

EDWARD T. WELCH

MEDITATIONS ON FEAR, WORRY, AND TRUST

A SMALL BOOK FOR THE

ANXIOUS

HEART

## Day 27

### Grace for Today

Everyone is interested in ways to quiet fears. This has led some to Eastern religions with their interest in breathing and mindfulness—techniques for being present and in the moment. They focus on not living in the past, not living in the future, but living now. Although these miss the personal God, in their focus on the present they have noticed one of the features of biblical wisdom.

Think manna. For forty years in the Sinai wilderness the Lord gave his people manna one day at a time. If they tried to save some for the next day, it grew moldy. The only time they could keep it overnight was in preparation for the Sabbath, when they were to rest from work. The Lord was teaching his people to depend on him one day at a time. Each morning they had to trust him again that the bread from heaven would fall from the sky.

We could substitute the word *grace* for manna. Grace, like manna, is God's gift during our neediness. But grace is bigger than manna. It sustains us and gives us power. The Lord will give us all the grace we need for today. Tomorrow he will give us the grace we need for tomorrow. When you try to think about tomorrow without having yet received power for tomorrow, you will be anxious.

With the promise of grace in hand, Jesus invites you for a walk outside in God's world (Matthew 6:25–34). Together you walk by birds that are thriving because your Father cares for them. He teases you about your worries by asking if they can make you taller. He points out the generosity of his Father as you witness the lavish beauty of creation. He reminds you that those beautiful lilies along the road don't have to work, and yet they are wonderfully clothed. He concludes by bringing your attention to the present.

Give your entire attention to what God is doing right now, and don't get worked up about what may or may not happen tomorrow. God will help you deal with whatever hard things come up when the time comes. (Matthew 6:34, The Message)

Your worries are taking you away from the present, where God is at work. Perhaps you think that God will not be with you tomorrow. Perhaps you think that after rescuing you and bringing you into his family by what his Son has done, he might abandon you in your time of need. Not true.

He will give you power for right now. He is doing something right now. In the midst of chaos, the Spirit often gives us a simple and clear mission, such as choosing to trust in God's love, listening to another person, helping someone in his or her need, or preparing lunch. Your God has made you a partner in bringing his kingdom to earth. Look around to see what he is doing and how he might want you to participate with him.

Today “has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:34, NIV). You need all your wits about you for what is in front of you. Don’t add tomorrow’s burdens to an already full plate.

### **Response**

1. What simple and clear mission can you see when your anxieties begin to swirl?
2. Go outside and look at God’s creation. Imagine you are walking with Jesus (because you are). What do you see and hear as you walk that speaks to your worries?

## Day 28

### Tomorrow

God promises that he is with you right now and that he will take care of your needs tomorrow. And God doesn't lie (Numbers 23:19). This gives you freedom to be engaged with what is most important in the moment. But the anxious mind can run to so many different places.

For example, even though you believe that God will take care of your needs, you also know that tomorrow could be very difficult. People will have died tomorrow. They will have heard that their spouse is leaving them. They will have learned that a child is an addict. Tomorrow is likely to be difficult—with challenges, frustrations, and annoyances.

It is hard work to live fully today. Human beings are natural prophets, always predicting the future. When our prophecies do not come to pass, we make a few more, undaunted by our poor prophetic record.

Here are some things that God promises for each day (including tomorrow):

*You won't have to sin.* You will receive grace to do what is right and good in whatever comes tomorrow. You won't have to run to an addiction. You can have self-control for your tongue. You won't have to enhance your reputation by boasting or putting others down..

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

This is more important than you might think. Relief from a threat *seems* like what is most important, but threats don't make us less human and more entangled by darkness. Sin is our greatest problem.

*He will help you.* When you speak to people of faith who have gone through what seem to be impossible hardships, they will often tell you that God did give them the grace they needed in their time of trouble. He helped them as they called for help.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. (Psalm 46:1)

Help does not always come in the way we expect. As a result, we too often miss the help we received. Sometimes it is that we have power to endure what we thought we could not. The promise is that you *will* receive help.

*He will not leave you alone.* You cannot hear this enough. You have the Spirit of Christ who gives you the presence of Jesus. The death of Christ was intended to bring you close to him—he was separated from the Father so you would never be separated. The right person, who loves you, who understands and has compassion for you, and who is quite strong—all our anxieties and fears are ultimately in search of him.

“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”(Matthew 28:20)

These were his last words before he ascended to his throne in heaven. Jesus is with you today, tomorrow, and forever. He is also ruling the whole universe and bringing all things together for God’s glory and your good. You can trust him with your tomorrows.

### **Response**

1. Have you made a few false prophecies?
2. Do you believe that sin is your greatest threat? Talk about this with others.  
Pray that you would see the dangers of sin more clearly.
3. What promise from the Bible is most helpful as you think about tomorrow?

## Day 29

### Death

Fears tend to cluster into three kinds: fear of not having enough money, fear of failure and rejection, and fear of death. The fear of death is the most formidable of these fears.

Here is where dictators derive their power. The one with the power of the sword wins, it would seem. So many fears find their way to death—fear of snakes, planes, elevators, crowds, bridges, driving in traffic. Panic attacks haunt us because we feel as though they bring us to death's door. Life, indeed, is very important to us.

The writer of Hebrews wrote about this fear—linking death to a larger consortium that included the devil.

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. (Hebrews 2:14–15)

Though death is a formidable enemy, the apostle Paul showed how the death of Jesus Christ has radically changed this fear. “My desire is to depart and be with Christ . . . . But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account” (Philippians 1:23–24). Paul welcomed death. Yet the sting of death persisted for him when he was shaken by the near death of a close friend (Philippians 2:27). Paul acknowledged that death, indeed, remains an enemy until Jesus returns (1 Corinthians 15:22–26). Expect some of your fears to be channeled toward the fear of death.

This fear can have a few different sources. One is a fear of the *way* you will die. Death sounds better if you could die in your sleep after a nice evening with family and friends, with a brain intact and a body free of significant pain. But Jesus did not die such a death, and we who follow him know that the odds are against it.

We can easily envision the worst possible death because we have most likely seen a few. In response, we remember that today has enough troubles of its own, and we live in the grace that the Lord liberally gives us today. Don't try to imagine a diagnosis of cancer. You do not yet have tomorrow's grace so your imagination will tell an incomplete story of the future. If you are going to venture out into the future, continue far enough out so that the story ends with you welcomed into heaven for an eternity of no more sorrow, tears, and fears (Revelation 21:4).

### Response

1. Where does the fear of death show itself in your life?
2. Grace for today that fences off tomorrow—that is the skill we all need to grow in. How are you doing at staying in those boundaries? Which of God's words can you rely on when you are faced with the fear of death?

Day 50  
**Psalm 121**

You are on a journey home. You had gone up to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. People were everywhere. The temple singers were in fine form. Scripture was read. Now you are walking home, which could take one to three days. You are with fellow travelers. You know all of them. Everyone is singing or reflecting on the mighty acts of God and his faithful deliverance of his people.

You see the mountains around Jerusalem and remember the God of Sinai who protected his wandering people in the desert. You feel compelled to say something. God is your help.

I lift up my eyes to the hills.  
From where does my help come?  
My help comes from the LORD,  
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1-2)

Another voice responds. Yes, the LORD will extend his help even to your sure-footedness on a rocky path. He will keep you—he will carefully watch over you like a hovering parent. And you can be sure that he never takes a break. Unlike all other gods who need their naps, the LORD is on watch even when you are asleep. How else could you get decent rest when you are in rough terrain known for wild animals and armed bandits?

He will not let your foot be moved;  
he who keeps you will not slumber.  
Behold, he who keeps Israel  
will neither slumber nor sleep. (vv. 3-4)

Now another voice runs with the theme of the LORD's keeping and watching. The LORD is close by day, at your right hand, even shading you from the blazing sun. The LORD is close by night, when old myths about the dangers of the moon come to mind.

The LORD is your keeper;  
the LORD is your shade on your right hand.  
The sun shall not strike you by day,  
nor the moon by night. (vv. 5-6)

The final voice has heard the word *keep* and loves it. The word appears three times in the next short refrain. God is the Watchman. God is the Guardian. He will never let anyone snatch you from him. The evil of others



might touch you but not own you. Expect God's close watch to be his desire and delight, and he will do it forever.

The LORD will keep you from all evil;  
he will keep your life.  
The LORD will keep  
your going out and your coming in  
from this time forth and forevermore. (vv. 7-8)

The pilgrims are singing and speaking about Jesus. Everything in Scripture anticipated his coming. When he came, there were some who thought that he would lead military conquests and vanquish injustice. When he rose from the dead, his disciples expected that he would return and set up his kingdom within weeks. Neither of these came to pass.

But once the death and resurrection of Christ settled into the hearts of his disciples and they began to understand what had actually happened, they looked back on passages such as Psalm 121 and discovered that the language could not contain the enormity and beauty of what they had witnessed. This song had been fulfilled in Jesus in ways they could never have imagined. So they rejoiced.

Worries and fears would continue, but confidence in Jesus would take away their power. Our peace is founded on him and his unshakable kingdom.

## **Response**

1. The pilgrims of Psalm 121 looked back on God's mighty acts as the reason to celebrate his watchful care. To what do you look back?
2. Psalm 121 is a conversation with different voices. How can your interest in God's words to your anxieties continue to draw others in? Anxiety will resist this. Its instincts are more solitary. But soldier on. Let others know what you are thinking about it. Invite them to speak of their fears and anxieties. Then you can grow as a community.
3. Do you have any psalms or hymns that have become a morning song for you?

A N X I E T Y

KNOWING  
GOD'S PEACE

31-DAY DEVOTIONALS FOR LIFE

PAUL TAUTGES

## DAY 1

# Anxiety Distracts Us

*“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matt. 6:25)*

ANXIETY IS SO much a part of our lives that it’s natural for us to talk about it frequently. However, *defining* it, and understanding how it works, sometimes seems like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall. Anxiety is an emotion—but it’s more than a feeling. It often includes a physical reaction—but it’s more than that, too. So what *is* anxiety, exactly?

