, in what we allow. A nation that exposes its young children to

movies that present vicious maniacs as stars and heroes, and sells toys and computer games that engage the minds and reflexes of children and youth in violence, should not be surprised that its school system is unsafe; that children under the age of twelve commit heartless murders and sexual assaults; or that they carry guns and dangerous weapons into classrooms. The more materialistic you are, the less sacred human life becomes. And whatever controls the minds of the children will eventually control the destiny of the nation.

### *The Sins of Others*

We may suffer because of the sinful choices and acts of others. This comes in various forms. For example, the sin of one man, Achan, resulted in Israel's defeat in battle against Ai (Joshua 7), and prophet Jonah's disobedience endangered the lives of other passengers aboard his ship (Jonah 1). If we associate with or fail to speak against those who live in sin, the consequences may reach beyond the active participants. We are not punished for the sins of others, but we groan and languish under their burdens if we live under their shadows or care—especially when they are authority figures such as parents or civil and political leaders. It has always been the case that subjects suffer the consequences of the sin of their rulers and leaders. In the same way, children are torn apart, and may suffer hardship, when their parents become separated or divorced.

Furthermore, there is corporate responsibility for the acts of a corporate body. If a vessel sinks, all on board drown—regardless of whose fault it is. Many families have been forced to flee their countries, and become refugees, as a result of political upheavals for which they are not responsible.

Many wars have been fought, and people have been maimed or disabled in power struggles among delinquent leaders.

In the Ten Commandments (the Decalogue), God promised to visit the sins of the fathers on their children even to “*the third and fourth generation[s]*” (Exodus 20:5,6). The generation of Israelites that wandered in the wilderness for forty years was not the one that sinned. Their fathers sinned, through unbelief and murmuring, and died in the wilderness, but their offspring languished for forty years. The young people of Judah who were taken into Babylonian captivity for seventy years were not the people who committed the sin. Their fathers and their leaders did. But it was Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Ezekiel, Mordecai, Esther, Nehemiah, Ezra, and other godly young men and women of Judah who spent their lives in exile.

While we are not called to pay for the sins of generations past, the rippling effects may produce suffering. No one goes around questioning why we benefit from the sacrifices of a past generation, but we never cease to wonder why we suffer the consequences of their misdeeds. Can we have one without the other?

Another cause of suffering is disaster that could have been prevented, had we heeded the warning and behaved more responsibly. A person who travels in a vehicle that is not roadworthy is courting trouble. Unfortunately, the trouble may go beyond the irresponsible motorist. The person operating a vehicle without a valid driver’s license or in a drunken stupor puts not only his own life at risk, but gambles with the lives and welfare of others as well. A faulty engineering design may lead to the collapse of a building with untold damage to lives and property. Jesus told of “*those eighteen, upon whom the tower of Siloam*



*fell, and slew them,*” and He declared that they were not “*sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem*” (Luke 13:4). What happened to them could happen to anyone.

### **Chastisement for Sin**

We may suffer by way of chastisement for our sins. A loving and caring parent uses appropriate discipline and punishment to correct and help straighten out a child. It is the child that the Father loves that He chastises. At the instance of his desire to build a house for God, God made a promise to David, concerning Solomon, his son, whom the Lord had chosen to build the Temple:

*I will be his father, and he shall be my son. If he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: But my mercy shall not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee* (2 Samuel 7:14,15).

The writer of Hebrews reminds us “*whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth*” (Hebrews 12:6). The Apostle Paul would have us know that some Christians in Corinth were “*weak and sickly*” and some died (1 Corinthians 11:30) because they were under God’s discipline. They ate and drank at the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner. In Haggai’s time, the post-exile Jews suffered crop failure and hostile weather conditions, because they had abandoned the project of rebuilding the Temple. The Israelites of Malachi’s time suffered similarly for failing to pay tithes to the Temple.

At the age of eighty, Moses was called by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land.

From then on, his life's passion was wrapped up in the mission of leading God's people to possess the "*land that flows with milk and honey*" (Exodus 3:8,17). But, in spite of all that Moses suffered in the course of carrying out the assignment, he was forbidden to enter the Promised Land. Why?

In an unguarded moment, Moses sinned. God had told Moses to speak to a rock, and water would come forth. Instead, Moses (under provocation) spoke to the people harshly, and then he struck the rock twice with a stick. He failed to honor the Lord before the people, while he indulged his own anger instead. Because we cannot sin with impunity, Moses was not allowed to enter into the Promised Land, the land for which he had labored so long (Numbers 20:7–12). How wonderful God's grace is, as we see Moses, in the New Testament, appearing with Jesus on the mountain where Jesus' transfiguration took place.

We need to bear in mind that God's way of disciplining His children is not always to act immediately when a sin is committed, but to give ample time for repentance. The refusal to deal with sin results in our chastisement, or judgment. The specific sin, therefore, which makes us candidates for chastisement is an unrepentant spirit (2 Samuel 7:14). God desires repentance and restoration. Adversity and affliction, in increasing severity, may be necessary to bring about the usefulness of God's people (Amos 4). Restoration to service and avoidance of further sin is the goal of divine chastisement (John 15:2; Hebrews 12:10; 1 Corinthians 5:15; James 5:15,16; 1 John 1:9).

The following principles, gathered from Dr. Howard E. Dial's notes, *The Role of Suffering in the Life of a Christian*, help to keep the meaning of suffering as punishment in perspective. The Lord chastens only His children, and does so

out of love. Chastening is not meted out every time a believer sins. It is his unrepentant condition that God deals with. Sin always brings consequences, and the longer a Christian allows sin to go unchecked, the more complications it creates. God's discipline may be either providential or miraculous in nature. God may use secondary means (such as psychosomatic effects of guilt, a storm), or He may directly intervene with instant death. God may use the authority of government, home, school, or church to bring corrective discipline (1 Peter 3:17; 4:15; Ephesians 6:1-4; 1 Corinthians 5). God does not discipline a believer for sins committed prior to conversion, although the result of such may continue and bring adversity (Ephesians 1:7; Acts 2:38). Finally, suffering may not be disciplinary in the sense that there is some unconfessed sin, but it does bear consideration (Psalm 139:23,24).

### *Pruning for Effectiveness and Efficiency*

Those painful experiences we go through as a result of pruning, which the Lord does for our greater productivity, may be unexplainable. While chastisement is designed to bring us to repentance, pruning is to remove from our lives the unproductive practices, behaviors, habits, and associations that are not sinful in themselves, but are not helpful to our Christian witness and growth. They are the "excess baggage" (Hebrews 12:1,2) that hinders us. Jesus said, in John 15:1-2,

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit.*

The pruning is not a pleasant experience for the tree. The farmer has a particular goal in mind, and sets out with the pruning shears to remove branches that will not suit his purpose.

The reason for the loss of its members, the injury and scar from the cut, are things the plant must endure. The plant, inanimate though it is, must trust itself to the care of the owner. If the plant, by being pruned, gives pleasure to the farmer, it has lived up to its purpose for existence.

Christians often experience pruning of undesirable aspects of their lives that only the Father knows His purpose of them. The pruning is painful, but is done in order that the Christian might better serve the purposes of his Maker. Malachi reminds us that God is in the business of refining His Church:

*And he [God] shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness (Malachi 3:3).*

The metalsmith uses fire to burn off impurities. As heat is applied, impurities rise to the surface. The smith scrapes these off and applies more heat. He is looking for a finished product that is pure. He continues the process until he gets a product that perfectly reflects his image. That is when he knows his product is pure.

God, in the closing days of the Old Testament, is pictured as sitting “*as a refiner and purifier of silver*” (Malachi 3:3a) to “*purify the sons Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness*” (Malachi 3:3b).

Today, God is doing the same to His Church, so that His people may offer Him righteousness.

If you are under the fire, take heart. The fire of God's furnace is to burn off the impurities in you. The fire that burns the dross purifies the gold. May you become a product that perfectly reflects the image of the refiner—God.

### *The Long Arm of Justice*

Problems and sufferings may be the result of the long arm of justice. The story of Eli illustrates this principle. For Eli's failure to confront his children with their sins, God pronounced a curse that the favored privilege of high priesthood was to be taken away from Eli's family (1 Samuel 2:27–36; 3:11–18).

Many years later, King Saul, suspecting a conspiracy among Jonathan and David and the priests, killed the high priest, Ahimelech, and the priests—eighty-five in all. In fact, Saul went so far as to destroy everything in Nob, the city of the priests:

*And Nob, the city of the priests, smote he with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword (1 Samuel 22:19).*

Why did such a fate befall innocent priests? Saul's irrationality did not explain it entirely. A greater part of the answer would be found in the seed sown by Eli and the curse that fell on his descendants.

Only one young man escaped the massacre at Nob. Abiathar escaped to David who, though he had been anointed to be king, was by then an outlaw on the run. Abiathar became the high priest during David's reign, but he joined

in Adonijah's intrigue (1 Kings 1:7,19,25). Why did the high priest behave so foolishly? While he was responsible for his actions, some of the reasons could be traced to a curse that hung on his line. 1 Kings 2:26,27 is the final fulfillment of the prophetic curse. King Solomon expelled Abiathar from his position as priest, ending Eli's line. The long arm of justice finally caught up with him.

Fortunately, it is not only the bad things that are passed down; good things also come through ancestral lineage. Abraham serves as an example of how the good seeds sown by an ancestor in one generation are reaped by the descendants in another generation. Abraham was the great grandfather of Levi. In Genesis 14, Abraham met Melchizedek and gave him tithes. Abraham had no child when he gave the tithe to Melchizedek. But in Hebrews 7:1-10 (especially verses 9 and 10), we are informed that this act of Abraham was reckoned to Levi, his great grandson who did not know Abraham. Spiritually, Levi was an unconscious participant of that good deed of Abraham. Levi paid tithes through Abraham, we are told. In the same way, certain good things done by an ancestor may be indirectly reckoned to the offspring, as if *they* had done the deeds.

## **Why Are People Brokenhearted?**

We do not necessarily become heartbroken because we have problems. History is replete with individuals, communities, and nations that have suffered terrible losses, degradation, and humiliation from wars, famine, or natural disasters. Amongst them are those who, in spite of their hardships, maintain good spirits and excellent communal psyches. In time, those ones are able to pick up the pieces, and bounce back to life. And there are those who have not suffered as

much, comparatively, but have been crushed in spirit and lost their sense of dignity.

The cause of heartbreak is usually not *the problem* we suffer, but our *interpretation* of and reaction to it. Failure to meet life's problems in a biblical manner and our use of non-biblical responses cause heartbreak. God, however, has promised us grace for every problem. When we shift our minds from the Word of God, and the peace and assurance it gives, we become vulnerable.

Why are hearts broken and spirits wounded? There are many reasons. Hearts may be broken by errors of judgment, miscalculations, and lack of foresight. All of us have made mistakes. We never know all the facts, yet we have to make some decisions based on our limited knowledge. But for the grace of God, it is possible to make one mistake that may affect many people adversely.

Hearts are often broken by the cruelty and insensitive attitudes of others. A husband can mistreat his wife. Subjection to mental, physical, and emotional abuses may rend a person's heart. Rebellious, wayward children can break the hearts of their parents. Parents can cripple their children's spirits.

Many hearts are broken by the complexities of our present society. It is easy to become depressed in this day of advanced communication. There has never been a day when the people of the world have been so well informed about each other's sorrows. Read the magazines, or listen to the radio, or watch television: only bad tidings make the news. You can hardly read the newspapers and not be depressed. Christ would have His Church minister to the brokenhearted in today's world. The tensions around us afford us the opportunity to present the world with an alternative—the life of

Christ. If we want to be true followers of Christ, we must seek to bind up and heal the broken hearts of those around us.

Hearts are broken by the tragedies of life. Some things are beyond us, and defy natural explanations. We live in an imperfect world, inhabited by imperfect people. In spite of advances in medical science, children are still born with unexplainable congenital diseases. Tragic accidents claim innocent lives. Flood disasters displace a community, rendering families homeless. Fire accidents turn the tide backward and dash the hopes of those having promising futures. An incurable, debilitating disease is diagnosed at the prime of life. A young woman is jilted in a love relationship, dashing her hopes. A young couple leaves the maternity ward with a malformed child, leaving dreams unfulfilled. A breadwinner is snatched away by the cruel hands of death, and life takes a dramatic turn for the dependents. We are never prepared for the death of a loved one, no matter how elderly.



## Chapter Two



# HEALING THROUGH THE WORD

I decided to use my last fifteen-minute break for a prayer walk instead of snacking. As I turned the corner on my usual route, I saw a man sprawled on the sidewalk. He was spared the setting sun's direct rays by shade from trees in front of a row of apartments. I first thought he was having an epileptic seizure, but on closer look, I concluded he was drunk. Using a sleeping bag for a pillow, he was fast asleep, or had his eyes closed, I should say, and drooled onto the pavement. I walked past him.

*That's a soul*, was the first thought that came to me. Since I was on a prayer walk, my first response was to pray for the sleeping stranger. I was going to pray, "Lord, have mercy on him," but the sentence stuck in my throat. I felt a gentle rebuke inside. How would God have mercy on the man lying on a busy sidewalk, with people passing in both directions? He was lying directly in front of some person's house, and, at that very moment, the owners stepped out of their apartment

and locked the door. All that was needed was for somebody, anyone, to walk to a public phone booth not far from the spot and dial the emergency number. The call is free.

I retraced my steps to work so as to see what had happened to the man. He had changed his position, but still had his eyes closed. I would have concluded he was unconscious if not that he had his bag for a pillow. Many pedestrians paused to look, then marched on in typical New York haste. Some kept turning and looking back as they walked away.

It occurred to me that God had mercy on that man by the busy street corner. The question was: did we? It also occurred to me that if a dog was lying by the street in that condition, many New Yorkers would respond with a passion and care that might even attract the attention of the media. Who was I to pronounce judgment that the man was a drunk? Even if he was, would that make him any less needy? Couldn't he be homeless and hungry, lying there out of exhaustion? It was a hot summer day, around 6:00 p.m. (July 1999 was reported as the hottest month since 1856, when records were first kept). That particular day's temperature was 98°F, with a heat index around 110°. Was that not sufficient to flatten a man by the road?

There are many needy people and situations with which we can help, but that we tend to just walk past on a daily basis, closing our heart, eyes, and ears. If we care to pause, we will find something we can do to make a difference. This brings to mind Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan.

## **Corporate Responsibility**

What should be our attitude to the brokenhearted of life? First, we call to mind a statement about Jesus' ministry quoted in Matthew 12:17–21: "*A bruised reed shall he not*

*break, and smoking flax shall he not quench...*” (Isaiah 42:3; quoted in Matthew 12:20). This shows the Messiah’s character: gentle, encouraging, kind, and loving. No matter how broken, bruised, or burned-out people become, God will not give up on them. He does not step on them or toss them aside as useless. We can count on God to gently lead them back into fellowship with Himself. God desires to do that work in and through us, even today.

In wartime, soldiers help their wounded or fallen comrades. Unfortunately, the soldiers of the cross most often kick, condemn, trample, badly criticize, or bury alive their fallen soldiers. This bad attitude is, unfortunately, all too common. “Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone,” is the world’s philosophy that many Christians have also adopted.

Jesus summarized the Law—the Commandments of God—into two principles: Love God, and Love your neighbor. In other words, every aspect of life is to flow in other-centered relationships, whether vertical (to God) or horizontal (to fellow human beings).

Lack of love is often easy to justify, even though it is never appropriate. To ease our conscience, we tell tales of when we were misunderstood or misquoted. We’ve been burnt once too often, and don’t dare to be hurt again. But love never gives up; love never fails to take risks.

In the story of the Good Samaritan, found in Luke 10:25–37, we find three attitudes that are shown towards victims; these attitudes still being common today.

The robbers, who attacked the merchant, wounded him, and stole his savings, had the following attitude: *What’s yours is mine, and I am going to get it however I can.* In so doing, they left the man half-dead.

The priest and the Levite, who came by but didn't want to help because of their so-called temple assignments, had this attitude: *What's mine is mine, and I am going to keep it even if it means another man's death.* It was *their* time, *their* money, *their* own space, and they wouldn't let go of any of it.

But the Good Samaritan, who helped despite the cost, had this attitude: *What's mine is yours, and I am going to share it even if it creates hardship for me.* He had compassion. True love costs something. Love is sacrificial. It cuts across race, class, and status. Love takes risks for the convenience of others.

It all boils down to a person's perceptions of humanity. Does a person have value? Is a human being a self-seeking, self-gratifying, irrational being, acting on impulse—an advanced creature of the animal kingdom? Or is he or she a rational being, with a mortal body and an eternal soul, made in the image and likeness of God?

The lawyers treated the wounded man as a topic for discussion. They were happy and satisfied with themselves as soon as they had finished their debate, even though they had not helped the man. The thieves saw him as an object to exploit; the priest, as a problem to avoid; and the Levite, as an object of curiosity. But the Samaritan saw him as a person to love. Love always acts to meet needs.

The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference. The fact that you do not hate somebody does not mean that you love him. Love is aggressive. It is active, not passive. We know love by what it does. We are commanded to love one another—even our enemies. The priest and Levite, in the story of the Good Samaritan, were simply indifferent; they could not—or would not—be bothered to help.

One of the greatest sins of omission is lack of love or compassion. Out of excessive self-protection, we shirk our responsibility to get involved. While the robbers were selfish, the priest and the Levite were indifferent. Many Christians would never dream of behaving like the robbers, but they see no problem with remaining indifferent—just as the priest and the Levite had been. They simply go their way, offering a silent prayer to placate and silence their nagging consciences.

Abraham Lincoln once said, “I am sorry for the man who cannot feel the whip when it is laid on the other man’s back.” Indeed, a person without feelings for another, or one who is indifferent to the needs of others, is most to be pitied. Love risks involvement.

The Rotary Club, Lion’s Club, Women’s League, and other social or philanthropic organizations visit their members (or their members’ relatives) and try to help. Oftentimes, they provide financial assistance during the early stages of bereavement or difficult circumstances. In addition, their motivation may be questionable. Must Christians, the healing agents of the Lord, be content with material gifts and initial visitation and venture no further? We should attempt more! We should constantly challenge ourselves as a body, as local churches. There are at least four things we should do as members of Jesus’ healing team: Prayer, Presence (or visitation), Protection, and Provision.

The Church does not have a ministry to the dead (whom we bury), but it has a ministry to the living. Yes, we do remember, honor, and cherish times spent with those who have passed, but it is those whose lives have been altered by the death of a family member who require our services. If we don’t minister to the living, then we have no ministry at

all. Pragmatic and realistic as ever, James wrote, “*Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world*” (James 1:27).

Open your eyes to the needy ones around you and reach out in Jesus’ love. Do so in spite of your own suffering. Personal problems should not become the excuse that prevents us from showing love. The bigger the selfless sacrifice behind acts of love, the more meaningful the acts are—both to recipients and to doers.

An atmosphere of love is a healthy and healing environment.

## **Personal Responsibility**

### ***Admit Reality***

The first and most important thing to do in a crisis situation is to face facts and accept them. When a loved one leaves through death, divorce, transfer, or other means, an intangible part of our being dies. In addition to the loss of the physical presence, we lose something non-physical, something in our shared humanity, shared story, or shared dreams.

Some have said that grieving is for a lifetime—that we never really get over the loss of a loved one. At an unexpected moment, the emotional floodgates may burst open again. But we must adjust to life without the presence of a departed loved one. Whenever possible, we ought to reinvest in other relationships. “*There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother*” (Proverbs 18:24). His name is Jesus.

For those who remain when a loved one has passed on, life must continue and adjustments must take place. We must distinguish between fact and fantasy. Sometimes, remembering certain things about a departed loved one will

bring down tears, even when we imagine that we have passed that stage. There is no need to be ashamed of this. A good cry is not a sign of weakness. Jesus, the greatest person who ever lived, wept privately and publicly at Lazarus' tomb, over Jerusalem at the gate of the city, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on other occasions.

God can meet us at the point of our need. The Holy Spirit says through the Apostle Paul, "*My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:19). We often limit God's promise to provision, which covers every area of need. The "every need" which we can trust the Lord to meet is not merely financial, but includes emotional, physical, mental, and social needs.

### ***Ask for Help***

You and I are needy people. From the womb to the tomb, we stand in need of help from one another, and from God. Though we hear the word "independent" used often, no one is truly independent. We all need each other.

When people offer help, be humble enough to let them render whatever assistance they may. Don't shut the world out. Turn to your community for help. Jesus acknowledged His need and asked for prayer from His three closest disciples on the night of His arrest. They were the community to which Jesus turned. They were not perfect, but they were there for Him. How sad if He didn't have them. The Apostle Paul admitted his need, and requested prayer in his epistles to the Asian churches. In addition to partnering in evangelism, Paul had formed bonds with many churches, and he knew many of the members by name. Paul turned to them. Follow these scriptural examples and ask for help.

*Brace Yourself for Disappointment*

Do not be embarrassed by the inaction and empty speeches of some of those you expect to care for you. Many do not know how to respond to those who suffer and, to avoid complicating things, they do another wrong thing: they withdraw completely. This is like abandoning you, when you need their support most. The sight of an individual whose suffering has disfigured him is so terrifying to some people that they run away emotionally and physically. While I am trying to discourage this attitude, I recognize it has become so common that you may as well expect to be treated that way.

When I told the senior pastor of my church that my brother died, he treated it like a side comment, like something he didn't hear or was never said. I was aghast. He never spoke a word of condolence. Even when the other pastors expressed their sympathy in his presence, he remained mute. If I hadn't known him in other contexts, I would have thought of him as a cold person. It was all the more painful because, in my network of relationships, he was the one person I hoped would pray or share a word with me at that time. It was more than a year later when I saw how my pastor treated the book of Job in a Bible study series that I began to appreciate what might have transpired in the pastor's office that day when I broke him the news of the loss of my brother. Overwhelmed by Job's afflictions, Job's friends had remained speechless for the first seven days of their visit, choosing rather to share the moment with Job than sermonize. My pastor emphasized the need for this kind of ministry to the afflicted, and he might have been offering me the same, giving me space and room to heal, while I sought a word from him. I wish I had summoned the courage to tell my pastor that I desired to hear a word from him or



hear him pray for me there and then, either in his role as a brother-colleague in ministry or pastor-priest. You may also need to tell those whose care you value how you desire that they minister to you, otherwise, you will be operating on different frequencies.

If people fail to reach out to you, if they run away or stand silent, do not take it personally. It is not because of you or your problem that they behave that way. It is actually a subconscious reaction to their own sense of insecurity, anxiety, fear, or guilt. Sometimes they do not know how to express their concern without saying the wrong thing or acting the wrong way. Tell those who venture to visit with you, and those friends you can count on, what you want of them and how you want them to care for you. Do this without being demanding.

Then there are those who ask unnecessary, fact-finding questions. Understand that their annoying questions grow out of their own restlessness. And there are many who think it inappropriate to be quiet; they think they show their concern by speaking. Unfortunately, many of them give empty platitudes and trite clichés that rarely are helpful. All you want is their presence, not their wisdom; their friendship and listening to your rambling, not a sermon; their assistance, not their control. But they will give their little sermons and pep talks, and attempt to take charge anyway.

You may hear things like: “God understands;” “You’ll make it;” “Stop crying; crying won’t change anything;” “Look at the positive side;” “God is still on His throne;” “You are strong;” “Age is still on your side;” “Yours is better, I’ve known and seen worse cases than this;” “God knows you are strong enough to take it, otherwise He wouldn’t have allowed it to happen;” “This is not the end

of the world for you;” “Did you pray?”; “Maybe God is trying to say something to you through this;” “There is a lesson God wants you to learn;” and so on.

More spiritualizing and pushy caregivers may say things like: “Things like this don’t just happen; you need to check your life;” “Have you been up to date with the Lord lately?”; “Are you a faithful tither?”

Others dish out Scripture verses and apply them in ways that often make you seem less than spiritual. By hastily applying Scriptures, which, in the passage of time or coming from an actual sufferer, would be appropriate, they show their insensitivity to your feelings.

At one time, when my wife and I were grieving a significant loss, we called one of her cousins, telling her that our much-prepared-for, technology-assisted fertility program had not been successful. The cousin was speechless on the phone, and I could tell that she was crying most of the time. Barely twenty-four hours later, she phoned back. She said to me, “I actually shouldn’t say anything. I haven’t been in your shoes, so I can’t say I know what you are going through, but Jesus does. Jesus has been through it all, you know. And I know that you are a man of faith. You are a spiritual person.” I wish she had stopped there, but then the Sunday school teacher in her began to emerge. She continued, “You know the Scripture says, *‘All things work together for good for those who love God....’*” As she started the verse, I heard myself saying under my breath, “Not this one!”

Not that I disbelieved Scripture, but it was not what I needed to hear right then. What I heard in her communication was that I didn’t have to feel sad, because God eventually would work everything out for my good. I needed a friend, not a preacher. Three months, six months,

or one year after a loss, I might not argue that all things work together for good. But not in the first thirty hours of a devastating event. I knew the cousin meant well. So be prepared for such statements from your caregivers. Incidentally, about seventy-two hours after the incident, even though I still did not know how things would be worked out for good, I had such peace that I was beginning to hope and trust God.

### ***Never Doubt God's Love***

Suffering does not mean that God has stopped or that He will stop loving you. And it does not mean that God loves you more. You have probably heard at funerals, "We love her, but God loves her more." People do not die or suffer affliction because God loves them specially. Why would God take delight in afflicting His children? In no way does the image of a God who afflicts His beloved ones agree with what the Bible tells us about God. God, our heavenly Father, is more compassionate than any earthly parent (Matthew 7:11). Jesus, our Lord, is the Good Shepherd, who laid down His life for His sheep (John 10:11,15), and the Friend who gave His life for His friends (John 15:13). The Holy Spirit is our Helper, Partner, Comforter, Counselor, and Strengthener (John 14; 16; Romans 8).

God's love is unconditional, independent of who you are or what you are. You don't have to deserve or earn His love. He loves you just as you are (Romans 5:8). Family and friends may forsake you or redefine their commitment to you, but God will not. God's Word says, in Isaiah 49:15,16,

*Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? yea,*

*they may forget, yet will I not forget thee. Behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands.*

Jesus' disciples were not perfect, but Jesus loved them with an unending love. None of them understood His ministry or mission while He lived with them and taught them. Judas Iscariot, the disciple from His own tribe, betrayed Him; Peter, the most outspoken among them, denied ever knowing Him; the threesome of His inner circle (Peter, James, and John) failed to pray along with Him, and slept on the night of His arrest while He agonized in prayer; all twelve abandoned Him when He was arrested. But,

*...when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end (John 13:1).*

The longest recorded prayer of Jesus was on the night of His arrest (John 17). Our Lord did not spend that time to pray for Himself, but prayed for His disciples.

The Apostle Paul asks the question: “*What or who shall separate us from the love of God?*” Then he presents an all-inclusive list of possible worst-case scenarios, anything that might affect or destabilize us. He concludes that nothing “*shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:35-39). Never doubt God's love.

### **Rethink the Problem**

Another helpful activity is to reinterpret or reevaluate the situation with a positive outlook for thanksgiving. Hard as it seems, the Holy Spirit says, “*In every thing, give*

*thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you*" (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Not "in some things" or even "in most things," but in EVERY thing. There is no situation that cannot be worse but for the grace of God.

Have you ever been to the hospital with what you thought was the worst situation you had been in, only to find someone else in a more critical condition? I find it ludicrous when people ask God, "Why me?" While I do not believe they should ask "Why not me?" as some have suggested, I believe a proper response is to wonder, "Why have I been so blessed to receive such grace of deliverance (early detection and diagnosis, a good hospital, insurance coverage, a supportive medical team, healing, provision) when others have not? Why have I been spared grief and agony?" Compared to some, who are in no way worse sinners than we are, we really *have* been favored. This in no way minimizes suffering, but provides a window to practice thanking God, even when we might otherwise find least reason to do so.

I have heard many cancer patients say that they have been told one of their allies is a positive spirit. They have been told to fight the disease with a hopeful demeanor and winner's outlook. They have learned to see the bright side of things to thank God for, in spite of the disease or its elusive control. They talk about the competence of their doctors and about the medical facility. Almost every patient I ask acknowledges family and friends being most helpful in coping with disease. Without this support group, many confess they would not be able to endure. I have also noticed the power of hope. Some said they were "hanging in there," hoping to be alive when technology produced a breakthrough treatment. They believe the light is at the end of the tunnel, if only they can stay alive for it.

## *Be Flexible*

Many patients cope with their situations by believing that there is a reason for their suffering, even if it is not presently known to them. They keep looking for the purpose. In the meantime, their thoughts and confessions are full of maybes: “Maybe it is punishment for sin;” “Maybe God wants to say something to me;” “Maybe God is sanctifying me;” “Maybe something worse than the illness could have happened;” “Maybe the sickness is serving the purpose of keeping me from a more serious problem.” Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Other patients cope better by believing that there is no reason or purpose for suffering. To them, the world is sick, nature is blind, the environment is polluted, and many things predispose us to illness. They are sick because their body is malfunctioning due to some organic or systemic problem, or something that may be explained genetically, and no one—not themselves, and not even God—is to be blamed or held responsible.

I believe there is a third possibility: suffering takes whatever meaning and purpose we assign it. In and of itself, suffering has no meaning. Our response to it either gives it power over us, binds us to it, almost making us lose our identity to it; or it frees us.

## *Could Suffering be a Service Gift in Disguise?*

Look for ways to turn your suffering into an opportunity for service. Paul made himself a model in all things—in plenty, in poverty, in pain. Through his sufferings, Paul found a practical ministry in which he could comfort others and be really empathic, not just theoretical. He had something in common with those to whom he ministered. This earned him

the right to be heard because he was speaking from experience.

It is for this that Paul exalts and blesses,

*... the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God. For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ (2 Corinthians 1:3–5).*

As He hung on the cross, our Lord Jesus reached out to minister to others, even in the midst of His own pain. Jesus interceded in prayer for His persecutors, He gave salvation to a repentant thief on the cross, and He arranged for the care of His mother.

Fanny J. Crosby (1820–1915) was a blind woman whom the Lord used to write more than a thousand great gospel hymns. Many of these hymns have become all-time favorites. “Blessed Assurance,” “Draw Me Nearer,” “All the Way My Savior Leads Me,” “Rescue the Perishing,” “To God be the Glory,” are just a few examples of Fanny’s classic songs.

Ira D. Sankey (1840–1908), the hymn composer and compiler, was a contemporary of Fanny’s. He was said to have asked Fanny, when she was advanced in age, if she could live her life all over again, what would she change. Crosby smiled and said she knew he had asked the question because of her blindness. She had gone blind in the first few weeks of life through misapplication of a drug. She reportedly said, “Not then and not now, at this time of my life, would I attempt to change anything. I believe that God has used me these years and given me a full life *not in spite of* my blindness but *because of it.*” She reasoned that, through

her blindness, the Lord had kept her from the struggles that many sighted people have.

It is true for all of us that our handicaps are not necessarily disabilities, but they can be avenues for us to serve God, minister to others, and encourage others in similar situations.