The writers of the New Testament employ two different, but related, words to refer to the experience that we call anxiety. They combine the noun *merimna*, which is usually translated “care,” with the verb *merizo*, which means to draw in different directions or distract. To be anxious, then, means to have a *distracting care*—to have our minds and hearts torn between two worlds. We see this in Jesus’s warning about thorns choking out the Word of God, which is intended to produce faith. He identifies these thorns as “the cares of the world” (Mark 4:19) or “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” (Luke 8:14). Anxious cares are typically tied to our earthly lives and are most often temporal, not eternal.

These distracting cares divide our mental energy and cloud our spiritual vision; they keep us focused on the here-and-now instead of on the future-promised-but-not-yet. They form cata-racts over our spiritual eyes and hinder us from keeping heavenly things in clear focus or from keeping diligent watch for the Lord’s return (see Luke 21:34).

Anxiety diverts us from what is most important. It causes our eyes to see only what is before us at that very moment. Our

worries exert great effort to keep our vision fixed on the *horizontal* (the things of the world) instead of on the *vertical* (the things of God).

In today's passage, Jesus commands us not to be anxious about our food or drink or clothing. He then immediately directs us to "look" somewhere else (Matt. 6:26). By looking at the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, we shift our focus to the heavenly Father who promises to provide even better care for us than he does for them.

Instead of allowing our minds to be distracted by the troubles of today, Jesus tells us to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). As we renew our minds and discipline our hearts to keep eternal matters as our central priority, we learn to rest in God, who has promised to meet all our needs. Therefore, even when our personal responsibilities require a certain amount of our attention, we can always look to the Lord with confidence rather than being fearful.

**Reflect:** What earthly cares are currently distracting you? What preoccupies your mind?

**Reflect:** Anxiety distracts you with temporal matters, but Jesus reminds you to keep eternal matters central.

**Act:** In a journal or notebook, write down everything you are currently anxious about. Then turn this "care list" into a "prayer list"—take each care to the Lord and ask him to show you which of them relate to your responsibilities, which you need to act on, and which you need to entrust (release) to him in faith.

## DAY 2

# Anxiety Weighs Us Down

*And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:28)*

YESTERDAY WE SAW that anxiety can be defined as “distracting care.” Today Paul introduces us to another way of viewing it. In 2 Corinthians 11:28, the apostle describes his anxiety as *pressure*—as the burden of the physical or mental distress he feels “for all the churches” he has helped to start or shepherd. We can only imagine how many people and needs this would have entailed. And if that weren’t enough, this “daily pressure” comes *on top of* “other things” he has already mentioned—including “imprisonments” and “countless beatings,” being shipwrecked and surrounded by all kinds of dangers, and personal hardships such as sleeplessness, hunger, and thirst (see 2 Cor. 11:23–27). Pressure on top of pressure. Talk about anxiety!

Paul’s pressures were sometimes accompanied by despair (see 2 Cor. 1:8). This shouldn’t surprise us, since many people experience depression alongside anxiety. But Paul always knew where to turn—to “the God of all comfort”—and so he assures us that God “comforts us in all our affliction” (2 Cor. 1:3–4). This truth is for *all* believers throughout *all* time.

Paul wrote this comforting promise while in the furnace of personal affliction. His mental suffering was so extreme that he and his companions were “utterly burdened beyond [their] strength” and “despaired of life itself” (2 Cor. 1:8). Nevertheless, these servants of God turned the eyes of their hearts to Christ.

Perhaps you are thinking, “I’m not an apostle. How does this help me?” Let me show you two ways that it does.

First, Paul reminds us that God graciously orchestrates

suffering to strip his children of self-reliance—of the pride that feeds so many of our other sins and hinders our usefulness. In the case of the apostle and his friends, God used overwhelming pressures to accomplish their Christian growth and perseverance. “That was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead,” they said (2 Cor. 1:9). Setting our hope on God alone, not on the lessening of our pressure or on the improvement of our circumstances, is the ultimate remedy for anxiety.

Second, the example of Paul and his friends directs us to discipline ourselves to look to Jesus. Their testimony was that “on him we have set our hope” (2 Cor. 1:10). Hope delivers us from the crippling effects of anxiety, because it helps us to cling to an immovable anchor: the truth that God is for us in Jesus Christ (see Rom. 8:31). The promise of ultimate deliverance in Jesus breathed life into the suffering apostles so that they could press on in the midst of unbearable pressure. The same is true for you and me. When we have moments of panic, we can stop, take control of our thought processes, and choose to believe that God’s love for us in Christ is greater than any pressure that tries to hijack our peace.

**Reflect:** What might the God of providence be seeking to accomplish in your heart through your current trials?

**Act:** Memorize Romans 8:31. As you review this verse, meditate on God’s love for you and on the eternal security you possess in Christ.

**Act:** What are some of the “other things” in your life that contribute to the pressure you are feeling? Talk to the Lord about these things.

## DAY 3

# We Are Embodied Spirits

*Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. . . . My strength fails because of my iniquity, and my bones waste away. Because of all my adversaries I have become a reproach. . . . I have been forgotten like one who is dead; I have become like a broken vessel. (Ps. 31:9–12)*

PSALM 31 ILLUSTRATES the interplay of our bodies and souls in our suffering and acknowledges that our frailties make us susceptible to emotional struggles like anxiety. Look at the layers of trouble that were all heaped on King David at the same time, which resulted in his having a heightened level of anxiety:

- physical weakness (“my strength fails . . . my bones waste away”)
- a conscience that was troubled by sin (“because of my iniquity”)
- hostility from his opponents (“because of all my adversaries”)
- abusive treatment from others (“I have become a reproach”)
- betrayal by his friends (“I have been forgotten like one who is dead”)

No wonder his soul and body—his whole person—were in “distress”!

The word *distress* implies mental strain or stress that is caused by danger or trouble and is impacting the body. It’s a vivid picture of the powerful effects of anxiety on a person’s inner and outer strength. It’s also a reminder of the way that challenging circumstances outside the body can aggravate anguish in the soul.

Because of his distress, David needs help and assurance from God that his whole person—both his body and soul—are in God’s caring hands. And so he prays.

“Be gracious to me, O LORD” is his simple yet bold cry. Though he is helpless, David’s desperate prayer reveals that he still has hope that God will eventually come to his aid. Clearly his faith is feeble in the moment; he finds it difficult to rest in God—to trust him as he slowly crawls through his personal fog. And yet he still calls out to God. He consciously moves from anxiety to assurance by personalizing the Bible’s truth—by choosing to hide by faith in God, who is his “rock of refuge” and “strong fortress” (Ps. 31:2). Later in the same psalm, David reiterates his dependence on the Lord—which, while unavoidable, he also makes a choice to submit to: “But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God. My times are in your hand’” (vv. 14–15).

In what ways might anxiety be affecting your body or sense of strength? Are you reaching out to God for the empowering grace that you need today? Do you see yourself moving from anxiety to assurance?

Ultimately, security and peace come from the Lord—from knowing and trusting the character and love of God. So don’t let your anxiety lead you away from God. Run to him today.

**Reflect:** When you are anxious, do you cry out to God or fight your anxiety alone? Why?

**Reflect:** Durable faith reaches for joy, even in the midst of distress: “I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction” (Ps. 31:7). How can you choose the path of joy?

**Act:** In a notebook or journal, write out a prayer that admits your needs and asks for grace.



Created to  
CARE

God's Truth for  
Anxious Moms



SARA WALLACE

## 8

# Peace in Our Kids’ Physical Protection

We are human moms with human kids—and we care about their very human needs. It’s strep throat season around here right now. I have spent the last two weeks taking the kids to the doctor, one at a time, as they graciously share their germs with one another. Trips to the doctor make for long days. We can’t get anything else done on those days. I fall into bed exhausted with a huge checklist left unchecked. But I push away that nagging checklist and remind myself that the kids got what they needed, and that’s what’s most important.

Physical protection is a huge part of motherhood. It can easily become all-consuming. As we saw in the intro, “Wired for Worry,” our concern for our children’s well-being is a good thing. Their physical needs have been entrusted to us. “Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?” (Isa. 49:15). We were made to care. Unfortunately, it can be very hard for us moms to care without worrying.

God expects us to do what we can to protect our kids. Even if it means spending every day, for weeks on end, at the doctor’s

office. Maybe it means staying up late to research new recipes in order to protect your child from food allergies. But there comes a point when each one of us have to recognize our limitations. We do not have sovereign control over our kids' safety and well-being. But God does. And we must submit everything that we do for our kids to his control.

The most practical way we can submit our protective instincts to God is by saturating our motherhood with prayer. There will be many times when we reach the end of our strength, knowledge, and ability to protect our kids—but we can never reach the bottom of God's love and care. We are limited, but God is not. He is the one who is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).

As we bring all our concerns to God in prayer—whether big or small, physical or spiritual—we must be willing to trust him with the answers to those prayers. God delights in giving us our daily bread, but we don't get to pick what that bread looks like. When I hold my toddler who is hot and crying with an ear infection, I pray that the pain will leave. I'm asking for bread from my Father. But I know that his definition of bread might be different from mine. It's like when my five-year-old asks for a cupcake right before dinner and I say no. He is too little to understand why. I can ask and ask and ask for health and safety for my kids, but I have to trust that God knows what they need. He knows how to use them (and me) for his glory. If more pain means more glory, only God can help me to accept that. He can also help me to praise him for it.

## **Caring vs. Idolizing**

You know that special panic that rises in your chest when something doesn't feel quite right? That motherly instinct is

what snaps us into action. But when do we cross over from caring for our children to idolizing them? Idolizing our kids means holding them with a closed fist. It produces stress and anxiety. But we can pour ourselves into caring for our kids without idolizing them. Caring without idolizing looks like:

- not being the helicopter mom—enjoying your kids and watching them enjoy life within reasonable bounds of protection.
- being less likely to judge other moms or to feel judged by them—being confident in your decisions for your kids' safety rather than constantly second-guessing them.
- recognizing that your kids' well-being is ultimately dependent on God—not you. This protects you from guilt over things you can't control and from the temptation to think of all the hypothetical things that could go wrong.