### ***Believe God's Promises***

An important attitude is to let the promises of God be your source of comfort and strength. A promise which has given great help and assurance to many is 1 Corinthians 10:13:

*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it (1 Corinthians 10:13).*

This verse is assuring in many ways. First, it says that you are not being singled out to suffer. Others have been, or will go, through similar things. You are not unique in your situation.

Second, God remains faithful to His Word, to His promises, and to you! God never lets anyone down.

Third, God knows your strength, and He is not going to allow you to be tempted above the ability He has put in you. You may have been stretched already, but there is no need to give up or quit. You can surely make it to the finish line. You really cannot say, "I can't take it anymore!"

Fourth, God will make a way of escape in the temptation or problem so that you will have a testimony of victory and deliverance. To any situation, there is a biblical solution which will bring glory to God.

Finally, there is no situation that is so terrible that grace



cannot surpass. Things may be trying, but grace will abound much more.

The fact that suffering has become your lot is not confirmation that God has abandoned you. God says He will not abandon you, no matter what. In times of need, as in every other time, let the promise of the ever-abiding presence of God be your source of comfort. Jesus is with you. He said, “*I will NEVER leave thee nor forsake thee*” (Hebrews 13:5), “*I am with you ALWAYS*” (Matthew 28:20, emphasis added). When people say “never” or “always,” I often challenge them. Human beings are not consistent or dependable enough to always or never do something. But God is dependable. In His Word, God has given to us,

*... exceeding great and precious promises: that by these [we] might be made partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust (2 Peter 1:4).*

In your pain and suffering, commit yourself to God’s sovereign control, even when life doesn’t make sense.

*Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows (Matthew 10:29–31).*

That portion of Scripture suggests that nothing happens to us without the Father’s knowledge.

### ***Have Faith in God***

Faith is the hand by which we grab God’s promises. Unfortunately, the faith movement, popularized by televan-

gelists, has proved to be no more than a church version of American capitalism and materialism. But we cannot discount with faith because of this aberration.

More than anything else, put your faith to work. Don't think your faith is too small. Even if it is as tiny as a grain of sand, it is the *object* of your faith that matters, not its amount. Make God and His Word the focus of your faith. Believe that God's words have been given by One who cannot lie and who has the power to bring them to pass. In the time of his perplexity, Habakkuk was told, "*the just shall live by faith.*" One such staggering promise, which seems too good to be true, is Mark 11:22,23. Jesus says:

*For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith (Mark 11:23).*

The backdrop to this promise was Jesus' talking directly to a tree. Jesus cursed a fig tree. Speaking directly to an inanimate object is weird, isn't it? But that may be what you need to do to face a particular situation. This is not simply to pray to God about the problem. It is praying against it, commanding it to move because of Christ's authority. At another time, when He was aroused from sleep in a storm-tossed boat, Jesus spoke directly to the wind. He rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "*Peace, be still*" (Mark 4:39). Does the sea have ears to hear? It heard and obeyed.

Moses was asked to speak to a rock. The angel of the Lord, who attended to Zerubbabel, brought to him the Word of the Lord. The Holy Spirit directly addressed the mountain, the invisible problem before Zerubbabel, saying,

“*Who art thou, O great mountain? before Zerubbabel...*” (Zechariah 4:7). The Spirit said “who,” not “what.” It was the spirit behind the problem being addressed.

In this respect I can think of three simple steps—as simple as A,B,C—which may be helpful to a believer. *Acknowledge* the problem. There is no point pretending the mountain doesn’t exist when it looms largely in your face. But don’t magnify the problem. Magnify God. God is bigger than your mountains.

*Believe* the promise of God that when you speak against it, in Jesus’ name, it will move.

*Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them* (Mark 11:24).

Believing means action. It means acting on the Word and promise of God, knowing that God will be true to Himself and His Word.

*Command* the mountain to move. What you are actually speaking against is the spirit behind the problem, the power behind the scene. Shout if you please at the mountain. Curse the problem to its roots. Note that the problem to be addressed this way is not an individual person or group of persons, but the spirit of wickedness behind an event or actions of the person or group. Because of our relationship with God, we have both authority and power.

### ***Believer’s Authority***

There are two New Testament words that describe the believer’s authority. *Dunamis* (Acts 1:8) is the Greek word for self-contained, self-generating, internal power. From *dunamis*,

we have English words like dynamo, dynamite, and dynamic. It is ability-power, power derived by the indwelling Holy Spirit energizing and enabling us. The second Greek word is *exousia* (Matthew 28:18), “passed-on” power. This external power, or delegated authority, is not resident in a person, but conferred by virtue of his position. For example, a general has authority because of his high military rank. As the old saying in the army goes, “Salute the uniform, not the man.”

All power is resident in God and vested in the name of Jesus. We have the authority, the power of attorney to use the name of Jesus. Traffic wardens, judges, military officers, and executives are limited in strength. They use the authority of the state or organization they represent. When the police officer signals a truck driver, he or she is using authority—recognized by the uniform—not power. The Christian also uses the authority of Christ when acting in His name (Luke 10:19; Matthew 28:18; Philippians 2:9–11).

Abraham, Moses, Gideon, David, Peter, Paul, and other followers of God did not achieve success when they focused on themselves or relied on their own abilities. They fulfilled their God-given missions and achieved their goals only by relying on God. Their power or authority was derived from God. The same authority is ours. In addition, Christians also have power resident in us because of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; Romans 1:16; 1 John 4:4; Philippians 2:13; 4:13). This power on the inside is supplied by “He who is in us” (Ephesians 3:20; Colossians 1:27; 1 John 4:4).

Don’t be deceived; God has given you a measure of faith (Romans 12:3). Believe God’s Word. That is all the faith that you need to face the challenges of life that come your way. God can turn your disappointments into His own appointments.

### ***The Master Key of Prayer***

Above all, pray! Prayer is what the Bible recommends for sufferers. “*Is any among you afflicted? let him pray,*” commands Scripture (James 5:13). We know God answers prayer. When we pray, something happens that does not happen when we don’t. The greatest change that prayer brings is internal, in our attitudes and feelings. Prayer changes things and people. Paul’s prayer for his “*thorn in the flesh*” (2 Cor. 12:7) did not change the situation, but it did change him.

That is why I want to ask you point-blank: Have you called on God? Have you sincerely and earnestly prayed about your problem? It is possible to ask others to pray for you without praying yourself. Set aside time to pray. God invites you to ask, seek, and knock. If you do, He says you will find the door will be opened to you (Matthew 7:7–8). Prayer opens the door to the miraculous!

Fasting may not be popular today, or may be abused by some denominations that legalize it as a “cure-all” prescription. But it still is a biblical mandate, evidenced in Jesus’ teaching and example and in the practice of the early Church. Are you willing to pray and fast? When His disciples questioned Jesus why they could not cast out a particular demon, He told them that some demonic cases would not go except “*by prayer and fasting*” (Matthew 17:21).

### ***The School of Suffering***

Don’t fail to explore what you may learn through suffering. Real life is a classroom in which each one of us is tested, passed, and promoted. God uses suffering to teach His children. We read that Jesus, “*in the days of his flesh... Though*

*he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered*" (Hebrews 5:7,8). Paul acknowledged that he "learned" and was "instructed" through the things that he suffered (Philippians 4:11,12). The Psalmist was made wiser by suffering (Psalm 119:71). It is our response and attitude to suffering that determines what benefit will result from the experience. Without a proper biblical response, any experience leaves us in a worse condition than before.

We cannot prevent problems, but we can choose our response to them. Blessings come not because we have suffered, but because of our response to the suffering. Paul encouraged a correct response to suffering when he said, "*We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience*" (Romans 5:3). Tribulation is something in which we do not rejoice. Its result, however, calls for rejoicing. James expounded a similar theology, enjoining believers,

*My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this that the trying of your faith worketh patience.... Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him* (James 1:2,3,12).

James also included an incentive: the reward of "*the crown of life.*"

In the process of bringing a Christian into conformity with the image of Christ, suffering is a tool the Holy Spirit uses. Suffering is a means to forge Christian character and virtue and to teach the Christian patience, love, humility, and dependence. We definitely would prefer to learn these lessons in ways other than through affliction.

### ***Don't Be Embarrassed***

What should our attitudes be when we suffer? Don't be embarrassed. Don't even attempt to "save face" for God before the world by denying or minimizing your suffering. Look at the example of Jesus, the Perfecter of our Faith. "*If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf*" says the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 4:16). The Apostle Paul exhorted the disciples "*to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22). In God's economy, suffering precedes glory; the cross comes before the crown; and the battle cry necessarily is heard before the victory song. *Jesus Himself suffered and He promised us suffering along with other blessings.*

A father cried in agony, "Where was God when my son was kidnapped, tortured, and left to die in his own blood?" Of course, the most appropriate answer—better left unsaid—is simply this: "Where was God when His own Son was arrested, tortured, and hung on the cross to die for a crime He didn't commit?" No one has ever suffered as much as Jesus, and He suffered for no fault of His own. His suffering and death were the greatest acts of injustice against an innocent person. He was the only truly innocent person who ever lived, the only truly innocent person who ever suffered.

*Jesus suffered. "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered"* (Hebrews 5:8, Hebrews 2:10). "*For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps*" (1 Peter 2:21, 1 Peter 4:19). Because Jesus, the beloved Son of God, suffered, and He remains the Son of God's love, we know that suffering does not diminish God's love and is no sign of God's abandonment or disfavor.

*Jesus promised suffering.* At Paul's conversion, Jesus said, "For I will [show] him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake" (Acts 9:16). To His disciples, He promised, "These things I have spoken unto you, that in Me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33; Matthew 10:21,34–36; Mark 10:28–30; Luke 12:49–53). Paul affirmed that suffering is inevitable for those who will not compromise: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Timothy 3:12).

### ***Anchors of Hope***

During one of his seminars on counseling, Selwyn Hughes, the author of *Every Day With Jesus*, shared what he called four anchors of hope to build around the counselee. The first anchor is: *God knows everything that happens to us.* God neither slumbers nor sleeps. This ministered to me at one time, especially hearing it from the mouth of a pastor friend, after I suffered from Bell's palsy (facial paralysis). The friend assured me that God was not asleep or out of town when it happened to me. Even the hairs on our heads are numbered and not one strand can fall, as we comb our hair, without His knowledge.

*God's grace is sufficient for every need.* God will not lead us to where His grace will not be sufficient for us. Whatever God allows is for a purpose.

*God carefully prepares us for whatever comes so that we may be able to bear it.* If the situation requires finances, I have seen Jehovah-Jireh (the God of provision) make provision ahead of time or in the hour of need for me. Sometime God just places someone strategically to attend to my case.



Lastly, Selwyn Hughes says because He is good, *God seeks to bring positive results from everything*. He makes all things to work together for good. All things are not good in and of themselves, but God works through them to bring good. Israel's enslavement in Egypt was not good; Joseph's imprisonment in Egypt was not good; Jesus's shameful, criminal death on the cross was not good. But God worked through all these situations to cause something good.

Bring all the broken pieces of your life to Him and see what He will fashion. He is the heart- and life-mender. Are you brokenhearted? Let Jesus touch your life. Let Him heal you, then go out and touch the world with His healing power.

There is healing through the Word because, "*He [God] sent his Word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions*" (Psalm 107:20), and "*The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary*" (Isaiah 50:4).



## *Chapter Three*



# HEALING FOR NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

**M**iriam is pursuing a graduate degree in a college where I work part-time in New York City. We had little to say to each other in my first three weeks at work. But this day, she overheard a Nigerian, a classmate who lived in the same dormitory, discussing religion with me. After the man left, she noticed that I was reading a religious book and asked me about it. Prior to this, I heard one of the professors mistakenly identifying her as Chinese. Miriam quickly corrected him by stating that she is South Korean. Miriam and I had some difficulty understanding one another because of our accents. But we got along pretty well, interspersing our conversation frequently with, “Pardon?” and “Please repeat it.”

Miriam is an outgoing, extroverted woman, with an inner beauty that shows through her insight and kind deeds. Her face looks like a child’s handiwork, molded from clay. After we talked for a while, Miriam told me that an accident

six years earlier left her face disfigured. She was the only person injured in that accident. She had spent many years in the hospital, and had undergone dozens of surgeries.

She pointed to her face and hands (the only exposed parts of her body), saying they had been reconstructed from skin grafts. She wore a long-sleeved blouse and wore a scarf wrapped around her neck, like a muffler. She has a full head of hair which covers the back of her neck.

Miriam's family stood by her through the long ordeal. She claimed the accident had drawn her closer to God, though it had been tough, and she was not yet as good a Christian as she could be. She insisted the accident was punishment from God because she had been stubborn, proud, and self-centered before the accident.

Miriam still cries when she is alone. She said, "To a woman, her looks are not the most important thing in life, but almost." She does not like the woman she sees in her mirror. Sometimes, she wishes she had died in the accident until she remembers that suicide is a sin. She wants to be grateful to God for sparing her, but finds it difficult to be thankful for the life she has. She thinks people are looking at her and discussing her.

Miriam needs a part-time job, but considers herself inadequate. She feels that her only chance is to be exceptionally good, so then those who need her skill will not pay attention to her looks. When she does not perform well in a job interview, she believes it is her looks that stand against her. She was studying to be a teacher before the accident. Now, she wants to change everything about her life. She changed her course of study and made a drastic geographic change, migrating from South Korea to New York. But her problem has followed her.

Miriam has a unique look in a way she did not seek. On the other hand, her face is not too bad or uncommon. As Miriam puts it, the large part of her problem is in her mind. She alone knows what she has, and what permanent “make up” she now wears. In her mind, she is the shadow of her former physical self.

## Why Are You Sad?

The Bible is full of questions that are designed by the Holy Spirit to cause us to ponder, to awaken us from our lethargy, and make us face reality. In the Garden of Eden, God posed three questions to Adam and Eve.

First, God asked Adam, “Where are you?” That question was more about Adam’s spiritual location. The second question God asked was to Eve: “Who told you?” He questioned her source of information. If you get your source of information wrong, your life will be wrongly programmed. The third question, God asked of the couple, “What is it that you have done?” This was a question about their actions. We stand accountable before God, not only as individuals, but also as families, as a people, or as a nation.

God asked Cain two questions to help him properly evaluate things (Genesis 4:1–15). The first question we find in Genesis 4:6. The Lord said to Cain, “*Why art thou wroth and why is thy countenance fallen?*” This questioned Cain’s emotions and mood. Cain had done something wrong: he offered an unacceptable sacrifice to God.

The same question is appropriate in examining our moods today. “Why am I angry (upset, irritated, sad, down or miserable)?” Cain’s story is familiar to us. The next question God asked him, in verse 9, was “*Where is Abel thy brother?*” This was the question about Cain’s

social responsibility and reminds us of our responsibility to one another.

Why are people angry or sad today? Why was Cain sad? What was he angry about? The two brothers each brought an offering to the Lord. Abel recognized his sinfulness. He brought a substitute to die in his place. When Abel shed the animal's blood, God looked favorably on the sacrifice because Abel acknowledged his sinfulness.

Cain brought something from the farm—just anything. We may worship God with the best of anything. But if it is not what God has asked for, or the way God designs it, it is worthless. Cain represents those who worship God in their own way. Those who want to be Christians on their own terms and in their own ways, worship a God they have created in their own minds.

Maybe the question is not in what Cain brought—the best or the worst—but that he did not acknowledge his sinfulness. He failed to acknowledge that the soul that sins will die. (Ezekiel 18:4,20). God did not look favorably on Cain and his sacrifice. Cain's mood changed, and God asked him, "Why are you feeling sad?" At this point, Cain's anger was turned inward, on himself. Later on, he turned his anger on God and on Abel, his brother.

Why was Cain sad? Let us examine four possible reasons why Cain was sad, and why people today are sad.

### **Wrong Thinking**

Feelings follow behavior and thoughts. Wrong thinking—telling yourself wrong things about an event—influences feelings and behavior. Cain's bad behavior, offering that which was not acceptable to God, left him feeling sad. His bad feelings followed his bad behavior. But his conse-

quent bad behavior—killing his brother, Abel—is also explained by his bad thoughts. As the old rhyme goes: “Sow a thought, reap an act; sow an act, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a destiny.” It all begins with a thought.

Wherever we set our minds, our emotions follow. For example, imagine having a nice day until somebody mentions the name of a person who has abused, misused, or taken advantage of you. What naturally happens? All of a sudden, negative feelings rush in and take over. Why? Because your emotions follow the train of your thoughts. In this case, thinking of someone who wronged you changed your happy feeling.

Cain was sad because he told himself wrong things. Sin actually begins in the heart. Cain’s offering was not accepted. His brother’s was. Cain killed his brother. Is there any direct relationship? The relationship can be found in Cain’s thoughts—his wrong thinking. Cognitive theory states that what we tell ourselves about what is taking place (“self-talk”) creates our feelings and behavioral actions.

Some experts tell us that it is not an event that affects us emotionally, but what we tell ourselves about the event that has an impact. What could Cain have told himself that got him so worked up that he killed his own brother? Cain could have committed suicide, but he didn’t. What did he tell himself about the whole situation?

The Bible has a lot to say about how thinking influences what we say, how we feel, and what we do. In Isaiah 55:8,9, the Bible links God’s thoughts to His ways, and man’s thoughts and ways likewise.

A man will live out his thoughts (Proverbs 23:7); evil thoughts lead to evil actions (Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:21); good thoughts (daily meditation in God’s words) produce a

good life (Psalm 1:1–3); whatever is in the thoughts (heart) will come out in speech (Matthew 12:34–37); much thinking about needs produces anxiety (Matthew 6:25–34). We should therefore “hold captive” or control our thoughts, because they can become strongholds or self-fulfilling prophecies (2 Corinthians 10:5). Paul even gives us a list of things that should occupy our thoughts (Philippians 4:8).

Thinking influences how we feel and what we do. God’s Word tells us to renew our minds, to let the Word and Spirit of God transform our perception from the ways of the world to the ways of God, from a self-centered world view to a Christian, other-centered world view, because our thinking will influence our actions; our thoughts will color our behavior (Romans 12:1,2; Colossians 3:16,17). The Bible says, “*As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he*” (Proverbs 23:7). We eventually act out our thoughts.

Don Dulany, in reviewing experiments in his book *Contribution to Modern Psychology—Selected Readings in General Psychology*, has shown that how and what a person believes affects and influences his behavior. The theory is that a person’s thought—the sentences he speaks to himself—directly controls his behavior.

Albert Ellis, a writer of psychological studies and methods, asserts that a person’s inner conversations control not only behavior, but feelings as well. In what he calls the A-B-C Theory of emotion, Ellis shows that A (Activating event, what happens), does not control C (Consequence, emotion, or feelings). Rather, B (irrational Beliefs, internal conversation, what you tell yourself about A) is, in fact, directly responsible for C (how you feel about A).

For example, if Ady is Bob’s breadwinner, at Ady’s death, Bob mourns and grieves. Naturally, we would say that Bob is



mourning Ady's death. But the theory says that it really is not the death (the event) that causes him grief, but how he evaluates the loss and what he says to himself about it.

Two men suffered exactly the same fate: they were robbed at gunpoint, and lost their wealth to thieves. One went to his church the following Sunday to give thanks to God for sparing his life in the ordeal. Thereafter, at every anniversary of the event, he put an offering of thanks in the collection to show his gratitude to God. Nothing but the mercy of God prevented the thieves from taking his life.

But the second man became bitter and resentful. He rarely went to church after the robbery, and he never ceased to question God for failing to prevent the event from happening or even miraculously intervening. On every anniversary of the event, and whenever he met his friends who had not suffered a similar misfortune, he became depressed.

Why the sharp contrast in responses? What could be responsible for the big difference? Simply, the two men told themselves different things, and acted according to their feelings. It was a matter of perception. The first person was looking at a glass that was *half full*, while the second man looked at a glass that was *half empty*.

It is because we tell ourselves different things about an event that people have counter reactions to the same things. If we tell ourselves true or rational things, events don't depress us, even though we may be sad. The false and irrational things we tell ourselves are what devastate and depress us.

What could Cain have been telling himself? "I offered a sacrifice which was not accepted, but my brother's sacrifice was accepted." What was Cain's inference? "God is playing favorites." But was that true?

Maybe Cain told himself that God did not love him. God did not accept Cain's sacrifice, but still went on to talk with him. God even offered Cain the opportunity to make things right. Maybe Cain feared Abel might seize the birthright—the right of the first child. Seeking counsel from his parents; checking his own motives; looking for the fault in himself, and not in someone else, might have helped Cain avoid murder.

When we tell ourselves the truth, it helps us get over foul moods. What are you telling yourself about the events of your life? At a conscious level, we use words and terms like, "I should," "I must," or "I ought to," which raise the stakes for our performance to a level of perfection we cannot attain. This unrealistic expectation not only raises our level of anxiety and guilt, it lowers our self-esteem. In a similar fashion, we nag ourselves with statements of regret, such as, "Had it been," "If I had," "I wish I did," "If only," etc.

If you are depressed, it is more likely that it is not the problem that affects your mood, but the wrong things you are telling yourself about it. You could be "making a mountain out of a molehill," so to speak.

Let's say your son failed an examination, and you spent two weeks in the hospital. What is the connection between the two, except the wrong things you might be telling yourself about the events? Maybe you are saying to yourself, "I am a bad parent. I must be responsible for my son's failure." But that may not be true. You may also be telling yourself that you are worthless; your friends' children are doing well, only your children are not succeeding.

You should, of course, always strive to do the best you can as a parent, but don't forget that you cannot live your children's lives for them. Your children have decisions to make.

They need to study. You can encourage them to work hard, but you can't make them learn. Accept responsibility for what you may.

I know some mothers who were hospitalized for days, close to death, because they worried over a child that happened to be different. (I did not say one child who was a failure or was worthless. I said one child that happened to be different.) These women had three, four, or five other children who were doing exceptionally well, and they were going to kill themselves over one child that was different. Are they bad mothers? Not necessarily.

The point is: What are you telling yourself? In any situation, I like to tell myself what the Word of God says about me and about my circumstances. The Word of God says that God loves me. God saw me at my worst, and still loved and accepted me, just as I was.

The Word of God also says that I am precious. God brought me into His own family, adopted me, and gave me a new name. The Word of God tells me that I have the Holy Spirit as my Helper. I am a unique and an integral part of the Body of Christ. I have a living hope, and the best is yet to come.

Of course I have faults. I am not perfect. But God is going to keep those mistakes in the family (1 John 2:1,2). He will deal with me as a son (Hebrews 12:5-13).

The Word of God tells me that God is able to work through any situation I am in to bring good for me because, "*all things work together for good to them that love God...*" (Romans 8:28). The Word of God tells me that whatever happens, God is still on His throne, and it is still His universe.

The Word of God says there is grace from God, which is more than sufficient in whatever situation I find myself (1

Corinthians 12:9). Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more (Romans 5:20). God's Word tells me that God will supply all my needs. Jesus is Lord over all things (Philippians 4:19; 2:9-11).

What do you tell yourself about your problems? It is the false things we tell ourselves that devastate us. We can handle any problem if we tell ourselves the truth of the situation from the Word of God.

### **Narrow Perspective**

I think Cain was sad because of his narrow-mindedness, his narrow perspective of the situation. How often have you heard someone say, "Oh, this is the worst thing that could happen to me." That is not always true. There is nothing so bad that it could not be worse but for the grace of God. Cain did not know that he could have been in a worse condition.

One writer says the worst that can happen to us is to be tortured to death slowly, making us suffer over a long period. But he says that even the slow torture will still not be the worst because it can be slower still, making us suffer over an even longer period of time.

If Cain could see a little bit into the future, to see others who offered sacrifices that were not acceptable to God and what befell them, maybe he would have thought twice and acted differently. In Leviticus 10, we read the story of Nadab and Abihu, both priests and sons of the high priest, Aaron. They meant well in their service, but they did the wrong thing: they offered a strange fire to the Lord, and on that day, the two of them were struck dead. Aaron, the first high priest of Israel, experienced the sudden loss of his two eldest sons. Saul, the first king of Israel, offered a sacrifice that was

not acceptable, and God rejected him as king. Owing to Saul's pride and rebellion, we read in 1 Samuel 13 and 15 that God cut off all communication with him thereafter.

Uzziah, one of the best kings of Israel, also "missed the mark" toward the end of his life. When his kingdom expanded and he was prosperous, pride entered Uzziah's heart, and he intruded into the temple as if he were the high priest. He wanted to offer the sacrifice. Uzziah was rejected, his sacrifice was rejected, and he was struck with leprosy right then and there. Uzziah remained a leper until his death (2 Chronicles 26:16–21).

If Cain had this background of knowledge, maybe he would have acted differently, although he was certainly no wiser than any of the latter. Cain's offering was rejected, but God did not strike him dead as He did the two priests. God did not cut off communication with Cain as He did to Saul. God did not strike Cain with leprosy as God meted out to Uzziah. God stooped down and spoke with Cain, yet Cain did not see the grace of God. He did not see the favor of God, but went ahead and killed his brother, Abel.

Isn't that just like many of us? Often, we think to ourselves, "This is the worst that can happen to me." We think we deserve something better, but the truth is, we do not really deserve anything. All that we are, all that we have, is because God has graciously allowed it. And all that we don't have is because God, in His wisdom, has withheld such for reasons He knows best.

I know of a man who was the richest in his generation, and righteous, too. But one day, calamity struck. All that he had—cattle, donkeys, fields, servants—everything was stolen or destroyed. Even his seven children died that same

day. But this man knew that he had never really owned those things. He never earned them. When he heard the first of the bad news and the reports kept coming in quick succession, this man got up and sighed, “They were never mine to start with.” Then he spoke out,

*Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.... I know that my redeemer liveth* (Job 1:21; Job 19:25).

Do you know this man? Did you ever meet him? I met him. I met him in the Bible, in forty-two chapters of the living Word of God. His name is Job.

Cain did know, I believe, why God rejected his sacrifice. He just didn't see the need to respond positively. He didn't take advantage of the second chance God gave him.

I met a friend who plays a kind of game with himself to handle problems. In any difficult situation, he says to himself, “If you could have just one wish and it would be granted, would you use that wish on this problem or would you save it?” He was forty-one when we talked, and he was yet to use that wish—because in each difficulty, he recognized that things could really have been worse.

## **The Spirit of Envy**

The third thing I found wrong with Cain was his envious spirit. Envy and pride are invidious twins. Cain just could not tolerate Abel's success. Envy is rooted in bitterness and resentment that have not been confessed.

When a colleague gets the better deal in a contract, the upper hand in a power struggle, or wins the award, gains the promotion, secures the love and attention of someone you

desire to marry—how do you react? Do you remain convinced that such things should have been given to you? Even elementary schools have become dangerous places today, because embittered children, full of suppressed anger, have access to weapons and use them to wreak revenge on those they envy.

In some churches or departments, you don't really need to know the matter that is up for vote. You just need to know who is supporting it and who is against it, and then cast your vote based on the camp to which you belong. It is not what is being said or the merit of the matter, but who is speaking or supporting it. This is not good when it happens in society. It is worse in an academic environment, where the better logic should prevail, even if it comes from someone who is not in the upper echelons. But it is worst in the Church, where the principle of love should guide our actions.

Sometimes when we debate and discuss and get nowhere, the end result is that "I" cannot give up on an idea which I think is golden, and "I" cannot stand to see the other person's views prevail.

We see this spirit of envy and its twin brother, pride, in many ways. There are husbands who cannot bear to see their wives succeed. If his wife earns more, the husband feels insecure. If his wife meets important people in society because of her job, he becomes suspicious. His wife is always in the news, so the husband feels his authority is threatened. The husband takes out his anger on his wife in any number of ways. It may be aggression, physical abuse, or false accusations. I have known women who bent over backwards to be submissive, to reassure their husbands they have no cause for alarm.

Sometimes, the reason we are unable to handle the success of others is aggravated, because we live with people who have possessions we desire. We may end up feeling that life

is not fair. Sometimes we begin to feel that people really do not deserve what they have.

Not long ago, somebody told me the difference between an inconvenience and a problem, as he understood it. An inconvenience, he said, is something you can live with; it is temporary. It makes you uncomfortable, but you will soon get over it. A problem, on the other hand, is something you really have to face, and you need all the help you can get to overcome it. The spirit of envy is something we need help to resolve.

Can you handle your brother's success? Can you accept your colleague's promotion above you, and wholeheartedly congratulate him? Would you feel the same way if the promotion had not been on merit, but due to the politics, discrimination, and injustices in the establishment? Would you warm up to the person, even if he or she had been one of your friends? I know that is tough. But if a Christian feels secure in the Lord who loves him eternally and unconditionally and secure in what God gives or withholds, he may still respond in true acceptance, without bitterness. He can do so knowing full well that anyone cannot hinder his promotion as a child of God. He knows that the Scriptures say,

*For promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another (Psalm 75:6,7).*

In God's own time, when no one but God will get the glory, God will see to the promotion of His own child. In the end, even the wrath of man would have praised God (Psalm 76:10) when God turns the tables. And if the promotion never comes, a Christian who has entrusted his whole life to the Lord and seeks glory not for himself, but



for his Lord, will hold no bitterness against anyone, and definitely not against God.

I know a landlord in Ibadan, Nigeria. Ibadan was, at one time, the largest city in West Africa, and the third largest in Africa. A tenant did not own a car when he moved into this man's apartment. Later on, he got a loan to buy a Volkswagen Beetle. That landlord forbade the tenant from parking his car in front of the house at night, not for lack of space, but for other motives. He said curtly, "Look, you cannot park that car in front of this house. When you moved in, you had no car. Parking a car was not part of the agreement, and it is not something we will discuss." The tenant began to park his car down the street.

The problem was that the landlord could not accept his tenant's apparent success. He was envious that his tenant owned a car while he did not. Now, if the tenant's car was stolen, do you think the landlord could offer sincere sympathy?

Some people go out of their way to destroy their more successful and truly industrious colleagues—just because they happen to have more visible signs of success. Others are not bold enough to come right out and say it, but in their hearts, they cherish opportunities to undermine their colleague. It is a big sign of insecurity when we cannot rejoice in others' successes.

I once visited a member of my congregation, an executive who worked for a bank in Lagos, Nigeria. He had just recently bought a used Mercedes Benz car. Mercedes Benz was then, and may still be today, the ultimate four-wheeled toy for adults. I asked him what his landlord's attitude had been since he bought the car. He replied that the landlord had increased his rent three times.

God does not measure success as we do. He does not measure success by human yardsticks—not by how much money you have, or by your status or position. God measures our success by our faithfulness in what we do where He has placed us. And He has said that if you are faithful in that which is little, when you have the opportunity for a big thing, you will be faithful in that endeavor also (Luke 19:17).

God will not demand of you what He has not blessed or endowed you with. And you do not have to feel uncomfortable with others who have more visible signs of success, because God did not ask you to compete with them. Compete only with yourself. Strive to be the best that you can be for God. The only person to beat is yourself!