How do you know if you are idolizing your kids' health and safety? Look at the three guidelines listed above and turn them into questions to test yourself: Are you an anxious helicopter mom? Are you judgmental of other moms' decisions about health and safety (or defensive about your own decisions)? Do you constantly feel guilty when your kids are sick or hurt? We can all answer yes to some or all of these questions at any given moment of the day. This is when we turn our anxiety back over to God and say, "I trust you. I've done what I can in my limited strength with my limited knowledge and limited power. I leave the results in your hands."

Sometimes when I'm anxious about my kids' safety, I think about my ninety-five-year-old grandma. She raised her kids on baby formula and canned food. She drove them around before car seats were invented. She did the best she could with the

resources that she had. And the generations after us will look at what we did as parents and say, “You did *what??*” We have nothing to lose from being as faithful as we can be, as long as we work with joy and leave the results to God.

## Comfort for the “What-ifs”

When you become a mom, nobody warns you about a brand-new door that opens up in your brain. It’s not a cute, Chip-and-Joanna-Gaines farmhouse door. It’s a dark, foreboding door that you never walk through intentionally but that pulls you in anyway. It’s the door of the “What-ifs.” *What if I’m not cut out for this? What if I’m not doing this right? What if something goes wrong?*

One Thursday night in March of 2018, one of my what-ifs came true. My baby stopped breathing. I recognized the seizure immediately and called 911. My twenty-month-old son turned blue, and time stood still. “Hurry. Hurry,” I heard myself saying into the phone.

I have walked this path before. Another one of my sons also had a febrile seizure at the same age. When babies’ fevers spike too quickly, their little bodies can’t handle it. Febrile seizures are terrifying, but in the end they are harmless. They indicate a serious infection, but the seizures themselves leave no lasting damage.

As my baby’s breathing returned to normal and he lay limp on the couch, the paramedics walked me through what was next. We had to get him to the doctor right away to find out what was giving him such a high fever. Thirty minutes later we were sitting across from the doctor getting the results: strep throat. The infection set in so quickly that he didn’t have any symptoms before the seizure hit. He got his medication, his fever calmed down, and we were soon back in our own home.

Once all five kids were tucked into bed and the house was quiet, I finally took my first breath of the evening. *This is it*, I thought. *Now I can fall apart*. There had been no time to process what was happening during the event. Now I was left alone with my own thoughts . . . and that dreaded door.

The first time we experienced a febrile seizure, I walked through the door of the what-ifs for days. What if he hadn't started breathing again? What if it had been more serious? What if . . . what if. . . . It was hard to be thankful for my healthy baby when I was suddenly struck by the fragility of life. Things could change so quickly. How could I enjoy my baby knowing that it could all end at any second? New worries took the place of what should have been joyful relief.

But this second febrile seizure was different for me. When it was all over, I saw two clear choices in front of me: have a meltdown and freak out about all the things that could have gone wrong, or praise God for keeping my baby safe that night. I could live through all the terrible scenarios that *hadn't* happened, or I could thank God for another day to enjoy my baby.

In Melissa Kruger's Bible study on Philippians, *In All Things*, she tells about a near-death experience she had. She walked away from a car accident that should have killed her. Her reaction to the event revolutionized my thinking on worry versus gratefulness. "When we know we've been rescued, we look at everything in a different light, don't we?" she writes. "I came home and hugged my husband and children a little tighter, ate my dinner with a deeper enjoyment, and experienced an overwhelming sense of gratitude. My thankfulness overflowed into joy, even in the most mundane of tasks."

Wait. I thought that trials were supposed to sober us up. I thought that being anxious was just being realistic. Melissa's response shows the exact opposite. Close calls remind us that

we are not in control—and that’s a good thing. They remind us that this world is not our home—and that’s a good thing. Close calls don’t say to us, “Watch your back. God is ready to pull the rug out from under you at any moment.” They say to us, “God is in control. You will walk through what he ordains for you to walk through—nothing more, nothing less. He is on the throne, and he is good.”

Are the what-ifs stealing the joy from your motherhood today? My sister Rachel, in her article “A Surrender That Is Safe,” says that we worry because we don’t want to be surprised by pain. We buy the lie that “I need to worry in order to prepare myself for the future.”

When I laid my baby down after the events of that Thursday night, my heart was filled with joy. I looked at the door of the what-ifs, and I closed it. I felt a tremendous sense of gratitude in their place—as well as freedom to enjoy my son. I have no idea how long I will get to enjoy each one of my kids. But I do know that the what-ifs don’t prepare me for trials in the future. They only rob me of joy in the present.

The only way to close the door to the what-ifs is to walk through the door of gratitude instead. Trade each what-if for a praise. Replace the unknowns with the knowns. Thank God for something that you *know* to be true. When what-ifs cloud my thinking, here are a few of my favorite truths to cling to:

- Everything could change in a moment, but I know that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8).
- I don’t know what tomorrow holds, but “I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth” (Job 19:25).
- I cannot control the future, but I know that “in his hand

are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also” (Ps. 95:4)

- I don’t know how I will bear future trials, but I know that “he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold” (Job 23:10).

## **Comfort in Painful Realities**

Much of our anxiety is over things that haven’t actually happened. It’s produced only in our minds. But sometimes it does stem from real events. What do we do when our worries are not hypothetical—when we’re walking through real pain and heart-ache? Where does our comfort come from?

If you’ve experienced a close call with your kids, you know how it feels to tuck them in at the end of the day and say, “That was close. At least everyone is safe and healthy.” But sometimes we can’t say that. Sometimes we walk through painful trials with our kids and they’re not “okay.” It gives us an amazing opportunity to push our hope past “At least . . .” and further and deeper into something much more real.

Before we suffer, our hope is pretty shallow. “At least I have milk I can use in my coffee, even though I’m out of half and half. Whew.” Then a trial pushes us a little deeper. “At least I have AAA, even though I’m stranded on a busy highway. Whew.” The more our comforts and securities are stripped away, the deeper we dig to cling to something real and important. “The earthquake destroyed our home, but at least the kids are okay.” We tend to boil our “At leasts” down to health and loved ones—which are truly great blessings indeed. But sometimes God allows even those precious securities to be moved just out of our reach. And he teaches us a new depth of hope in the process.

My mom met Bev in college. They instantly bonded over



their involvement in Campus Crusade for Christ. They attended the same college Bible study, where they both met their husbands. Together they would embark on the exciting new adventure of raising families.

But Bev's journey soon took a very different turn from my mom's. In 1986 my mom and Bev both had babies. My mom gave birth to my sister—a healthy baby girl. Bev had a daughter, too—but something was wrong. Little Kristie was born with a rare muscle condition.

As Kristie grew, her family's life revolved around her. It had to. Bev and her husband Mike had to do things in order to protect Kristie that “normal” families didn't have to do. They had to forgo party invitations and regular outings, because even the smallest sickness was deadly to Kristie. Her weakened immune system could not protect her. Their money and time went to hospital stays instead of family vacations.

When Kristie was three years old, she caught an illness. Her body, weakened by her muscle condition, could not fight the illness. After five weeks in a coma, Kristie passed away. In a letter that Bev wrote to Kristie after she died, she said, “Dear Kristie, . . . Nearly daily you said, ‘Some day I will walk.’ ‘Some day I will dance.’ ‘Some day I will fly like Peter Pan.’ That some day is here, honey, and we are so happy for you.”

In her book for families of special-needs children, *A Never-Give-Up Heart*, Bev talks about a comment from another parent that she will never forget. When Kristie was born, another mom of a special-needs child told Bev, “This is hard, but it's not the end of the world.” Bev said that that statement was not necessarily true. It was the end of “a certain kind of world—a world where everything is perfect and ‘normal.’ . . . It was the end of a certain kind of world that we had dreamed of. But there is another world, one that I would have never chosen,

but that has proven to be . . . more fulfilling, meaningful, and in some ways, more wonderful, than any I would have ever imagined.”

There might come a time when our individual “worlds,” as we know them, end. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. It does not mean that we are alone or abandoned. Whatever new world we find ourselves in, we can be confident that God created it for us. He created it for our good and his glory, and he will be with us. In the darkest days of caring for Kristie and then grieving for her, Bev learned a depth of grace that she had never known. God’s strength and mercy sustained her when her hopes and dreams were destroyed. He did not take away the pain or the trial, but he showed her a new kind of beauty—the beauty of choosing joy.

Before Kristie passed away, Bev had another baby. He was a strong, healthy baby boy. A couple of years after Kristie passed away, Bev became pregnant again. “Finally,” she thought. “God will bring me the healthy daughter I’ve always dreamed of.” Not only was Bradley not a girl, but he was also not healthy. He had the same muscle condition as Kristie.

Bev and Mike got to enjoy eighteen years with their son before he joined his sister in heaven. In those years, Brad was often the strong one when his parents were weak. One day, reflecting on the concept of hope, Brad wrote, “Hope is very meaningful to me because it makes me optimistic and reminds me of my relationship with Christ, who is my salvation. . . . There is always hope no matter what happens.”

When I think about Bev and her children, I remember this hope. Although her kids’ bodies were weak and crooked, their outlook on life was shaped by faith. Both Kristie and Brad couldn’t wait to meet Jesus. They made everyone around them want to meet him, too.

It's a great reminder to me that my kids' bodies are temporary. Whether they are healthy or not healthy, their bodies were not made to last. Psalm 103:15–16 says,

As for man, his days are like grass;  
he flourishes like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more.