I want to define success as the gap between what you are and what you could be, if you wisely and consistently harnessed God's resources within your reach. How close or how wide is that gap? We should continually strive to bridge the gap. In reality, there will always be a gap between what we are and what we could be because no one is perfect, and there will always be room for growth and improvement. If you keep comparing your success with other people's, you will either become complacent or forever dissatisfied. The Bible says this is not wise behavior:

*For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise (2 Corinthians 10:12).*

Two brothers once lived in the same town. One was very successful, and considered to be a man of the people. His brother felt insignificant in comparison, and hated his

more successful brother so much that he secretly killed him. To immortalize the dead man, the community decided to build a statue, which was erected in the town square. This further enraged and vexed the murderous brother. One morning, the townspeople awoke to discover that the statue was gradually being chopped apart. They could not figure out who was responsible, or what should be done to repair the statue. At last, the brother finally dismantled the statue of his late brother. But it happened that the final blow toppled the statue so that it fell on him, and killed him. His jealousy over his brother's success caused his own death.

## Projection

The fourth reason for Cain's sadness was what some people call projection. In psychology, projection is an ego-defense mechanism whereby a repressed idea or motive is unconsciously placed upon an external source, such as a person or thing. It is attributing one's objectionable qualities, ideas, attitudes, motivations, defensive maneuvers and characteristic ways to another person, or to an ambiguous situation.

The name *projection* is aptly chosen. It is as if the mind acts like a slide projector, and the outer world is the screen. But what is perceived as external is put there by the individual's psychological and emotional needs. The defense is in the sense that the projection allows the individual to deny ideas or motives that are at variance with his or her ideal.

It is taking out your anger at the wrong person, shifting the blame on others. We read in Genesis 4:6–7 where God asked Cain—before he committed his heinous crime—

*Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and*

*if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.*

Cain's problem was not with God or Abel, but Cain wrongly directed his anger at them. God was telling Cain in this passage that his own response—not Abel's behavior or God's—would determine whether Cain was happy or not. Many times we direct our anger at the wrong person. We claim the source of our unhappiness is our wife, husband, neighbor or boss. Like Cain, rather than admit responsibility for our actions, we project our anger and attitude on others.

Check yourself, like God instructed Cain to do. *You* are more likely the problem; not society, the system, your wife, husband, children or anybody else. Be honest with yourself. The real culprit may be the person you see in the mirror every morning—yourself.

The problem of blame shifting, hiding, acting from fear, covering up, avoiding responsibility, or the use of sinful response patterns to life's pressures and problems, can be traced to Adam and Eve. Confronted with their sins, Adam and Eve came out of hiding, covered with fig leaves. The figs leaves were wilting and turning brown, showing the inadequacy for the purpose for which they were used. But they would yet not face up to their sins. Adam said Eve was to be held responsible. Eve suggested that it was all the devil's idea. People who are not willing to accept responsibility for their actions are difficult to help.

When people I counsel are quick to point to the devil as the culprit behind the problem, and seek speedy praying or exorcism, I am often forced to treat the devil as a non-issue.

A lot of Christians go to certain ministers, or are encouraged by the church or the minister, to present themselves for

*deliverance* and prayer. But the practice may easily turn out to be a way of avoiding responsibility and shifting the blame for our problem to Satan and demons. Unsuspectingly, I believe, this has become a weakness of many such churches and their ministers. Demons are real, and they torment, oppress, and harass their victims. Some problems are really demonic and the only true help comes from divine intervention. Curses are not to be taken lightly.

Satan likes publicity in any form. If care is not taken, it is easy to give Satan the attention in any deliverance session. Because the goal is to resist Satan, cast out demons, and thereby release the oppressed from his stranglehold, Satan may end up gaining the focus. Under such circumstances, the temptation to magnify Satan is great. Is it any wonder that many in “deliverance ministry” see Satan, demons, demonic attacks, and such things in almost any problem?

Yet, the first step is to accept responsibility for personal actions or problems whenever they are the consequences of moral choice. It is this openness and acceptance of blame which can lead to a true confession of sin and a genuine cry for help.

Recurrent divorces and unstable marriages may be consequences of the environment, the result of what has been modeled by parents and internalized by the children. Recurring teenage pregnancies may be the result of social problems, such as poverty, low-self esteem, and a misguided craving for affection and acceptance. Sickness may be the result of genetic factors, poor nutrition, hazardous living environment, bad habits, and dangerous lifestyle. But I have known individuals and families who testified to having been delivered from such vicious cycles through prayer.

Let me conclude by pointing out a relationship between personal and corporate responsibilities. In the Old Testament, we observe that Nehemiah, Daniel, Ezra, Samuel, Moses, and all the other men of prayer who delivered their nations through intercession, genuinely identified with the sins of their forefathers in their confessions. They knew they were suffering the consequences of a previous generation's disobedience. They accepted blame because, while they had not actually done those things, they found the seed for acts of rebellion in their own hearts. It was this honest self-evaluation that made them acknowledge before God that they wouldn't have acted any more honorable had they lived in the previous generation. Corporate responsibility demands such identification.

Of course, we all know that it was Satan who tempted Eve. But his tempting notwithstanding, God held Adam and Eve responsible for their own actions, just as He held Cain accountable for his. God has not changed His standard. He always holds us responsible because we always have a choice. We can act as God requires, or we can sin. We are never forced, and all too often choose bad behavior and then suffer the consequences.

### **Cultural Diversity**

However, generational sins and character flaws have different cultural interpretations. Tragedies, accidents, losses, incurable illnesses, and other vicissitudes of life which are given spiritual and even mystical explanations in one culture, receive psychological and medical explanations in another. By the same token, family dynamics and problems that are suspected to have roots in generational curses or ancestral covenants in one culture are labeled as "dysfunctionality" or

“co-dependency” in another. What is considered “demonic” in one is christened “psychiatric” in another. In one culture, the afflicted turns to spiritualists and occultists to provide explanation and redemptive activities, while in another culture, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts come to the rescue. Prayer seems to work in one culture; medication brings relief in another.

But it is accepted in all cultures that family traits and negative patterns are often passed on from one generation to another. In psychology, this is termed “repetition-compulsion,” that is, a compulsion to repeat an experience. There is no conscious decision to do this, but at the unconscious level, the individual may be repeating a bad experience in order to master it. This characteristic may be observed both in people’s personal lives as well as in their family dynamics. For example, a person going through a chain of bad relationships or divorces may have a compulsion to repeat it.

An example of how family traits are repeated or passed on to other generations is seen in the life of Abraham. Abraham lied to protect himself because he was afraid for his life on account of his beautiful wife. But God, in His providence, protected Abraham and his household in spite of his sin. Next, Isaac, Abraham’s son, who was not yet born when his father created this lie, followed in his father’s footsteps. Isaac also lied to protect himself in an area in which he was fearful—namely, his beautiful wife. As in Abraham’s case, it was not the *lie* that saved Isaac; it was God’s *intervention*. Continuing the chain, Jacob, Isaac’s son, repeated this pattern of deception. Jacob tricked his father Isaac in order to obtain his brother Esau’s birthright. Down the line, Jacob practiced favoritism with his son Joseph, and this set the stage for sibling rivalry. As a result, the other brothers plotted to kill

Joseph, finally selling him into slavery. Repeating the family pattern, the brothers lied to their father Jacob.

From Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, Jacob to his sons, the treachery and deception chain continued. It was in Joseph, a godly person, that the chain was finally broken. Joseph, the fourth generation, did not replicate the character flaws seen in his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. Joseph, a righteous man, looked at all that was done wrongly toward him and was able to see the hand of God through all the events of his life. Joseph forgave his brothers and became a means of reconciliation between the brothers and themselves, between the brothers and himself, and between the brothers and their father. A person can make a self-conscious choice to begin to break, rather than repeat, the chain of generational sin and character traits and flaws that are passed from generation to generation.

### **How Reads Your Script?**

The question God asked Cain is applicable to all of us today. If you are angry or sad, why is that so? Why are you depressed? Many people are so engrossed in themselves and their problems; they cannot see the grace of God that is available to them in all areas of their lives. They are just like Cain. God stooped down to talk with Cain, but Cain wasn't listening. I wonder if God is speaking to someone right now, through this book.

Cain failed to see the grace of God. That may be true of you. Are you failing to see the great ocean of God's love flowing around you? It is like the incarnation: God shrouded in humanity. In your instance, He may "clothe" Himself in your family members, friends, institutions, and systems. May you find it so.



## Chapter Four



# HEALING WHILE YOU WAIT

### Conversation with Self

**O**n April 22, 1999, I was going through a cycle of frustrating situations and wondering what God was doing. It was my day off work, and I was making my way to the library when I entered into a conversation with myself. It began with an inner voice, which I will identify as Mike 2.

Mike 2: You know your problem? You think you deserve something better from God than what you have.

Mike 1: (*Angrily and emphatically*). Yes. I do!

Mike 2: What makes you think that God should treat you any differently or better?

Mike 1: Because I am a child of God.

Mike 2: And you have been told that a child of God should expect better?

Mike 1: I think so!

Mike 2: So a child of God should be spared of all crises and struggles of life?

Mike 1: Not completely, but there should be a marked difference from the rest of society, at least as a testimony to the world.

Mike 2: Do you know any child of God who is not involved in a crisis or struggle?

Mike 1: Struggling is relative. Some have it easier than others. I don't have it easy.

Mike 2: Was Jesus, the Son of God, given the better treatment you expect to have?

Mike 1: Jesus belonged to a class by Himself.

Mike 2: And what would you say about Peter, James, John, Paul, and the other Apostles? What class did they fall into?

Mike 1: They were special, too.

Mike 2: You know what? Maybe what you really need is a change of religion. Why don't you look for a religion that doesn't allow suffering, one that removes all your struggles and problems; a religion that offers only wealth, health, and prosperity?

Mike 1: That will be hard to find. None of the major religions I know of denies suffering.

Mike 2: It is not hard. Materialism is its name. It comes in different forms. And you can even give it a Christian outfit.

Mike 1: (*Angry. Silence.*)

Mike 2: By the way, even the road to materialism is paved with troubles. No one travels that road problem-free.

Is life fair? To put it bluntly, is God always just in His dealings with humans? Does God sometimes break the hearts of His children? Why do the innocent suffer? Why is it that “good” and “bad” people do not always receive what they deserve, or they receive what they do not deserve? Is there justice in the world?

Almost everyone can cite an example of a faithful Christian (or Christian family) who has yet to receive a blessing for which they have been waiting on the Lord and trusting Him. Some might say they “deserve” that God should give them this thing. We all know plenty of nice people whose lives have been made miserable by an un-cooperative spouse, unruly children, or a business failure.

Who is not aware of at least one Christian on the church prayer list who has been waiting for God’s healing for a long time? For every public testimony of divine healing in a local church, there are probably five other cases of members who still struggle and suffer with a disease or hardship. While we say that “healing is the children’s bread” (alluding to Matthew 15:26), more often, it is the “prodigal” who seems to be healed while the faithful son still waits. And waits, and waits, and waits. What does God’s Word say to people in such circumstances?

## Waiting on God

*“Hope deferred maketh the heart sick: but when the desire cometh, it is a tree of life”* (Proverbs 13:12). Waiting on God or waiting for God is not an easy task. This is not

an age when waiting is encouraged. We want everything instantly or, at the very least, “while you wait.” The food industry especially has responded to this craze for immediate results by providing instant everything—from microwave meals to drive-through “fast foods.”

Society cries out for immediate satisfaction of desires, often misconstrued as needs. God’s children must be different. We need not be enslaved by our feelings. We must learn to patiently wait until our heavenly Father, in His sovereign will, designs it to be so. The God on whom we wait loves us so much He sent His Son to die for us so we might be reconciled to Him. One diligent Bible student said that the Bible lists over 7,000 promises from God to His children.

Because God is sovereign, He does not owe us any explanation for His actions. Often we do not know and cannot understand why some things are so. God’s people must decide to live responsibly in spite of their feelings. We must live with a due sense of duty, a heart inclined toward God and committed to obeying God’s Word, even when it is contrary to our nature. We must accept the fact that God knows what He is doing, and that He can run His universe better than we can.

At one time or another, God brings each of His children to a place of waiting. We wait on God for many things: a job, promotion, a spouse, children, healing, financial security, admission into a desired school, conversion of a loved one, a house, the launching of a business or project.

No one can deny that we are usually closer to God during times of waiting than at any other time in our spiritual lives. Sometimes, God calls us to wait forever. This is painful, to say the least. But when God does that, He gives the grace to find joy, fulfillment, and meaning in what He gives, even if it is not

what we desired. In our spiritual pilgrimage, we must come to the place where we are contented with whatever God gives.

I am no stranger to waiting. I have experienced disappointments and frustrations, time and again. I waited on the Lord for a marriage partner, and He gave me the best person that heaven could make. My wife is one of the practical ways God has enabled me to experience His great love for me. When I married in 1986 at age thirty-three, many of my friends had already found a spouse. But the waiting continues. My wife and I are still waiting on the Lord for our first child, thirteen years after our marriage. If you multiply the years by the months, that gives over 150 months of hope and shattered dreams for a couple and their families, prayers, fasting, more intense prayers, exercising faith, mustering more faith, claiming promises, spiritual binding and loosing, confession, authority prayer. In spite of all this, the years continue to roll by and, medically, age is not on our side. At one time, whenever I met a pregnant woman or a woman carrying an infant, I said a quick prayer for God to remember us.

On a natural level, it is this desire that made us leave the comfort of our homeland to come to the United States to explore better medical facilities. But we know better. Our lives are in God's hands, and He must surely have a larger plan, especially with the door opened to us in America as legal resident aliens. "*Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning*" (Psalm 30:5b).

God has promised to renew the strength of those who wait patiently on Him. After a series of prophesies on the dark future of his people, Isaiah assured the Israelites that God would supply the strength they needed to hold on until the light at the end of the tunnel.

*But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint (Isaiah 40:31).*

We must wait upon God like waitresses wait on customers in restaurants: serving others, giving satisfaction, remaining in active service, even while we patiently wait. To wait on God is to depend on God, to trust, and to rely on Him.

When the Israelites stood by the Red Sea, Moses challenged them with the Word from the Lord.

*And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will [show] you today: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen today, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. (Exodus 14:13,14).*

Moses instructed the people to “*stand still.*” For the people to rush forward in panic would be to drown in the Sea. To turn back in fear was to run into the hands of the pursuing Egyptian army. It was a time to “*be still, and know*” (Psalm 46:10) that God ruled over all the earth. Waiting and trusting was the only reasonable option. The waiting period is a time when we are forced to examine our understanding of who God is.

You will notice that I have not directly addressed the problem of waiting and questioning. The reason is that I cannot. Maybe no one can do so for another person. When Christ cried out on the cross, “*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46b) we have no record that He received an answer. Maybe there was no answer,

and the silence continued. Before He died, Jesus prayed, “*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit*” (Luke 23:46). What resolution can be greater than that? Jesus no longer chided the Father. In like manner, each of us must be willing to commit to God all our “Whys,” and trust Him.

Who can answer our unspoken questions with certainty or joyfully end our waiting? God alone. I believe each person must come to a place where he finds the meaning, purpose, or whatever is uniquely suited to cope with the ongoing experience of suffering. It is my prayer that God may use this book to plant the seed for that experience in every reader.

### **Waiting That’s Unnecessary**

There is a type of waiting that is unproductive because it postpones the joy of living to a future date or event. Somehow, it is easy to succumb to the temptation to postpone life’s fulfillment and purpose to a future date or season of life when certain things have finally happened, or we have achieved some particular goals. With this mindset, happiness is defined by, and deferred to, a future event or achievement. While it is appropriate to live in the hope for a better tomorrow, we also should attempt to find joy and meaning in the reality of the present. As the saying goes, “Tomorrow exists only in a fool’s dictionary.” There may not be a tomorrow. Tomorrow is not promised to anyone—only today, only *now*.