I read that passage as a teenager and was very depressed by it. But now that passage gives me great comfort. It reminds me not to hold on too tightly to things that I can't keep anyway. We should pour into caring for our kids' bodies, but we should also pour into caring for their hearts. That's the part that does not pass away. God created our hearts to last forever (see Eccl. 3:11). You won't share endless, pain-free days with your kids here. But you might be worshipping with them for eternity, where God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore" (Rev. 21:4).

Maybe you are a mom reading this book who has lost a child. The emotional pain is physically palpable. A dear friend told me that her heart literally ached when she lost her baby. She also told me that, because the pain ran deep, it created a deep path for God's truth in her heart. And her most encouraging words to me, just a few years after her loss, were "Healing does come."

Healing will come at different times for different people and in different ways. If you are currently living with loss, or living with a special-needs child or a child battling an illness, you are not alone. God is "near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Ps. 34:18).

I love that I can read the same passage of Scripture hundreds

of times and still see something new. Suffering often causes things to jump off the page that I didn't see before. During a particularly dark time in my life, I read Psalm 62 and saw a word that I hadn't noticed before: *alone*.

For God *alone* my soul waits in silence;  
from him comes my salvation.  
He *alone* is my rock and my salvation,  
my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken. (Ps. 62:1-2)

There is no other comfort that compares to God. There is no rock, no salvation, and no fortress apart from him. As much as I want to build my life around the safety of my kids, a comfortable house, my husband, and financial security, none of those things will hold me. Only God will hold me and keep me from being shaken. Suffering causes us to narrow down our hope to the only thing that stands.

## What Other Moms Are Saying

I love meditating on the fact that God is eternal. I can pray for eternal results, such as salvation for my kids, in the midst of my time-bound efforts to feed them and clothe them. That thought is life-changing for me! (Laura)

Practically, I think it's so important to teach our kids who safe and unsafe strangers are. Teach them to identify store employees, police officers, or moms with young kids if they ever need help. (Janet)

When my son was three, he was diagnosed with sensory processing disorder and ADD. My biggest stress-relief in caring for

## *Committing Your Children to God*

him has been prayer, as well as listening to my motherhood instinct. God gave me that instinct, and I find that I care for my son best when I listen to it. (Theresa)

Trusting God with my kids' physical safety is part of teaching them how to be adults *before* they actually become adults! I have to let go a little and let them have freedoms, even if it is hard for me. (Mary Lee)

I talk openly with my seven-year-old about some of the dangers of this world. I remind her to stand by her faith because, no matter what, we have God with us. The fact that I can't protect her from everything is a chance for me to point her to Christ. (Christel)

I was a tomboy when I was little, and my parents let me do whatever my brothers were doing. I fell out of the tree in our backyard, and I crashed my bike straight into a parked car. When I start to feel overprotective, I remember that bumps and bruises are part of life. (Rachel)

## Reflection

1. What does the difference between caring and idolizing look like for you personally?
2. Read the following passage. How do these verses give us perspective on placing our hope in our kids' physical safety? "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:24–25).
3. First Peter 5:7 says, "[Cast] all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you." What is your greatest care right

FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

DARK  
CLOUDS



DEEP  
MERCY

DISCOVERING THE GRACE OF  
LAMENT

MARK  
VROEGOP

## Introduction

# Life in a Minor Key

## A Personal Journey

The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken  
away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

*Job 1:21*

Learning to lament began on my knees.

“No, Lord!” I pleaded. “Please not this!” It was 2004, and my wife, Sarah, awakened me, concerned that something was wrong with her pregnancy. A few days from her due date, she had not slept most of the night, waiting for our in-utero baby to move. Hours of tapping her tummy, shifting positions, and offering tear-filled prayers only increased my wife’s concern. Inside her womb, stillness.

I cried out in prayer next to our bed.

Pregnancy was not new for us. Eight years earlier we were shocked to hear the word “twins” from an ultrasound technician.

Sarah carried our boys to thirty-nine weeks, nearly breaking the doctor's office record for the largest womb they'd seen for twins. Three days after delivery we carried our healthy kids home. And then, three years later, we were blessed with another son. In the four years of our marriage, we welcomed three healthy children into our lives.

Not everything in life was a breeze. We faced challenges. During the birth to our three children, I was the teaching pastor of a church in west Michigan. The demands on me as a young pastor were heavy. I was inexperienced, and the church never lacked for challenges. So we faced many struggles; life wasn't problem-free. However, my spontaneous prayer expressed a new depth of desperation.

I was frightened.

Later, that afternoon our doctor placed a monitor on Sarah's womb, searching for a heartbeat. Seconds passed. Multiple angles. Silence. I saw a concerned look form on his face. He suggested we move into the ultrasound room to determine what was happening. My wife's head dropped. She knew.

A few minutes later we could see our baby's body on the screen. I watched as our doctor navigated the small wand. I'd seen enough ultrasounds to know what he was looking for: the grainy flutter of a beating heart. Sarah was silent. The doctor pointed to the screen. "I'm so sorry," he said, "but the heart's not beating."

Our baby, only a few days from entering our lives, had died.

### **Sorrows Like Sea Billows**

The crashing waves of grief in that moment were overwhelming. But our journey was only beginning. A few hours later we checked into the hospital. I sat by my wife's bed as she endured hours of labor. We prayed and cried together. About



twenty-four hours after hearing the crushing news, I held the nine-pound body of my lifeless daughter, Sylvia. As I cradled her, swaddled in a hospital blanket, I longed for her to wake up. Her fully developed body looked so normal. But there was no breathing.

She was beautiful but not alive.

I felt such piercing grief and sorrow, it's impossible to fully describe. Pain and fear mingled together in a jumbled torrent of emotion. Thoughts about the future raced through my mind. Questions haunted me: How would my boys respond to this level of sadness? Would my wife ever be happy again? What if we never conceived another child? How could I live with this pain while feeling the need to have it all together as I pastored a church? Would our marriage make it?

So many questions.

So much fear.

### **Discovering Lament**

Following Sylvia's death, I poured out my heart to the Lord with desperate candor. I fought the temptation to be angry with God. I wrestled with sadness that bored a hole in my chest. In the midst of my pain, I began to find words and phrases in the Bible that captured the emotions of my heart. Some leapt off the pages.

The Bible gave voice to my pain. Particular psalms became my own. I read these passages before, but I had never seen them or heard them like this. A years-long journey began. In that process, I discovered a minor-key language for my suffering: lament.

Although I had been a student of the Bible for many years, biblical lament was new for me. I didn't even know what to call it at the time. I was merely trying to voice my fears and struggles while at the same time pointing my heart toward God.

My quest for spiritual survival opened my heart to this historic and biblical form of prayer.

Sorrow tuned my heart to hear the song of lament.

The gut-level honesty expressed in lament was refreshing and helpful. You see, I knew the assurances of God's love in passages like Romans 8 and others. I believed somehow God would work out everything for his good purposes. I never doubted that.

Yet my grief was not tame.

It was vicious.

I battled fears, disappointments, and sorrow. And in my journey, I discovered the grace of lament, a song I never wanted to sing. However, once I was in the crucible, I was deeply thankful for this uninvited dimension of the Christian life.

Looking back, I can see how lament became my guide, my teacher, and my solace.

The years that followed Sylvia's death were a roller-coaster of emotions and challenges. We suffered multiple miscarriages and a false-positive pregnancy. However, our painful yet honest prayers helped turn our agony into a platform for worship.

Lament helped us navigate the wilderness of our grief.

### **Uncomfortable with Lament**

However, in that journey we also learned that many Christians, like us, were unfamiliar—even uncomfortable—with lament. When occasionally I candidly shared a few of the struggles of my soul, some people reacted with visible discomfort. Others quickly moved to a desperate desire to “find the bright side,” a quick change of the subject, an awkward silence, or even physically excusing themselves to escape the tension.

When people stayed in the conversation, they often responded in unhelpful ways. In moments of attempted comfort, people said things like “I'm sure the Lord will give you another

baby,” “Maybe more people will come to faith because of the death of your daughter,” or “The Lord must know he can trust you with this.”

Every person meant well. I appreciated their attempts to address our pain. But it became clear that most people did not know how to join us in our grief.

Lament was just not familiar terrain.

### **Lament as Grace**

As I read books on grief, I discovered many attempts to explain the purpose of pain or to walk readers through the stages of grief. While these are helpful at some level, they frequently missed or ignored the concept of lament. Finding an explanation or a quick solution for grief, while an admirable goal, can circumvent the opportunity afforded in lament—to give a person permission to wrestle with sorrow instead of rushing to end it. Walking through sorrow without understanding and embracing the God-given song of lament can stunt the grieving process.

I came to see lament as a helpful gift from the Lord.

Through this journey, I came to love Psalm 13. I had read it many times before. This time it was personal. It expressed my heart and served as a path for my grief. It kept my soul out of the ditches of despair and denial. I memorized the words. It became a help to my soul and to others in pain.

How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I take counsel in my soul

and have sorrow in my heart all the day?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;

light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,

lest my enemy say, “I have prevailed over him,”  
lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me. (vv. 1–6)

Through this personal odyssey, I began to see the redemptive value of lament and wonder why it was often missing. For example, I listened differently at funerals, and they seemed lament-lite. The absence of lament in our worship services also struck me. I noticed how the majority of songs were celebratory and triumphant. While I have nothing against celebration and pointing people toward hope, the depth of my grief caused me to long for the honest and candid spiritual struggle with pain. Celebration is certainly not wrong, but with a consistent absence of lament, it felt incomplete.

Through the years I began to talk about lament. I incorporated it into funeral services. I taught on it in my sermons. The effect was startling. Grieving people came out of the shadows. My life and pastoral ministry involved numerous conversations with hurting people. I began helping people discover how lament invites us to grieve and trust, to struggle and believe. I walked people through their grief by leading them—even encouraging them—to lament. I started to understand at a new level why the Psalms are so helpful to hurting people.

I began to see lament as a rich but untapped reservoir of God’s grace.

### **Deep Mercy in Dark Clouds**

The aim of this book is to help you discover the grace of lament—to encourage you to find deep mercy in dark clouds. The

title is taken from two verses in Lamentations that seem to be a paradox. But they aren't.