How often have we said to ourselves, “When I graduate from school, then my life will begin”; or “When I have my professional credentials.... When I pay off my loans.... When I marry.... When I have a child.... When I have raised my children.... When I have a house.... When I secure a better job.... When I retire....” And the list goes on. The child looks forward to becoming a teenager, only to discover that

becoming a teenager does not satisfy her deep-seated longings. The teenager thinks, “When I become an adult....” But typically, adulthood is greeted with more unanswered questions and unmet aspirations. Overwhelmed, but not giving up, the adult shifts hope to becoming older or building a business, home, or ministry. On and on life goes, until one approaches retirement age. In the twilight of life, wiser and tempered by experience, the senior still clings to a lingering belief that retirement holds the key to life. And then... all of life is gone, and we still have not affirmed it.

Unknowingly, we convince ourselves that life will be better or more meaningful when a certain goal is achieved, or a stage in life is reached. But when the stage is reached or the goal accomplished, we find ourselves still stretching into the future for another date or set of events to validate our life. It is a game which we will never be winners because we face different challenges at every stage of life. We will do well to begin to live in the here and now by counting every blessing or frustration as integral parts of the intertwining threads of the fabric of our life. Only then can we see our life as each stage of a story worth telling.

Religious people add another dimension to this game. We do this when we interpret God’s goodness, or His ability to answer prayers and perform miracles, by mundane things we pray for, such as: healing, a new car, home, or financial breakthrough. Unconsciously, we think, *When I am able to achieve this goal, then God is good; when this dream comes true, then God has done a miracle.* This attitude blinds us to God’s work in other areas of life. It is a step forward in spiritual maturity when in all things and all situations we acknowledge God as Almighty, bigger than our blessings and burdens, and sovereign over all.



It was a new awareness for me to acknowledge that life is the process of achieving a goal, not the attainment of the goal. Life is the journey, not just its destination. In every challenge or struggle is the life we are called to live, the battle we are assigned to fight, and the very testimony of our existence. Overcoming the obstacle or winning the battle is the icing on the cake. The process or journey itself is the essence of life. Viewed this way, all the trials, frustrations, disappointments, blessings, creativity, initiatives, and victories that we experience along the way becomes sanctified. Come to think of it, life without these inevitable tensions and passions would be no more than one long, uneventful sleep.

This journey motif accords with the journey metaphor of which the Scripture is replete. Old Testament examples include Abraham's journey from Mesopotamia to a land God promised him (Genesis 12:1; Acts 7:3; Hebrews 11:8), and Israel's journey from Egypt through the wilderness to Canaan, the Promised Land (Exodus 12-18). Spiritual growth came from these journeys of faith. In the New Testament, the Church grew as it took its journey of faith from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria, to Rome, and to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). Spiritual growth, as well as numerical and geographic spread, came from this journey.

I am at a stage in my life when I am both looking forward and backward, and asking questions both ways. I found it a relief to come to an understanding that life, even the abundant life Jesus promised, is integral to the ability to view life squarely and ask questions. Life "*more abundantly*" (John 10:10b), is especially the relationship and intimacy that develops from seeking, searching, and probing God for a window into His workings, thinking more deeply and critically on God and God's world.

I have envisioned a day when my wife and I would present our first child for dedication to the congregation of God's people. What a day that would be! But it would be a narrow way to recount God's goodness and power if the baby dedication becomes the overriding testimony defining God's goodness to us. I believe it would be more appropriate to see it as the end of a journey, which could only be a part of a story.

It took me some time to come to an understanding that our real testimony is ongoing; not when the child arrives but in the struggle to have a child, in the frustration, passion, prayer, fasting. Along with that, it is in knowing that God loves us regardless, and that God is worthy of our trust, love, and service, with or without a child. The weight of our testimony lies in our ability to "give thanks in everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:18), to affirm each step as "*ordered by the Lord*" (Psalm 37:23). It is in knowing that God deserves our devotion for who He is, not for the blessings He bestows (Job 1:8-11). All else is icing on the cake.

The life we are called to live and for which we shall render an account, is the struggle, the journey, and the relationships that we form in the process. We would show ingratitude and narrow-mindedness were we to think that God is good, miracle-working, and prayer-answering only when we dedicate our child. How about the uncountable daily blessings, mercies, and answers to prayer in many other areas of our lives? Besides, I refuse to define my life by what I don't have when I am already blessed "*with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ*" (Ephesians 1:3).

If, in the course of waiting for a desired blessing, we don't live and enjoy the goodness of God in the here and now, we will be missing the purpose of life. Life is not about getting a new car, a new home, a college degree, a

child, a miracle, getting married, or whatever. Life is to know God's love, and to love God. It is in the context of that love relationship that every obstacle or challenge becomes a testimony.

If you are consumed with passion for a blessing or a miracle, you may fail to recognize that God is good all the time. The challenge is to live everyday to the fullest while you anticipate your miracle and, in the same breath, keep hope alive for a better tomorrow.

The key is to learn contentment in whatever your state or station in life, as in the words of apostle Paul:

*Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me (Philippians 4:11-13).*

*But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content (1 Timothy 6:6-8).*



*Part Two*



MEANING MAKING  
THROUGH  
GOD'S CHARACTER



## *Chapter Five*



# GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

**A** young widow stood up to testify to the goodness of the Lord, in spite of all she experienced since her husband died. For two years following the sudden departure of her husband, it had been one funeral after another. She had lost a younger brother, a daughter, and two elderly relatives. After sharing her testimony, she sang a song. The refrain said that God is God of both the good times and the bad times. As her pastor, I sat and listened to her testimony with tear-filled eyes. I knew, without a doubt, that God had strengthened and fortified this lady in ways beyond understanding. God had not failed her, in spite of the recurring tunes of funeral dirge.

Yes, God is God of the good times and the bad times. What if God were a proud Father, carrying us only when we were washed and clean, but abandoning us when we were dirty, filthy, failing, and disgusting, even in our own eyes? Would any one of us ever be clean enough to be acceptable

and worthy of His love under such conditions? Never! God loves us and accepts us at His own expense.

If anything could happen to us without God's knowledge and outside His control, then we would not be able to entrust ourselves to Him. The sovereignty of God means that He retains full control of all events in the universe, especially those that concern us.

God is not liable for the world's evil. God is not responsible for the pain and suffering of war, prejudice, discrimination, sickness, earthquakes and hurricanes. Behind the wicked deeds of humans, the activities of nature, the devices of Satan, or any causal agent, standing by is the sovereign God who has chosen not to stop the events. God is not liable, but the buck stops with Him.

In some cases, it may be glaringly obvious when human beings orchestrate evil. But that does not change the fact that those men and women, even with their wicked deeds, might be serving the purpose of God. God could turn the event into a greater advantage for His glory. The selling of Joseph into slavery by his brother, and the crucifixion of Jesus, illustrate this fact. Clearly, men were at work, venting their envy and perpetrating injustice to achieve their own ends. But, in the end, all served God's determined purpose. Though the men were held accountable to God for choosing to do evil, God was able to turn even their wicked acts and bad motives to accomplish His good plan.

An example of how God's sovereignty does not relieve us of our responsibility is seen in David's treatment of Shimei. When David ran from Absalom, Shimei, a relative of the late King Saul, rained curses on him. One of King David's army generals sought David's permission to attack Shimei, but David refused. David looked beyond Shimei



and his action, and acknowledged God's sovereign control of all events surrounding his life (2 Samuel 16:5–14). Seeing the event from the perspective of God's sovereign control, David restrained himself from punishing Shimei. Yet, David did not exonerate Shimei. On his deathbed and final charge to King Solomon, his successor to the throne, David mandated that justice be meted to Shimei (1 Kings 2:8,9,36–46).

### The Sovereign and Suffering God

If we are not careful, we could ascribe blame to God when we should accept responsibility for our own actions. What we must come to grips with is that nothing we suffer is an accident to God, or outside His control.

I find it helpful to link God's sovereignty over creation with His suffering. If God is sovereign, but not detached from pain and suffering in the world, then, for the child of God, no suffering is meaningless.

The questions that confront us are many, and they do not deserve glib answers. Is suffering an accident and matter of chance, or is there a greater purpose in it? Is everything ruled by chance or destiny? Is there "a sovereign mind and will" over all things, and is that sovereign mind and will, nature or God? Do things occur that even a loving God can do nothing about, except to be sorry that they happen to His loved ones?

Shortly after I gave my life to Christ, on Easter in 1972, I learned in Jeremiah 29:11 of God's promise to the exiles in Babylon. For many years, I derived assurance from that passage, even though I unknowingly took it out of context without reference to the surrounding verses. After a guided study of the book, when I was able to put the passage in context, it gave me much *more* comfort. Here is the Word of assurance from the Lord:

*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end (Jeremiah 29:11).*

The prophet Jeremiah was a much misunderstood man. He had such a thankless task that many came to think of him as unpatriotic. The Assyrians had carried the northern kingdom of Israel into captivity in 722 B.C. The sin of the southern kingdom, especially the idolatry of the rulers, made the people ripe for God's judgment. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry began in 627 B.C., and he prophesied under Judah's final five kings. The southern kingdom eventually fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. God had sent prophet after prophet to warn the people of Judah, but they would not return to the Lord. God was now committed to implementing one of the clauses in the covenant package: to send them into captivity for their sins (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28). It was during this time that Jeremiah was called to prophesy.

*Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon.... For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.... Hear ye therefore the word of the Lord, all ye of the captivity, whom I have sent from Jerusalem to Babylon... (Jeremiah 29:4,10,11,20).*

Jeremiah in his prophecy advocated submission to the foreign power, because the invasion was God-ordained and Judah's army would not be able to win. God used Nebuchadnezzar as His chastening rod. Jeremiah's message was considered unpatriotic, because it weakened the morale of Judah's army. Jeremiah was labeled a pro-Babylonian traitor. By this time, Nebuchadnezzar's army had carried away the first exiles to Babylon, and the siege and plunder of Judah continued. Many false prophets popped up, both in Jerusalem and among the exiles in Babylon, who told the Israelites that Jerusalem would not fall; it was the headquarters of Yahweh, the Lord God, and it was the location of the Temple. The false prophets predicted the exiles would soon be returned to their homeland; God would defend the nation as He had done in times past; and what befell the northern kingdom would not happen to Judah. This was the exact message the leaders and the people of Judah wanted to hear.

But Jeremiah's message was different. He said the exiles should settle down, build houses, and work for the peace of Babylon, the land of their captors, because the captivity would last for seventy years. Jerusalem would fall and the Temple would be plundered. If the Israelites cooperated with the invading army, they would be shown leniency. Rather than the exiles' quick return from captivity, as the false prophets predicted, more inhabitants of Judah would be carried away to captivity in Babylon. Even the king of Judah would fall into the hands of the enemy.

Jeremiah was so persistent in his warnings that he wrote a letter to the captives in Babylon, to acquaint them with the plan of God (Jeremiah 29). Here he clearly indicated that, unpleasant as it might be, their captivity was directed by God. It was punitive, but it was also corrective. Incidentally, idola-

try, the principal sin for which they were sent into captivity and which had dogged their history ever since they left Egypt, was never again reported in their history after the captivity. They had other sins and national problems after they returned from exile, but idolatry of the kind for which they had gone into captivity had been cured. We may say that God used the captivity to purge them of the sin of idolatry.

God is not only the God of the Exodus, but God of the Exile as well. He took their forefathers across the Red Sea, fed them with manna for forty years, fought their battles, and established them in Canaan. He was orchestrating their defeat and captivity to Babylon. And He would oversee the return of remnants to the “Promised Land” after seventy years in exile.

At least two hundred years before Judah went into exile, God had said through His prophet Isaiah that Judah would be taken into captivity. But God had provided the means for their return, even before the captivity took place. God would use a Gentile king, Cyrus, whose name God revealed to his prophet over two centuries before Cyrus or the empire he ruled came to the scene.

For the sins of His people, God allowed the plundering, looting, and vandalizing of the Temple that had been built and dedicated for His worship. For His own glory, He would see to the rebuilding of the Temple, even through the support of the dominating nation. In the letter Jeremiah sent the Jews in exile, he gave this word of the Lord, “*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end*” (Jeremiah 29:11).

That was exactly what those young people, uprooted from Judah, desperately needed to hear. Among the exiles were godly individuals such as Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach,

Abednego, Ezekiel, Mordecai, Esther, Nehemiah, and Ezra. God's word gave meaning and purpose to their suffering. Encouraged by the ministry of Jeremiah, some of these exiled Jews got involved in the political affairs of Babylon (and later Persia) and left a testimony to God. Jeremiah reminded them that what they were experiencing was all in God's plan and was all for their good—in the end. Their path to the “expected end” was truly rough. It was paved with defeat, national humiliation, deportation, desecration of the Temple, and war and death. But there was a purpose in it.

There are no accidents in a believer's life. And no believer is a victim, either. I subscribe to what Ronald Hawkins wrote in *Strengthening Marital Intimacy*, “A victim is someone who was in an accident that serves no beneficial purpose.”

## The Sovereign God

In the past, I read certain Bible verses in many different versions, hoping to find a comfortable translation in one of them. And really, some versions have gone beyond mere translation into interpreting difficult texts. I would find myself trying to find a way to squeeze these passages to fit my concept of God. But, in the course of my Christian growth, I have stopped trying to explain away every difficult passage, and have learned to trust God for everything. Take, for instance, Exodus 4:11:

*And the Lord said unto him [Moses], Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? (Exodus 4:11).*

After Moses had given one excuse after another to God's instruction that he approach Egypt's Pharaoh to let

the Israelite slaves leave (he said he was slow of speech and not eloquent, a stammerer), God claimed responsibility for Moses' condition. Not only that, God said that He made the dumb, the deaf, and the blind. We might attribute such conditions to viral or bacterial infections, mutant genes, disease or somebody's carelessness. But God said they could not have been without Him.

What purpose is served by creating a person blind or deaf, with all the attendant sufferings he goes through in life? I will answer the question in the words of a sixty-eight-year-old patient with terminal prostate cancer. He said: "There are answers. But as soon as we get one answer, many more questions arise, requiring further answers. And by the time we get answers to those other questions, many more questions challenge our current answers. That is what keeps the world going and that is why those questions have always been and will always be."

We have to agree that if God is sovereign, then all the intricate combinations of events leading to an unfortunate incident could not "just happen" while God was busy elsewhere. The source of the circumstance in question may include personal mistakes, victimization by others, demonic attack, viral or bacterial infection, environmental pollution and contamination, natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, floods, or fires, but even then, God can control nature.

If we take Exodus 4:11 to mean what it says, then we can be sure no one is blind or deaf by accident, outside the sovereign control of God, hard as that may seem. I cannot imagine my friend and dear brother in Christ, the chairman of the non-profit organization, *Hope For the Blind* (Nigeria), saying that God made him blind! It does not

square with our theology, does it? Doctors know what made him blind, don't they? Yes, it is true that medical doctors may have a logical and scientific explanation to his condition, but he still could not have been blind without God saying "So be it." Somehow, we have to admit that Brother Gana is blind not because a loving God could not help the situation, but for reasons we do not know and for a purpose we do not understand. Otherwise, we rob God of His sovereign control and sustenance of the universe. Does this mean that we are defending God or trying to exonerate Him? I hope not.

*And [the Lord] said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee (Exodus 15:26).*

We are quick to quote the last phrase of the verse—"I am the Lord that healeth thee." But we would do well to notice that God claimed He had inflicted the Egyptians with diseases because they enslaved His chosen people. But then God said He would inflict the same diseases upon the Israelites, His covenant people, if they disobeyed Him. God states that He allows some diseases; He afflicts His people with sickness. In Deuteronomy 28:22,35,59-61, God specified diseases He would bring on the Israelites if they turned from Him. The issue here is that God said *He*—not Satan—would afflict the Israelites with sickness.