How the Lord in his anger  
has set the daughter of Zion under a cloud! (Lam. 2:1)

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;  
his mercies never come to an end. (Lam. 3:22)

When the circumstances of life create dark clouds, I hope you'll come to embrace lament as a divinely given liturgy leading you to mercy. This historic song gives you permission to vocalize your pain as it moves you toward God-centered worship and trust. Lament is how you live between the poles of a hard life and trusting in God's sovereignty.

Lament is how we bring our sorrow to God. Without lament we won't know how to process pain. Silence, bitterness, and even anger can dominate our spiritual lives instead. Without lament we won't know how to help people walking through sorrow. Instead, we'll offer trite solutions, unhelpful comments, or impatient responses. What's more, without this sacred song of sorrow, we'll miss the lessons historic laments are intended to teach us.

Lament is how Christians grieve. It is how to help hurting people. Lament is how we learn important truths about God and our world. My personal and pastoral experience has convinced me that biblical lament is not only a gift but also a neglected dimension of the Christian life for many twenty-first-century Christians.

A broken world and an increasingly hostile culture make contemporary Christianity unbalanced and limited in the hope we offer if we neglect this minor-key song. We need to recover the ancient practice of lament and the grace that comes through it. Christianity suffers when lament is missing.

## A Journey in Lament

This book charts a course for our journey. It will take us through an exploration of four lament psalms and the one biblical book dedicated to the subject: Lamentations. In part 1, I'll try to help you learn *to* lament. In part 2, I hope to show you what we learn *from* lament. And finally, in part 3, we'll explore how to live *with* lament—both personally and with others.

Although I didn't realize it at the time, Sylvia's stillbirth would be the beginning of my discovery of lament. The path of grief created an affection for the biblical language of sorrow that would extend into other areas of my life and pastoral ministry.

My fearful prayer—"Please not this!"—was only the beginning of a providential journey of learning to love lament and the grace that comes through it. Regardless of the circumstances in your life, this minor-key song can help you.

Join me on this journey.

There is deep mercy under dark clouds when we discover the grace of lament.

## Reflection Questions

1. What is your story with pain or sorrow? What painful events in your life have shaped your soul and your understanding of God?
2. What are some of the questions and struggles you frequently have to fight when you are dealing with pain?
3. What are some of your favorite passages in the Bible that bring comfort and assurance to those who are suffering?
4. How would you define lament, and what is your perspective on it?
5. When you've had to help a friend or a loved one through the pain of suffering, what are some things you've found helpful and unhelpful?

PART 1



# LEARNING TO LAMENT

PSALMS OF LAMENT





## Keep Turning to Prayer

### Psalm 77

In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;  
in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying;  
my soul refuses to be comforted.  
When I remember God, I moan.

*Psalm 77:2–3*

Who taught you to cry? The answer, of course, is “no one.” Although you don’t remember it, the first sound you made when you left the warm and protected home of your mother’s womb was a loud wail.<sup>1</sup> A heartfelt protest.

Every human being has the same opening story. Life begins with tears. It’s simply a part of what it means to be human—to cry is human.

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1. I’m grateful for this concept as found in Michael Card, *A Sacred Sorrow: Reaching Out to God in the Lost Language of Lament* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2005), 19.

But lament is different. The practice of lament—the kind that is biblical, honest, and redemptive—is not as natural for us, because every lament is a prayer. A statement of faith. Lament is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God’s goodness.

### **To Lament Is Christian**

Belief in God’s mercy, redemption, and sovereignty create lament. Without hope in God’s deliverance and the conviction that he is all-powerful, there would be no reason to lament when pain invaded our lives. Todd Billings, in his book *Rejoicing in Lament*, helps us understand this foundational point: “It is precisely out of trust that God is sovereign that the psalmist repeatedly brings laments and petitions to the Lord. . . . If the psalmists had already decided the verdict—that God is indeed unfaithful—they would not continue to offer their complaint.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, lament is rooted in what we believe. It is a prayer loaded with theology. Christians affirm that the world is broken, God is powerful, and he will be faithful. Therefore, lament stands in the gap between pain and promise.

To cry is human, but to lament is Christian.

A few years ago I was leading a prayer meeting for our church staff. I placed an empty chair in a circle of other chairs. While we were singing, praying, and spontaneously reading Scripture, I invited people to make their way to the middle chair and offer a prayer of lament to the Lord. We’d been studying the subject as a church. I thought it would be good to put this minor-key song into practice. I also knew there was a lot of pain in the room.

After a few minutes of awkward silence, a brave young woman nervously moved to the middle chair. She clutched a

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2. Todd Billings, *Rejoicing in Lament: Wrestling with Incurable Cancer and Life in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015), 58–59.

small card and sighed. Painful emotions were just under the surface. Her husband, who also served on our staff, quickly joined and knelt beside her. Others soon followed, placing hands on their shoulders—a simple but touching demonstration of entering their grief. With a trembling voice she read her lament:

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you withhold the blessing of a child from us? How long will we cry to you—how many more days, months, or years will pass with our arms remaining empty? How much longer will we struggle to rejoice with those who rejoice while we sit weeping? But I have trusted in your steadfast love. My heart shall rejoice in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, because he has dealt bountifully with me! Thank you, Father!<sup>3</sup>

In one short prayer she vocalized her deep sorrow while simultaneously reaffirming her trust. She wept and remembered. She sobbed and trusted. She lamented.

After she prayed, another staff member made his way to the same chair. “Here I am again, Lord! I don’t like this chair, but I know I need to come. My wife and I long for another baby to adopt, and we are so tired of waiting and the emotional rollercoaster. But we are trusting.”<sup>4</sup> By the time the prayer summit was over, four couples mourned empty cribs. Lament provided a language that anchored these grieving couples to what they knew to be true while they waited.

One reason I have written this book is my love for people who know the unwelcomed presence of pain. As a follower of Jesus, I have personally walked through my own trauma of unexplainable loss and wrestled with troubling questions. As a pastor, I’ve wept with countless people in some of the darkest moments of life.

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3. From former a staff member of our church, who prefers to remain anonymous (2016). Used by permission.

4. From a staff member, who prefers to remain anonymous (2016). Used by permission.

Every Christian experiences some kind of suffering and hardship. And I've seen the difference between those who learn to lament and those who don't. I've observed the way lament provides a critical ballast for the soul. No one seeks out the pain that leads to lament, but when life falls apart, this minor-key song is life-giving.

### **What Is Lament?**

Before we start our journey exploring four psalms and the book of Lamentations, we need to define lament. Allow me to give you a brief overview, and then we'll see what it looks like in Psalm 77.

Lament can be defined as a loud cry, a howl, or a passionate expression of grief. However, in the Bible lament is more than sorrow or talking about sadness. It is more than walking through the stages of grief.

Lament is a prayer in pain that leads to trust.

Throughout the Scriptures, lament gives voice to the strong emotions that believers feel because of suffering. It wrestles with the struggles that surface. Lament typically asks at least two questions: (1) "Where are you, God?" (2) "If you love me, why is this happening?"<sup>5</sup> Sometimes these questions are asked by individuals. At other times they are asked by entire communities. Sometimes laments reflect upon difficult circumstances in general, sometimes because of what others have done, and sometimes because of the sinful choices of God's people in particular.

You might think lament is the opposite of praise. It isn't. Instead, lament is a path to praise as we are led through our brokenness and disappointment.<sup>6</sup> The space between brokenness and God's mercy is where this song is sung. Think of lament as the transition between pain and promise.

It is the path from heartbreak to hope.

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5. Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 17.

6. Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 21.

## The Pattern of Lament

Most biblical laments follow a pattern as God takes grieving people on a journey. This poetic odyssey usually includes four key elements: (1) an address to God, (2) a complaint, (3) a request, and (4) an expression of trust and/or praise.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes in this book, I'll use four words to help us learn to lament: *turn*, *complain*, *ask*, and *trust*. Part 1 explores these steps, helping us to know what they are and how to put them into practice.

Each step of lament is a part of a pathway toward hope. In the address, the heart is turned to God in prayer. Complaint clearly and bluntly lays out the reasons behind the sorrow. From there, the lamenter usually makes a request for God to act—to do something. Finally, nearly every lament ends with renewed trust and praise.

In this first chapter we will see how lament begins by turning to God in prayer. We'll discover the supply of grace that comes as we take the step of faith to reach out to God. Lament invites us to turn our gaze from the rubble of life to the Redeemer of every hurt. It calls us to turn toward promise while still in pain.

The Psalms are where our journey begins.

## Psalms of Lament

The book of Psalms is filled with lament. No doubt that's why it is a cherished portion of Scripture. Aren't the Psalms one of the first places you turn to when you're in pain? The Psalms were the songbook for God's covenant community. They reflect the joys, struggles, sorrows, and triumphs of life. It's noteworthy that at least a third of the 150 psalms are laments. It is

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7. Stacey Gleddiesmith, "My God, My God, Why? Understanding the Lament Psalms," *Reformed Worship*, June 2010, [www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2010/my-god-my-god-why](http://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2010/my-god-my-god-why).

the largest category in the entire Psalter.<sup>8</sup> Whether the lament is corporate, individual, repentance-oriented, or imprecatory (strongly expressing a desire for justice), you cannot read the Psalms without encountering laments.

One out of three psalms is in a minor-key. Just think about that! A third of the official songbook of Israel wrestles with pain. But consider how infrequently laments appear in our hymnals or in our contemporary songs. I find this curious and concerning. Could it be that our prosperity, comfort, and love of triumphalism are reflected in what we sing? Is it possible that our unfamiliarity with lament is a by-product of a subtle misunderstanding of Christian suffering? Don't get me wrong, there certainly is a place for celebration and joyful affirmation of the truths we believe. But I wonder about the long-term effect if the contemporary church and its people consistently miss this vital dimension of Christianity. The number of laments, their use, and their message invite us to consider the value of this biblical song of sorrow.