Consider also the following Scripture:

*In the day of prosperity be joyful, but in the day of adversity consider: God also hath set the one over against the other, to the end that man should find nothing after him (Ecclesiastes 7:14).*

*I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things (Isaiah 45:7).*

*But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men (Lamentation 3:32,33).*

*And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in your cities, and want of bread in all your places: yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the Lord. And also I have withholden the rain from you, when there were yet three months to the harvest: and I caused it to rain upon one city, and caused it not to rain upon another city: one piece was rained upon, and the piece whereupon it rained not withered (Amos 4:6,7; see also Haggai 1:7–11.)*

In these passages, God is said to bring both prosperity and adversity, peace and evil. Since God allowed sin into His universe, He also allowed all the consequences of sin to become a part of His world. Jeremiah, in his lamentation, said God did “*cause grief*” (Lamentations 3:32) and “*afflict*,” though unwillingly. God’s great mercies and compassions are set forth in comparison to whatever happens to us. The grace and blessing of chastisement are found in the passages of Amos and Haggai. God declared that He sent famine, and that He created harsh weather to cause people



to repent of their sins. In Isaiah 45:7, the term “*creating evil*” does not mean creating sin. It means that God made sorrow, misery, and suffering to be the consequence of sin.

It should be obvious that God’s sovereignty over creation does not suggest that He looks at His daily planner, then maps out tragedies which the newspapers will eventually report. We do not believe that God wakes up one morning and says to Himself, “Today, let’s starve 200,000 children in Africa; let 80,000 children in India get chicken pox; while one million people catch the common cold. Let there be one earthquake, one hurricane, one tornado, and severe flooding in three places.” Of course, that is not the case!

In the context of these passages, how should a Christian consider God’s sovereignty, in relation to pain and adversity? The improper way to respond is to fatalistically say: “Anything that happens is from God.” You probably have heard rationalizing statements such as, “God caused me to fail the exam so that I might choose another profession. I was in a wrong profession;” “It was the will of God for my marriage to break up in order to humble me. Divorce was something I did not believe could happen to me;” “God ordained that I should have an accident and break my leg. This has made me more sympathetic to those who are sick;” “God gave me this problem so I may not become proud because of the many spiritual victories He has given me. It is my own ‘thorn in the flesh;” “God destined that I be fired and lose my job. I was so stubborn that the loss of my job was the only way I could be made to respond to the call to the ministry. I now serve God full time;” “God arranged for my car to be stolen so that I might learn to depend on Him. The car was almost becoming an idol for me;” “God is afflicting me with a

terrible sickness as a chastisement for my disobedience.”

It is my opinion that no one can be so certain of the events in his life as to categorically ascribe them to God. We know the statements cannot be true in many cases, regardless of the rationalizations. God expects us to act as rational, responsible beings. When we fail to do so, certain consequences of our wrong choices often follow, which would be presumptuous of us to ascribe to Him. The sovereignty of God does not free us from our accountability to Him for our personal decisions.

The proper way to relate to these verses is to have confidence in the fact that whatever happens to us, God remains sovereign. In our struggle with Satan, we are not caught between two equal, opposing powers. No! The devil is always on a leash. Satan can act only with God's permission.

Satan could not touch Job without God removing a bit of the hedge around Job and giving Satan the limited permission (Job 1:12; 2:6).

Satan could not sift Peter without asking permission, and he was restrained even in that by Jesus' prayer for Peter (Luke 22:31,32). We also notice that the prayer of Jesus, our High Priest and Advocate, preceded the testing of Peter.

Jesus told Pilate, the Roman governor, that Pilate's power over Him was limited to what was given him from above (John 19:11). Pilate thought he had power over Jesus' life because only he, as governor, could sign a death sentence. But Jesus acknowledged that power as God's. On the night of His arrest, Jesus spoke of His impending suffering in the imagery of a cup from His Father. He said, "*The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?*" (John 18:11b). Jesus saw

His death and suffering as “*the cup*” which the Father gave Him to drink, served through the hands of wicked people.

When Satan stood by Joshua, the high priest of the Jewish remnant that returned from exile and resisted him, the Lord was equally in charge of the situation. In Zechariah’s vision, the Angel of the Lord rebuked Satan, saying, “*The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan; even the Lord that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee*” (Zechariah 3:2). This establishes the fact that, whatever happens to God’s children, even if it be at the hands of Satan, God remains sovereign.

In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter said that the wickedness of those who crucified Jesus was according to the “*determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*” (Acts 2:23). In his next recorded sermon in the Temple, after the healing of the crippled beggar, Peter said that though Jesus was “*delivered up, and denied*” by the Jews “*through ignorance,*” it was that “*those things, which God before had [showed] by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled*” (Acts 3:13,17,18). All that happened to Jesus was under God’s control.

The Apostles, in their prayers, acknowledged that the combined threats of “*Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel*” could not extend beyond what God had “*determined before to be done*” (Acts 4:23–31). It was with this understanding that they experienced persecution.

Paul was convinced that his “*thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan,*” was under God’s surveillance (2 Corinthians 12:7–10). Looking past this undisclosed, humbling affliction, Paul prefaced his account, saying, “*there was given to me a thorn in the flesh*” (vs. 7). In another instance, though imprisoned by Rome, he looked past the emperor by

referring himself as “*the prisoner of Jesus Christ*” (Ephesians 3:1; Philemon 1) and speaking of “*my bonds in Christ*” (Philippians 1:13). We are not pawns in the hands of Satan, people, or situations. We can be sure that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond our ability (1 Corinthians 10:13).

No matter what evil Satan or wicked men devise, all of them operate within the realm of God’s supreme control.

## Putting the Pieces Together

God created a universe without sin. He created the angels to praise and worship Him. The angelic beings were free-acting, moral, rational, and intelligent. They were innocent, but they had the capacity to sin. Among the angelic beings was Lucifer. It was he who, after pride and rebellion led to his expulsion from heaven, became known as Satan, the adversary of God.

Satan’s sin was self-generating. God did not force Satan and the angels that rebelled with him to exercise their capacity to sin. But He did not stop them. They were designed to worship God, not by coercion, but from a willing response to the worthiness of God. Through Satan’s rebellion, sin entered the universe, and through Adam’s disobedience, sin entered the world. Sin is the cause of all evil and suffering.

God created Adam and Eve in a sinless state. These individuals were not robots or puppets controlled by others. Love, not force, was to be the guiding principle in their relationship to God. Love gives freedom. Love is vulnerable. Deceived by Satan, Adam and Eve acted independently of God and sinned.

Their sin accounts for entrance of evil in the created world. God is not the author of evil and wickedness. How-

ever, God created humans as free, moral, rational beings with a capacity to sin. God did not force them to use that capacity, and He also did not prevent them from doing so. To stop them would rob them of their freedom and free-acting capacity. In the present time, God has chosen to use sin and its evil consequences to bring glory to Himself. God used the wickedness of Joseph's brothers to bring about His plan for Joseph and Israel. The arrogance of the religious leaders in Jesus' day, Judas' greed, and the weakness of Pilate, all worked toward God's redemptive purpose through the cross of His Son.

God created a universe without sin, evil, suffering, or wickedness, but one that contained the capacity for these things, contingent on the beings He had created. Sin is the reason Jesus was born into the world. Through the cross of Christ, God defeated sin, evil, suffering, and death. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ was God's eternal provision for sin and its consequences.

I once heard of an emergency room nurse who took delight in playing hero in the lives of her critically ill patients. Occasionally, she tampered with the patients' life support equipment or medication, forcing the patients into a crisis and putting their lives in jeopardy. She would then rush in, fully knowing how to correct the effects of her misdeeds, and resuscitate the patients. She was considered a super-nurse until her sinister trick was detected. Unlike this nurse, God did not force our first parents to sin, and He did not set them up for failure. As free-acting beings, obeying or not was their choice. At the same time, because God could see the end from the beginning, He put His plan of redemption into operation even before Adam was created or sin entered the universe. Therefore, the entrance of sin did not

take God by surprise, or send Him into panic over what to do to salvage the mess created by sin.

Nothing catches God off guard. He neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4). Whether it be an attack of Satan and his demons, a mistake of our own making, victimization by others, natural disasters, wasting disease, a broken heart, or anything else, it could not happen without our Father's knowledge and without His allowing it to occur.

It should encourage us that we are not left to blind chance in our struggles. No matter how difficult life gets, God is still in absolute control of His universe and of our lives. He remains sovereign and loving in all situations. God never makes mistakes. There is a plan and purpose and "*an expected end*" for all that happens to a child of God. This is as true for us today as it was true for the Jews in exile.

*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end (Jeremiah 29:11).*

## Chapter Six



# GOD'S SUFFERING

God is not only sovereign in all situations; He also suffers with us. God feels our pain. This is the other side of the coin to God's sovereignty. In Christ, we have such a High Priest who *"himself hath suffered being tempted, [and therefore] he is able to succour them that are tempted"* (Hebrews 2:18). He is *"not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but [One who] was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin"* (Hebrews 4:15). Through the incarnation of Jesus, God entered into human experience of suffering. Our Lord Jesus not only died *for* us, He also died *as* us. He not only suffered *for* our sins, He also suffered *with* us sinners.

In the time of the Judges, when Israel was sold into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites who oppressed her for eighteen years, it was said of Jehovah that *"His soul was grieved for the misery of Israel"* (Judges 10:16b).

Centuries later, the prophet Isaiah said, “*In all their [Israel’s] affliction he [God] was afflicted*” (Isaiah 63:9).

God’s wounded love is reflected in the Book of Hosea, especially in the tension between God’s justice and love. The nation of Israel had sinned almost beyond redemption. The Israelites were ripe for judgment. God strove to see if He could find a way to postpone judgment. It vividly pictures the tears in the eyes of a loving father when circumstance forces the father to discipline his beloved child. The discipline is for the good of the child, yet the father suffers along with the child. As if God were powerless, He says,

*O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness [repentance] is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away.... How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings [compassions] are kindled together* (Hosea 6:4; 11:8).

Concerning captivity, God said through the prophet Ezekiel that Israel had profaned His holy name among the heathen nations. By reason of the deportation, God was seen in a bad light—a God too weak to save His people. It was not only Israel that suffered. In fact, God would save Israel for the sake of His name that had been dragged into the mud (Ezekiel 36:20–28).

At about the same period, the prophet Jeremiah penned these words from Jehovah:

*Is Ephraim [representing the whole house of Israel] my dear son? is he a pleasant child? For since I spake against him, I do earnestly remember him still: there-*



*fore [I am deeply] troubled for him; I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the Lord (Jeremiah 31:20).*

In the New Testament, Jesus lamented over Jerusalem for its unrepentant disposition and impeding doom:

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate: and verily I say unto you, Ye shall not see me, until the time come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord (Luke 13:34,35).*

In His concern for His children, God is the true picture of the suffering and agonizing father in the story of the prodigal son. The boy's father had kept vigil, daily looking out the window and down the road, anxiously waiting for his son's return (Luke 15).

When Jesus cried on the cross, "*My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46), it was not He alone who suffered the agony—the Father did as well. God suffered with His Son, and He suffers with us today.

In Acts 9:3–6, Saul of Tarsus, who later became the Apostle Paul, learned that by persecuting the disciples and Apostles of Christ, he was actually persecuting the Lord Jesus Christ. The risen Lord asked Saul, "*Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?*" (vs. 4). If there was any doubt in Saul's mind about what he heard, the Lord spoke to him again, saying, "*I am Jesus whom thou persecutest*" (vs. 5). The Lord Jesus is united with His followers. He is the head of His Body, the Church. Whatever happens to the Church or a member of the Church directly affects the Lord Himself.

## God's Sovereignty and Vulnerability

If pain, suffering, and death are the result of sin, then sin is the real problem. And if sin is the culprit, where then lies the hope of humanity? This question leads us to God's answer to the problem of suffering. That answer is the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. How can we know that God is to be trusted in the midst of an evil and suffering world? The answer is Jesus. This is why the doctrine of Christ's divinity is crucial. If God suffered in Christ, then suffering should take on a new dimension for us.

When Jesus said, "*I and my Father are one.... And he that seeth me seeth him that sent me.... he that hath seen me hath seen the Father*" (John 10:30; 12:45; 14:9), He gave an entirely different meaning to suffering. God completely entered into our suffering in the person of His Son. If Jesus were a good person but not God, then suffering still would lack purpose. To understand how God feels about our suffering, we need to do no more than look at Jesus. The ministry of Christ was all about compassion. The healing, salvation, deliverance, forgiveness, and provision that Jesus gave were tokens of God's grace. Whatever we see in the face of Jesus reflects the face of God.

The tears of Jesus, for example, are the tears of God. At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus wept (John 11). Those were the tears of a loving, vulnerable, but not helpless God. He proved He was not weeping out of helplessness by raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. There we see the heart of God for His people (Matthew 23:37–39). In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus agonized "*and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground*" (Luke

22:44). In many unrecorded instances, where details are not given, Jesus “*offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared*” (Hebrews 5:7). In Jesus, we find a God who could enter fully into our pain and be moved to tears of concern for us.

The suffering God is evident in the life and work of Jesus Christ, Himself. Therefore, any biblical discussion of suffering must reckon with the suffering of Jesus Christ, for two reasons. First, the meaning of suffering is discovered in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ. All suffering is the consequence of the entrance of death into the world, and death is the payment for sin. Sin and death were defeated by Jesus Christ, giving an entirely different meaning to suffering. Second, we have in Christ the perfect model. He endured humiliation and pain in His life and death. He subjected Himself to the affliction of living in a fallen world, experiencing humiliation and pain as our substitute on the cross. He suffered unjustly, yet responded in a perfect manner.

If we want to know how to respond to suffering, we must know Jesus Christ. If we are ever to make any sense of suffering, we have to come to terms with the cross of Christ. To the believer who is struggling with pain and suffering, that believer must see how the cross of Christ is relevant to his pain and suffering. It is at the cross of Christ that God has made the definitive statement about the unfairness of our world.

In *Disappointment With God*, Philip Yancey wrote that God responded to the question of unfairness not with words, but with a visit, an incarnation. The cross that held Jesus’ marred, scarred body revealed the kind of world we have and the kind of God we have: a world of gross unfairness, and a God of sacrificial love.

Dr. Howard E. Dial says in his notes, *The Role of Suffering in the Life of a Christian*, that God's answer to man's suffering comes not merely in the form of a proposition, but in the tears of God, as witnessed by the afflictions of Jesus. The very nature of pain and suffering makes us feel isolated and lonely. Knowing that we have in Christ a great High Priest, who is our advocate and who sympathizes with us, is a real source of comfort.

The Church has always emphasized what Jesus did *on* the cross, but we need to tell equally of what He did *to* the cross. He turned that symbol of death into a symbol of victory. He not only died for us, He suffered for us, leaving an example that we should follow in His steps. We should learn to suffer, and to endure suffering, as He did.

In all our adversities, we should not forget that our God is both the sovereign and the suffering Lord. God can be one and not the other, but He has chosen to be both. He deeply suffers with us, and He suffers long. Love suffers long, and God is love. Whether suffering is allowed, permitted, or brought by God, really makes no difference; nothing we suffer is an accident to God. In addition, there is nothing we suffer that God cannot use for His glory, and there is nothing we suffer that He does not suffer with us.

## *Chapter Seven*



# GOD'S JUSTICE

**I**f we have a wrong concept of God's justice, we will wrongly ascribe to Him events of human history for which He is not responsible. In the face of trying and difficult situations, some people begin to doubt the existence of God. They cannot reconcile suffering with a loving God who cares and who answers prayer. This dilemma cannot be blamed entirely on a shallow gospel of convenience, which is preached today in some circles—although that has certainly contributed.