Laments are in the Bible for a reason.

When you put all this together, it's clear that this minor-key song is vital to the life of God's people. There's something uniquely Christian about lament, something redemptive, and something full of faith. I hope this book helps you to discover the grace of lament.

With this background, let's learn to lament by looking at the first element: turning our hearts to prayer.

### **Psalm 77: Keep Praying**

I've chosen to start with Psalm 77 because it provides a wonderful example of the connection between lament and turning to God. It shows the beauty of pushing the heart toward God in

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8. Bruce K. Waltke, James M. Houston, and Erika Moore, *The Psalms as Christian Lament: A Historical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 1.

our pain. This psalm is filled with honest struggle, deep pain, tough questions, determined trust, and a biblical grounding. To learn how to lament, we must resolve to talk to God—to keep praying. I know that this sounds pretty basic, but it is where we have to start. Lament begins with an invitation to turn to God while in pain. Let me show you.

### **Cry Out to God**

I cry aloud to God,  
aloud to God, and he will hear me.  
In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord;  
in the night my hand is stretched out without  
wearying;  
my soul refuses to be comforted. (Ps. 77:1–2)

The opening line of this lament, “I cry aloud to God,” frames the tone of the text. The psalmist is in pain, and yet he’s not silent. However, he is not just talking, complaining, or whimpering; he’s crying out in prayer.

Other references to prayer follow in the first two verses: “He will hear me” (v. 1b), “In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord” (v. 2a), and “In the night my hand is stretched out without wearying” (v. 2b) (a reference to a prayer posture).

Clearly the psalmist is reaching out to God in the midst of his pain. Please don’t miss this or take it for granted. It’s really important—in fact, it may be one of the reasons why you’re reading this book.

It takes faith to pray a lament.

To pray in pain, even with its messy struggle and tough questions, is an act of faith where we open up our hearts to God. Prayerful lament is better than silence. However, I’ve found that many people are afraid of lament. They find it too honest, too open, or too risky. But there’s something far worse:

silent despair. Giving God the silent treatment, it is the ultimate manifestation of unbelief. Despair lives under the hopeless resignation that God doesn't care, he doesn't hear, and nothing is ever going to change. People who believe this stop praying. They give up.

However, lament directs our emotions by prayerfully vocalizing our hurt, our questions, and even our doubt. Turning to prayer through lament is one of the deepest and most costly demonstrations of belief in God.<sup>9</sup> James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000), who pastored the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for thirty-two years, helps us see the spiritual value of praying through our spiritual questions:

It is better to ask them than not to ask them, because asking them sharpens the issue and pushes us toward the right, positive response. Alexander Maclaren writes, “Doubts are better put into plain speech than lying diffused and darkening, like poisonous mists, in [the] heart. A thought, be it good or bad, can be dealt with when it is made articulate.”<sup>10</sup>

I wonder how many believers stop speaking to God about their pain. Disappointed by unanswered prayers or frustrated by out-of-control circumstances, these people wind up in a spiritual desert unable—or refusing—to talk to God.

This silence is a soul killer.

Maybe you are one of those who've given God the silent treatment. Maybe you just don't know what to say. Perhaps there's a particular issue or struggle that you just can't talk to God about. It feels too painful. I hope you'll be encouraged to start praying again. Or perhaps you have a friend who is really

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9. Card, *Sacred Sorrow*, 55.

10. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–106*, An Expository Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 640–41.



struggling in grief. Maybe this person prays some things that make you uncomfortable—even wince. But before you jump in too quickly and hush his or her prayer, remember that at least your friend is praying. It's a start.

Prayers of lament take faith.

### **Pray Your Struggles**

However, praying in the midst of pain isn't a guarantee the emotional struggle will immediately lift. The psalmist's description of his ongoing tension is clear:

My soul refuses to be comforted.  
When I remember God, I moan;  
when I meditate, my spirit faints. Selah

You hold my eyelids open;  
I am so troubled that I cannot speak. (Ps. 77:2–4)

He's praying, but it's not bringing immediate comfort or resolution. His prayers are not "working." Yet, he still prays.

You need to know that lament does not always lead to an immediate solution. It does not always bring a quick or timely answer. Grief is not tame. Lament is not a simplistic formula. Instead, lament is the song you sing believing that *one day* God will answer and restore. Lament invites us to pray through our struggle with a life that is far from perfect.

### **Pray Your Questions**

Painful circumstances surface big and troubling questions. The psalmist wrestles with why God isn't doing more. He begins to "consider the days of old," to "remember my song in the night," to "meditate in my heart," and to make "a diligent search" (77:5–6). He is thinking and reflecting.

This painful search leads to six pointed rhetorical questions:

1. “Will the Lord spurn forever?” (v. 7).
2. “Will [he] never again be favorable?” (v. 7).
3. “Has his steadfast love forever ceased?” (v. 8).
4. “Are his promises at an end for all time?” (v. 8).
5. “Has God forgotten to be gracious?” (v. 9).
6. “Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (v. 9).

Does the psalmist really believe God isn’t loving, doesn’t keep his promises, and is unfaithful? I don’t think so, and the rest of the psalm will bear this out. But he does something important here. Honestly praying this way recognizes that pain and suffering often create difficult emotions that are *not* based upon truth but *feel* true, nonetheless.

Honest, humble, pain-filled questions are part of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We’ll explore this more extensively in the next chapter when we learn about complaint. For now, I simply want you to see that lament is humbly turning to God through the pain. It takes faith to lay our painful questions before the Lord.

Anyone can cry, but it takes faith to turn to God in lament.

### ***Prayer Turns Us Around***

Lament is a prayer that leads us through personal sorrow and difficult questions into truth that anchors our soul. Psalm 77:11 includes an important and repeated word: “remember.”

Then I said, “I will appeal to this,  
to the years of the right hand of the Most High.”

I will remember the deeds of the LORD;  
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.

I will ponder all your work,  
and meditate on your mighty deed. (Ps. 77:10–12)

This is where the lament prayer makes its turn toward resolution.

In all we feel and all the questions we have, there comes a point where we must call to mind what we know to be true. The entire psalm shifts with the word “then” in verse 10 and the subsequent appeal to the history of God’s powerful deliverance.

Important phrases are connected to this remembrance: “I will appeal . . . / to the years of the right hand of the Most High” (v. 10), and “will remember the deeds of the LORD” (v. 11a). This reflection becomes personal, as if the psalmist is talking directly to God: “Yes, I will remember your wonders of old” (v. 11b), and

I will ponder all your work,  
and meditate on your mighty deeds. (v. 12)

He is looking back and reflecting on the works of God in the past.

Then the focus shifts again from the historical works of God to the very character of God.

Your way, O God, is holy.  
What god is great like our God? (v. 13)

Notice how different this rhetorical question is from the previous six questions! This is an important turning point. It makes lament full of grace as we turn from honest questions to confident trust.

The aim of this book is to help you understand this shift and to make it your own.

Earlier in this chapter I said that laments are possible only if you believe that God is truly good. You see, the character of God—his sovereignty, goodness, and love—creates a tension when we face painful circumstances.

Lament is how we learn to live between the poles of a hard life and God's goodness. It is an opportunity to remind our hearts about God's faithfulness in the past, especially when the immediate events of life are overwhelmingly negative. While we're still in pain, lament reminds our hearts of what we believe to be true.

Hurting people are given permission to grieve, but not aimlessly or selfishly. The biblical language of lament is able to redirect weeping people to what is true despite the valley they are walking through. I long for the experience of personal and corporate lament to be multiplied. How many Christians need to learn to lament? How many need to have their thinking redirected? I've come to love lament because of what it does in people's lives.

### ***Pray the Gospel***

Psalm 77 concludes with the ultimate moment that defined the people of Israel and their relationship with God: the exodus. The psalmist remembers this defining moment in Jewish history as God demonstrated his faithfulness and love:

When the waters saw you, O God,  
 when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
 indeed, the deep trembled. . . .  
 Your way was through the sea,  
 your path through the great waters;  
 yet your footprints were unseen.  
 You led your people like a flock  
 by the hand of Moses and Aaron. (vv. 16, 19–20)

Do you see what is happening here? The psalmist anchors his questioning, his hurting heart, to the single greatest redemptive event in the life of Israel. This moment defined his understanding of God's character. The exodus was an anchor for his weary soul.

For the Christian, the exodus event—the place where we find ultimate deliverance—is the cross of Christ. This is where all our questions—our heartaches and pain—should be taken. The cross shows us that God has already proven himself to be for us and not against us.

The apostle Paul even quotes a lament, Psalm 44, before proclaiming the promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God:

As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:36–39)

The promise for Christians is as glorious as it is deep:

Jesus bought the right to make everything right.

Even if we are “killed all day long” or are “like sheep going to the slaughter,” nothing—no sorrow, no disappointment, no disease, no betrayal, not even death—can separate us from God's love.

Lament prayers celebrate this truth with tears.

## Lament by Faith

Do you see now how uniquely Christian it is to lament? It takes faith to pray when you are in pain. Belief in God creates challenging questions, and lament provides the opportunity to reorient your hurting heart toward what is true. But in order for that to happen, you have to turn to prayer. The silent treatment must end. Frustration and discouragement might tempt you to stop talking to God.

Lament opens a door and shows you a path toward trust.

Heartfelt cries of lament are often brief or messy. They might feel a bit forced or uncomfortable. But keep talking to God. Don't allow your fear, your despair, or your track record of silence to cut off the flow of grace. Your pain can be a path toward God if you'll allow lament to be your new language.

If you don't have the words, read one of the psalms of lament out loud.<sup>11</sup> Linger over it. Let it open your heart. Let lament do its work in your life. Allow it to lead you to other aspects of this sacred song of sorrow. But whatever you do—don't stop talking to God. Keep wrestling. Keep struggling. Keep praying.

No one taught you how to cry. Tears are part of what it means to be human. But to lament is Christian. It is a prayer of faith for the journey between a hard life and God's goodness. We need to learn to lament. Through the tears, the first step is to turn to God in prayer.