In a subtle way, this attitude demands the same kind of proof demanded by an atheist who stood before an audience and said, "If there is a God somewhere in the universe, let Him prove Himself by striking me in the next minute. If He fails to do so, He does not exist." The atheist counted the time—fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, forty-five seconds, one minute. He turned to the audience and crowed, "Is there a God? Did any superior being strike me?"

Many Christians who live under oppressive regimes or despotic leaders cannot help but wonder, with all the injustices, murders, lies, corruption, and wars abounding, whether God is really alive. He ought to and should do something. But often, the prayers of the Church are not answered as expected. God's seeming inaction, therefore, readily suggests His absence, powerlessness, or lack of concern.

The presence of evil is a question with which all religions and philosophies wrestle. Why does God allow evil? Why do the wicked prosper? Why do the innocent suffer? The presence of evil is a stumbling block to faith in a loving God for many; for some, it provides grounds for denying God entirely. The theme of the Book of Job addresses this age-old question on the justice of God.

In certain Psalms, the writers prayed for evil to fall on certain people, in order to defend God's justice and holiness. The ancient belief was that prosperity, good health, and other such blessings came from God, and were commensurate with a person's righteousness. Yet the Psalmist observed wicked individuals enjoying these same blessings. He prayed against their welfare as the way to vindicate God and promote His holiness. He viewed himself as fighting God's cause.

Habakkuk was a trailblazer in another dimension of the prophetic ministry. He was the first of the writing prophets to speak to God about the people's dilemma and to question God. He asked God, "Why?" As we open the Book of Habakkuk, we find him asking,

*O Lord, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou show me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? for spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife*

*and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth* (Habakkuk 1:2–4).

Habakkuk complained to God about the corruption, oppression, and wantonness of the leaders. He demanded that God do something to prove He did not condone sin, and to vindicate His holiness. God told Habakkuk He would deal with the situation. But when God revealed His plan, Habakkuk couldn't accept it. He was confused.

God had said He was going to use the Chaldeans to punish the Jewish leaders. The Chaldeans were more wicked than the Israelites. The Chaldeans did not know the Lord God, Yahweh, as the Israelites did (even if they were not sincere in their worship). The Chaldeans were not a covenant people, as the Israelites were. God was going to use a more wicked people to punish His own people. Habakkuk could not see the justice in that. He asked again, "Why?"

Of all religions in the world, the demand is most made of the Christian faith to reconcile the justice of God with the presence of evil. The Moslems do not face this difficulty, because Allah (the Moslem's God) is responsible for good and evil. Everything is the work of Allah. The key word in Islam is submission, submission to the will of Allah in any situation. Eastern religions feel no pressure to reconcile a good and great God with the presence of evil, because there is dualism in the concept of their system of deities: separate gods are responsible for evil and good.

A school of theology which has become more than a passing fad insisted that Christianity, as we know it, has been colored by Greek philosophies. But, in their attempt to separate what they considered Greek thoughts, these pro-

cess theologians removed everything that was orthodox to the Christian faith. They considered traditional explanations for the presence of evil inadequate and irreconcilable with the notion of a perfect, omnipotent God. They concluded that we cannot reconcile a God who is omnipotent, and perfect in goodness, with the presence of evil.

They reason that, if God is wholly and infinitely good, He must *want* to remove evil from His own creation. And if God is omnipotent and all-powerful, He must *be able* to remove evil from His own creation. Traditional Christianity says that God is perfectly good and totally powerful. Yet, there is evil in the world. These thinkers, therefore, say that we must either deny the presence of evil or be ready to deny or modify one of the traditional attributes of God. Either God is not perfectly good, which explains the existence of evil in society, or God is not absolutely almighty, in which case He cannot control the presence of evil in the universe.

Process thinkers are willing to concede that God is perfectly good, but not that God is omnipotent. They distinguish between coercive and persuasive powers. A process god does not have coercive power, only persuasive power. The process god cannot decisively bring things to pass—he can only persuade, lure, and entice us away from evil to good. Since humanity is sinful and the process god can only make an appeal; and since humanity has been known to be rebellious, the future is an open risk for process philosophers. There is no guarantee that good will overcome evil. By the way, the process concept of good is aesthetic, not moral. Good and evil, in process thought, provide contrasting and enriching value to creation. Evil speaks of activity or action, without which monotony would rule the world.

Today, more than in any other period of humanity's his-



tory, we need a biblically sound defense of God's justice (*theodicy*). God made a perfect world (Genesis 1:31). He created man as a free moral being. Man disobeyed God. Sin and evil came into the world (Genesis 3). But God is not helpless. The will and power of man are exercised within the sovereignty of God.

When we say that God is in control, we do not mean that He is behind the wickedness and injustice in the world, but that His redemptive program has taken care of all the contingencies of sin. God is sovereign; man is not. It is God who will bring history to an end, in His own way. Man is not going to wind up history, bringing a universal catastrophe. Evil is not going to triumph over good. God will have the final word.

Contrary to process thought, God has coercive power. He *does* divinely intervene in human history. In the Garden of Eden, God divinely intervened. To prevent evil from gaining eternal dimension, He sent Adam and Eve out of the garden. Had they stayed, they would have had access to the Tree of Life, and remained eternally sinful and unredeemable.

The flood of Noah (Genesis chapters 6–9) was a divine intervention to judge the world. The story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 10) was divine intervention—or coercive power, if you like. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was divine intervention (Genesis chapters 18,19). The Exodus was divine intervention (Exodus chapters 1–15). The return of the Exile after seventy years in Babylon through the decree of Cyrus was divine intervention. The restoration of Modern Israel, in 1948, after centuries of dispersion, was divine intervention. The incarnation of the Son of God, the cross, the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and so forth, were all divine interventions in human history.

Time and time again, God entered human history and irrevocably altered its course. Even the conversion of souls, today, is a divine intervention (Colossians 1:13; 2 Corinthians 4:3,4). A great epochal, dramatic divine intervention in the near future will be the rapture of the saints. God will step in, and alter the course of human history again.

Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, was almost swept off his feet when he considered the prosperity of the wicked. He confessed,

*But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.... They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.... Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning.... When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end (Psalm 73:2,3,5,13,14,16,17).*

Only as Asaph was permitted to see the entire picture, when he went into the house of God, did he know that good would ultimately prevail.

The only way we may find peace and meaning in our daily struggles is to keep our eyes on the redemptive acts of God, both in the past and in the future of human history, and live within those realities. We must keep our eyes on the cross where we find justification and acceptance through the suffering Lamb and, at the same time, keep our eyes on the second coming of Christ. This is when our King of kings will establish justice and stamp out wickedness.

Paul did not minimize his suffering, or human suffering

in general. But he cast his suffering by the “*more exceeding and eternal weight of glory*” of what God is preparing for His own. All his sufferings, therefore, paled into nothingness in the light of what was in store, following a faithful life and service. He declared,

*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.... But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.... If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.... For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal (Romans 8:18; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 15:19; 2 Corinthians 4:17,18).*

Only when we have an eternal perspective does the whole puzzle of life fit together.

The story of Job has a happy ending. Job, after his ordeal, had twice as much of everything he ever possessed. He lived to see his children’s children (Job 42:10–17). The greatest blessing Job received, however, was spiritual. In Job’s own words, he came to know the Lord in a personal, intimate, first-hand manner like he never knew Him before (Job 42:3–6).

The Book of Habakkuk also has a happy ending. God allowed the prophet to see into the future and, in the closing verses of the book, the prophet said,

*Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength... (Habakkuk 3:17–19).*

Habakkuk had imagined the worst scenario that could befall an agrarian community. He was convinced, at last, that God was right. God's ways may be hard to understand or figure out, but He is always consistent in His nature: He is good and just.

For God's creation, the story is going to be a happy ending. The Book of Genesis opens on a very bright note (Genesis chapters 1,2). But in chapter 3, sin enters the scene. From then, gloom and darkness settled over creation. Genesis chapter 4 records the first murder. In chapter 6, God judged that generation by sending a flood that destroyed the world. On and on, human history was a record of man's utter failure, a story of doom and gloom.

But when we turn to the last book of the Bible, especially the last few pages, and read about the end of things, it is a happy ending. In Revelation, we see that Jesus, the Lamb that was slain, has become the reigning Lamb, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, before whom all the hosts of heaven and earth bow in worship. Satan is finally cast into the lake of fire. Satan, death, and all evil are at last conquered. There is a new heaven and a new earth. God has wiped away all tears. Sorrow and sighing no longer exist. It is a happy ending (Revelation 20–22). We are able to appreciate God's justice only as we see the entire picture.

## *Chapter Eight*



# GOD'S LOVE

**T**his chapter could also be entitled “God’s Omniscience.” But while the Almighty’s omniscience may intimidate or alienate, and rightly so, His love pursues, draws, and encircles us. It is this enfolding nature of God’s love which makes any form of meditation a comforting reality.

A time of waiting or suffering is really a time to examine who God is. Who is your God? Is He the God of the Bible, the god of the age, or of someone’s philosophy? God resists the best effort to describe Him. The sum total of all of our descriptions cannot sum up who He is.

Some of God’s attributes include His omnipotence (having power over all things), omniscience (knowing everything), omnipresence (present everywhere), immutability (unchangeable), eternal (without beginning or end), and love (kindness, goodness, benevolence, mercy and grace).

When we say that God is omniscient, we mean that God has perfect knowledge of the past, present, and future.

When we say God is eternal, we mean that He transcends time and space; before time began, He already existed. But because He is also immanent, He acts in time and space.

The past is as fresh to God as the events of today. The future is as well in His focus as the present. The omniscient God has full knowledge of things that have happened or will happen, as well as things that could have happened but did not or will not.

When we say that God is omnipotent, we mean that He is not subject to any other power. Nothing is greater than Himself. He created the universe out of nothing, simply by speaking (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1–3; Hebrews 11:1–3), and He sustains the world by the same power of His Word (Colossians 1:15–20). He is able to do all things. For example, He made a pathway for Israel through the mighty Red Sea (Exodus 14–15); He caused the walls of Jericho to fall at the shout of His people (Joshua 6); He gave them water from a Rock (Exodus 17:6; Numbers 20:11); He made barren and aged women able to bear children (Genesis 18:21). The infinite and sovereign God can do anything, because He is not limited by human alternatives, reasoning, and imaginations that are as finite as man himself.

It has been rightly said that the best definition of God is “*the One we encounter through Jesus Christ*” because Jesus reveals the fullness of God to us (John 14:1–11; 10:30). In Christ, the fullness of God dwelt bodily (Colossians 1:19; 2:9). Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, restored hope to the downcast, cast out devils from the oppressed, restored sight to the blind, turned water into wine, and walked on the sea. There was no situation greater than His power. He is still the same loving, compassionate, caring Jesus who

walked on the shores and streets of Galilee. He is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). That is why we can rely on Him when we call on Him (Hebrews 11:6). You may rest assured that your fears, anxieties, and problems are no match for the power of the Lord.

Is there anything too hard for the Lord? Genesis 18:14a asks. We should, in concert with all believers of all centuries, say, “Nothing! Nothing is too hard for our Lord.”

*I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee (Job 42:2).*

*Ah! Lord God, behold thou hast made the heaven and the earth by thy great power and stretched out arm, and there is nothing too hard for thee (Jeremiah 32:17).*

*But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26).*

*For with God nothing shall be impossible (Luke 1:37).*

*Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28:18).*

*Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9–11).*

There is never a problem that we cannot navigate with God's help. Inherent in every problem is God's solution. That does not mean that God answers every prayer in the way we expect. His thoughts and His ways are higher than ours—as the heavens are higher than the earth (Isaiah 55:8,9).

When the Lord does not remove the mountain, He gives us strength to climb it. And when He does not supernaturally part the waters and create a highway through the sea, He providentially supplies rafts to transport us across.

Even though God can do anything, there are certain things He will not do. God does not use His power arbitrarily.

For example, I could jump off a bridge into a lagoon, several meters below. I could, but I will not do so. Even if someone dares me, I will not do it. Why not? Because other faculties of my being restrain me from doing so, even though it lies within my ability. In the same way, God does not do all that lies within His ability because of the other faculties (especially His omniscience and love) that constrain Him.

Under intense pressure and hardship, people have asked, "God, why can't you?" or, "God, why won't you?" God does not always answer our prayer the way we expect, not for lack of power, or of will, but because He is constrained by His love and total knowledge of past, present, and future. Only eternity (when we see and understand more perfectly) can justify God's wisdom in saying "No" or "Not now" to certain of our prayers. God's delay does not always imply denial. And His seeming silence is not evidence of His absence.

We need two or three words to describe God: "might" (or power), "love," and "justice." If we admit that true love is not deprived of justice, then we are left with two words: power and love. There are various insightful combinations



of the three. We may say that God fully uses His power to defend His love and justice; God uses His power justly for His love; God uses His power lovingly for just ends and in fairness to all—even His enemies. Power ensures firmness, love accommodates feeling, and justice guarantees fairness. If not in time, definitely in eternity, no one will be able to accuse God of injustice. Of course, God will not stand trial before any court, terrestrial or celestial.

The love, power, and justice of God makes sure that even if (from the human standpoint) we are not successful in certain battles or get wounded, we cannot lose the war, and we cannot die in the warfare. I have known some wounded Christian soldiers—veterans of spiritual warfare. They lost battles, but not the war. Their wounds will someday be portraits of honor, displayed throughout eternity, like the scars of Jesus' hands which He delightfully showed Thomas.

Sometimes, Christians in a community or Christians in a generation may lose battles. But the Christian faith has never lost, and can never lose, the war. Inherent in the gospel is the power for its preservation and propagation. Jesus said, "*I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it*" (Matthew 16:18b).

In God's grand design of life, victory is the final outcome for any child of God. Because Jesus, our eternal Victor, lives, we are not fighting *for* victory; we are fighting *from* victory. We have already been declared to be more than conquerors (Romans 8:37; 1 John 4:4).

Even when God withholds His power and does not act as we expect Him to, the reason (most likely) is LOVE—because He sees and knows things we do not. It may be like Jesus told Peter, "*What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter*" (John 13:7). Only in the "hereafter"

will tensions between faith and experience be resolved. A preacher put it beautifully when he said, “God can do everything He wills, but God will not do everything He can.”

There are many ways we can make it difficult for God to answer our prayers. Self-examination is called for here. Do we truly trust God? (Mark 11:22–26). Are there unconfessed sins in our lives? (Psalm 66:18). Are we doing what He expects of us? (1 John 3:20–24).

Are we doing our part, all that we can, in the best possible way? (Ecclesiastes 9:10; Proverbs 22:29). Have we refused to pay attention to things God has been calling to our attention? (1 Samuel 15:22,23). Are we serving two masters? (Matthew 6:24). Are there idols in our lives or in our hearts? (Ezekiel 14:1–5). An idol is anything, any one, or any enterprise that has preference over our devotion and loyalty to God. Do we seek God’s blessings and gifts more than we seek God Himself, the Giver? We must find honest answers to these heart-searching, soul-probing questions (Matthew 6:33).

Children of God can rest assured that He is working in our best interest and for His own glory. That is why I keep on serving Him. I serve Him, not because He has given me all I earnestly ask for, but because He has always given me all that I desperately need. Most times, my greatest need is grace, which God supplies abundantly and graciously. Paul’s words are applicable to all who have entered a personal relationship with God:

*And he said unto me, my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.... for when I am weak, then am I strong* (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

One of the early Church fathers has given the world a marvelous prayer,

*Lord, give me the courage to change the things I can;  
The serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
And wisdom to know the difference.*

An anonymous writer penned this:

*I asked for strength that I might achieve;  
He made me weak that I might obey.  
I asked for health that I might do greater things;  
I was given grace 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 received nothing that I asked for, all that I hoped for,  
My prayer was answered.*



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