## Reflection Questions

1. In your own words, what makes lament Christian? Why does it take faith to lament?
2. Describe a time when you found it difficult to pray because you were suffering. What were the circumstances or the reasons for your silence?

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11. See appendix 2 for a list of the various lament psalms.

3. What are some of the hard and painful questions that you've asked God over the years?
4. As you think back on God's faithfulness, where has he proven himself to be trustworthy?
5. What portions of Scripture do you use to anchor your soul to who God is?
6. How is lament connected to your theology?
7. How does the cross become the ultimate anchor and resolution for our suffering and pain?
8. Take a few minutes and talk to God about whatever is in your soul as you conclude this chapter. Tell him your pain, share your questions, affirm your trust, and ask him to keep you trusting.



EVERYDAY  
PRAYER

*with*

JOHN CALVIN



DONALD K. MCKIM



## ANXIETY LEADS US TO PRAY

### *Psalm 130*

**T**HE author of Psalm 130 expresses a deep desire to be redeemed by God. This profound longing deals with the deepest realities that we know in life: our need for God to hear our prayer, for our sin to be forgiven, and for hope to be established.

In the face of these yearnings, the psalmist does the only thing he can do—he prays. “Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications!” (vv. 1–2). God’s saints, said Calvin, experience “huge torments,” and so they call on God. As he went on to say, “Great anxiety should kindle in us the desire to pray.”

Prayer invokes God; it seeks God’s help regarding the deep things of life. When faced with the need for salvation, for sin to be pardoned, and for a confident expectation of experiencing God’s steadfast love and redemption (see vv. 7–8), the psalmist prays—and so do we.

We pray in the midst of life’s grimmest circumstances. When there is nowhere else to turn, when we need help in order to do what we cannot do for ourselves, we pray. When we wait and watch for the Lord (see vv. 5–6), we pray. Anxiety leads us to pray.

As was the case for the psalmist, when we pray, we find that our hope is kindled. This hope rests in who God is—the God of steadfast love—and in his “great power to redeem” (v. 7). Our anxieties are met by the God who redeems us and gives us hope in Jesus Christ!

**REFLECTION QUESTION:** Recall the times when you were most anxious. For what did you pray?

## IN ADVERSITY, PRAY!

*Psalm 143*

**A**DVERSITIES come to us. We experience them in many ways, often without knowing why they come upon us. But they do. And, no matter the nature of the adversities, we need to face them.

The best way for us to face adversity is to pray. When the psalmist was in a desperate situation before his enemies, he was confronting severe adversity. So he prayed, “Hear my prayer, O LORD; give ear to my supplications in your faithfulness; answer me in your righteousness. Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you” (Ps. 143:1–2). He knew that his only help lay in praying to God. He asked God to hear and help him, not to judge him. He prayed for forgiveness and pardon.

Calvin commented, “When overtaken by adversity, we are ever to conclude that it is a rod of correction sent by God to stir us up to pray. Although he is far from taking pleasure in our trials, it is certain that our sins are the cause of his dealing towards us with this severity. . . . We must pray for the pardon of our sins.”

Whether we think that our adversities arise from our specific actions or not, we are sinful people who need God’s forgiveness and pardon—especially when we face great challenges. We have to move through our adversities. But first we must make sure that our relationship with God is not marred by sin. And so we pray for pardon.

We are not exempt from adversities. But we need to face them in a state of being forgiven by God!

**PRAYER POINT:** Spend time in prayer, confessing your sins and asking God’s pardon.



**G**RANT, Almighty God, since thou settest before us so clear a mirror of thy wonderful providence and of thy judgments on thine ancient people, that we may also be surely persuaded of our being under thy hand and protection:— Grant, that relying on thee, we may hope for thy guardianship, whatever may happen, since thou never lovest sight of our safety, so that we may invoke thee with a secure and tranquil mind. May we so fearlessly wait for all dangers amidst all the changes of this world, that we may stand upon the foundation of thy word which never can fail; and leaning on thy promises may we repose on Christ, to whom thou hast committed us, and whom thou hast made the shepherd of all thy flock. Grant that he may be so careful of us as to lead us through this course of warfare, however troublesome and turbulent it may prove, until we arrive at that heavenly rest which he has purchased for us by his own blood.—Amen.





GOD'S GRACE

*in your*

SUFFERING

DAVID POWLISON

## INTRODUCTION

Job, his wife, and his three friends agreed on two things. Our lives are “few of days and full of trouble” (Job 14:1), and God’s hand is intimately mixed up in our troubles. But strife and perplexity set in among them when they tried to explain exactly how God and troubles connect.

They argued about the cause of Job’s troubles; no one understood the backstory of cosmic drama. They argued about what God was up to; no one understood that God had purposes for good beyond human comprehension and he was not punishing Job. They argued about the validity of Job’s professed faith and faithfulness; no one understood that Job was both the genuine article and a work in progress. And they argued about *who* needed to do *what* in response to affliction; no one understood that the Lord would show up, that he would be asking the questions, that his purposes would be fulfilled. The Lord himself described Job as “a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8). But who could have predicted the tumultuous journey that proved that fact?

Thousands of years later, we humankind are still short-lived

## Introduction

and still much afflicted. And our troubles still perplex us. Why is this happening to me? Where is God? What is he doing? What does faith look like? How does the Lord show up? Why is the journey so tumultuous?

And what difference does it make that in between Job's afflictions back then and your afflictions right now, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us? Job said:

I know that my Redeemer lives,  
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.  
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,  
yet in my flesh I shall see God,  
whom I shall see for myself,  
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.  
My heart faints within me! (Job 19:25–27)

Job's Redeemer came to him at last. The Lord answered out of the whirlwind, and Job said, "Now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5). But we see even more clearly. From where we stand, we see Jesus Christ. We see more of who the Redeemer is. We see more of how he did it. We say more than Job could say: "God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). We see. But our lives are still "few of days and full of trouble."

Here is the central concern of the book before you. When you face trouble, loss, disability, and pain, *how* does the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ meet you and comfort you? How does grace and goodness find you, touch you, work with you, and walk with you through deep waters? You probably

already know something of the “right answer.” Consider three sweeping truths.

First, it is obvious from both Scripture and experience that God *never* establishes a no-fly zone keeping all problems away. He never promises that your life will be safe, easy, peaceful, healthy, and prosperous. On the contrary, you and I are certain to experience danger, hardship, turmoil, ill health, and loss. And some of God’s beloved children live lives particularly fraught with physical pain, poverty, isolation, betrayal, and loss. For all of us, death is the inevitable and impending final affliction. We humankind are mariposa lilies in Death Valley after rain. We flourish for a moment. Then the wind passes over us, and we are gone, and no trace remains. That’s the description of God’s blessed and beloved children according to Psalm 103:15–16. And, of course, people who are estranged from God also live brief and troubled lives. We cannot read God’s favor or disfavor by assessing how troubled a person’s life is.

Second, it is obvious from Scripture and experience that we also sample joys and good gifts from God’s hand. The mariposa lily is beautiful in its season. Most people taste something of what is good—familial care perhaps, and daily bread, occasional feasting, a measure of good health, friends and companions, moments of beauty, opportunity to become good at something, committed love, children’s laughter, a job well done, the innocent pleasure of resting after working, and perhaps a restful sleep. There are no guarantees of any particular earthly good, but all good gifts may be gratefully enjoyed.

Some people seem unusually blessed with temporal joys. Job enjoyed unusually good gifts at both the beginning and the end

## *Introduction*

of his life—Satan had accused the Lord of giving Job a cushy life as a bribe for faith. And arrogant people, at odds with God and self-reliant, may also enjoy an easy life of good health, growing wealth, and the admiration of others. That’s how Psalm 73:3–12 describes people who flourish though they deem the Lord irrelevant. We cannot read God’s favor or disfavor by assessing how easy and trouble-free a person’s life is.

Third, it’s obvious from Scripture—and it can become deeply rooted in experience—that God speaks and acts through affliction. As C. S. Lewis says, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this book is to anchor your experience more deeply in God’s goodness. Suffering reveals the genuineness of faith in Christ. And suffering produces genuine faith. For example, when you struggle under affliction, the Psalms become real. True faith deepens, brightens, and grows wise. You grow up in knowing God. When you are the genuine article, you are also and always a work in progress.

Suffering is both the acid test and the catalyst. It reveals and forms faith. It also exposes and destroys counterfeit faith. Afflictions expose illusory hopes invested in imaginary gods. Such disillusionment is a good thing, a severe mercy. The destruction of what is false invites repentance and faith in God as he truly is. Suffering brings a foretaste of the loss of every good thing for those who profess no faith in the one Savior of the world, God’s inexpressible gift, the Lifegiver. Affliction presses on unbelief. It presses unbelief toward bitterness, or despair, or addiction, or ever more desperate illusions, or ever more deadly



self-satisfaction—or to a reconsideration of what lasts. To lose what you are living for, when those treasures are vanities, invites comprehensive repentance. We can read God’s favor or disfavor by noticing how a person responds to affliction.

God’s hand is intimately mixed up in our troubles. Each day will bring you “its own trouble” (Matt. 6:34). Some difficulties are light and momentary—in your face today and forgotten tomorrow. Other hardships last for a season. Some troubles recur and abate cyclically. Other afflictions become chronic. Some woes steadily worsen, progressively bringing pain and disability into your life. And other sufferings arrive with inescapable finality—the death of a dream, the death of a loved one, your own dying and death. But whatever you must face changes in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the promise that you, too, will live. Faith can grow up. You can learn to say with all your heart, in company with a great cloud of witnesses: “We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:16–17). We can learn to say it and mean it, because it is true.

If you are someone who has taken the book of Psalms to heart, if you’ve pondered the second half of Romans 8, if you’ve worked your way through Job, if you’ve let 1 Peter sink in, then you’ve already got the gist of how God’s grace works in hardships. But there are always new challenges. The wisdom to suffer well is like manna—you must receive nourishment every day. You can’t store it up, though you do become more familiar with how to go out and find what you need for today.

How will God actually engage *your* sufferings with his grace? You may know the right answer in theory. You may have known it firsthand in some difficult situations. And yet you'll find that you don't know God well enough or in the exact ways you need to for the next thing that comes your way.

We take God's hard answer and make it sound like a pat answer. He sets about a long slow *answering*, but we're after a quick fix. His answer insists on being lived out over time and into the particulars. We act as if just saying the right words makes it so. God's answer involves changing you into a different kind of person. But we act as if some truth, principle, strategy, or perspective might simply be incorporated into who we already are. God personalizes his answer on hearts with an uncanny flexibility. But we turn it into a formula: "If you just believe x. If you just do y. If you just remember z." No important truth ever contains the word "just" in the punch line.

We can make the right answer sound old hat, but I guarantee this: God will surprise you. He will make you stop. You will struggle. He will bring you up short. You will hurt. He will take his time. You will grow in faith and in love. He will deeply delight you. You will find the process harder than you ever imagined—and better. Goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. At the end of the long road you will come home at last. No matter how many times you've heard it, no matter how long you've known it, no matter how well you can say it, God's answer will come to mean something better than you could ever imagine.

He answers with himself.<sup>2</sup>

IN THE  
PRESENCE  
OF MY  
ENEMIES

Psalms 25-37

Dale Ralph Davis



# Psalm 29

A Psalm of David

- (1) Give to Yahweh, O sons of God,  
give to Yahweh, glory and strength.
- (2) Give to Yahweh the glory his name deserves,  
give homage to Yahweh in the splendor of (his) holiness.
- (3) Yahweh's voice over the waters!  
The God of glory thunders;  
Yahweh over many waters!
- (4) Yahweh's voice in power!  
Yahweh's voice in majesty!
- (5) Yahweh's voice breaks cedars;  
yes, Yahweh has shattered the cedars of Lebanon.
- (6) And he has made them skip around like a calf,  
Lebanon and Sirion like the young of a wild ox.
- (7) Yahweh's voice is hewing up flames of fire!
- (8) Yahweh's voice makes the wilderness writhe,  
Yahweh makes the wilderness of Kadesh writhe!

- (9) Yahweh's voice makes deer go into birth pangs,  
and he stripped the forests bare  
– and all in his temple say, 'Glory!'
- (10) **Yahweh** sat (enthroned) at the flood,  
and Yahweh has seated (himself) as king forever.
- (11) **Yahweh** will give strength to his people;  
**Yahweh** will bless his people with peace.

# 6

## God of the Storm

Some friends were on holiday in Scotland. They were rummaging in second-hand bookshops and brought me back a copy of *The Covenanters in Moray and Ross* by the Rev. M. MacDonald. In that volume MacDonald passes on the story of how that scoundrel Charles II arrived in Scotland in 1650. The ship that came to the mouth of the Spey had to drop anchor away out, and a boat was used to carry passengers to shore. But there was no pier and the transfer boat could not get near enough to allow the king to disembark dry-shod. What to do? Thomas Milne, the short but robust ferryman that day, offered his back to his Majesty and told him to 'loup on'. And so the king was lugged, Milne-like, to terra firma. I would guess Charles was hoping for something with more flourish for the royal advent than a piggy-back ride to shore. Doubtless disappointing.

That is likely the way many look upon Psalm 29. Not what we were hoping for; truth be told, a bit disappointing. And why so? Oh, maybe we were hoping for more of a pain-reliever, or reading of some distressing experience of the psalmist that we could enter into. But here in Psalm 29 there seems nothing but God – and God wreaking havoc and scaring His world to death. The psalm is not about us but God – and that, sadly, tends to cool our interest. It's something like being a king and yet riding Thomas Milne to shore.

Yet Yahweh does, we might say, insist on imposing Himself on us in Psalm 29. There are eighteen uses of 'Yahweh' in these eleven verses. 'Yahweh's voice' occurs seven times. The psalm moves from the worship of Yahweh (vv. 1-2) to the revelation of Yahweh (vv. 3-9) and ends with the people of Yahweh (vv. 10-11). Or we might say it goes from exhortation to revelation and on to consolation.

We could summarize verses 1-2 as **giving orders for Yahweh's worship in heaven**. Notice several matters in the text. David calls the 'sons of God' to worship (v. 1). The phrase refers to angels or heavenly beings. The very same Hebrew phrase occurs in Psalm 89:6, of heavenly beings who can in no way compare to Yahweh. In the adjacent verses these 'sons of God' or 'heavenly beings' (ESV) form the 'assembly of the holy ones' or the 'council of the holy ones' – those who, as it were, are surrounding God's throne (Ps. 89:5, 7). Here in Psalm 29 these 'sons of God' are told in a three-fold ascending crescendo to 'Give to Yahweh!' They are to give to Him 'glory and strength' and 'the glory his name deserves'. What does that mean? It does not mean, obviously, that they can add anything to

Yahweh's majesty. It means at least to declare that glory and strength are Yahweh's and to acknowledge that they rightly belong to Him. Kidner observes that to 'give' glory and strength 'enlists the mind' (focus on the content of worship) while 'give homage' (or, 'bow down') 'enlists the will' (the matter of submission).<sup>1</sup> Which indicates that worship should be both thoughtful and submissive.

But now a realization should come creeping over us: if we are ordering angels to worship Yahweh with gusto, then we are not the only worshipers. This is the testimony of Psalm 103:20-21 as well:

Bless Yahweh, (you) his angels,  
(you) mighty ones who do his word....  
Bless Yahweh, all his hosts,  
his servants who do his will.

David is speaking to the angels and celestial beings, calling them to 'bless Yahweh,' which he himself is ready to do: 'Bless Yahweh, O my soul' (v. 22). When we order angels to worship God, we can be pretty sure, I think, that they will do it.

Talking to angels may not appeal to you, but there are some of us who do so regularly. Some of us sing the 'Doxology' nearly every week in public worship. It begins:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
praise him all creatures here below...

We do not yet see this. We call on all creatures world-wide to praise our God, but this is not occurring at the

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1 Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (London: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 125.



moment. This will be a ‘last thing’ affair (cf. Phil. 2:10-11) – it will be but it is ‘not yet’. But then the Doxology moves on:

praise him above, ye heavenly hosts....

There it is – we are caught talking to angels right in church! That, I’m pretty sure, takes place right away, as soon as we ask them to add their deafening adoration to our often meagre efforts. Then the searchlight comes round to us: if we are ordering angels to praise, are we ourselves gripped with the urgency, necessity, and delightfulness of Yahweh’s praise?

One of the arenas in which we can see Yahweh’s ‘glory’, the evidence of His goodness, is in the storm. So in verses 3-9 David moves on to say we should be **taking in Yahweh’s display on earth**. Here the psalm relates the video and audio of a massive thunderstorm (v. 3) apparently moving off the Mediterranean, working its way eastward and to the north of Israel. The storm breaks cedars: ‘Yahweh shattered the cedars of Lebanon.’ That’s quite impressive, considering those cedars grew to a height of 70-80 feet and that their trunks could sometimes be 30-40 feet in circumference.<sup>2</sup> Even mountains are fragile before Yahweh’s storm. When Lebanon and Sirion [=Hermon] are skipping around ‘like the young of a wild ox’, is it because of the fury of the storm or has an

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2 J. I. Packer, M. C. Tenney, and William White, eds., *The Bible Almanac* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 255-56.

earthquake been thrown into the mix?<sup>3</sup> Then come the slashes and bolts of lightning, the ‘flames of fire’ (v. 7) that Yahweh hews out. The storm moves on and convulses wilderness areas (v. 8),<sup>4</sup> thunderous outbursts scaring the female deer into labor and leaving forests in tatters (v. 9). A conservationist’s worst nightmare.

This is quite a collage. It’s as if David says, Look at what mighty items His voice destroys (v. 5), what massive items He moves (v. 6), what isolated areas He shakes (v. 8), and what a range of creation He affects from the timid doe (v. 9a) to whole forests (v. 9b). And all those ‘sons of God’ in the heavenly temple explode with ‘Glory!’ (v. 9c).

We should pause to say that sometimes you may hear the claim that Psalm 29 is really an old Canaanite hymn praising Baal, the storm god, the god of the lightning bolt, and so on, and that biblical writers may have taken it over or adapted it to praise Yahweh. I doubt it. Biblical writers had sufficient theological sophistication that they had no need for Canaanite ghost-writers to express their theology for them. But I don’t doubt that Psalm 29 may have Baal theology in view. Not to endorse or imitate but to oppose. Psalm 29 may partly function as ‘put-down’ theology, as if to say to the pagan media: ‘Nuts! Baal is no storm god. Yahweh is God of the storm. Here’s a clip

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3 As Allen Ross suggests (*A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 1 (1-41)*), Kregel Exegetical Library [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011], 659).

4 There is debate about the Kadesh of v. 8b. Some suppose it may refer to Kadesh-barnea of the southern border of Israel, but it could well be the Kadesh about 75 miles north of Damascus on the Orontes River – and so still in the north.

of Him at work. And He brings his storm right across Phoenicia, supposedly Baal's backyard!

Some people probably wince at the idea of biblical faith using put-downs – it seems rather nasty. But put-downs (well, we can clean them up and call them polemics) are sometimes necessary and very effective. In 1910 President Taft appointed former President Theodore Roosevelt to represent the United States at the funeral of Edward VII. After the funeral the German Kaiser told TR to call on him 'at two o'clock; I have just 45 minutes to give you.' Roosevelt shot back, 'I will be there at two, your Majesty, but, unfortunately, I have but 20 minutes to give you.'<sup>5</sup> That was a put-down and probably an effective one in the face of Teutonic arrogance. So don't lose sleep over the way the Bible may slam Baal worship.

But why does David paint this scenario of 'Yahweh's voice'? Because he wants me to be impressed with Yahweh's glory and majesty. And where might you and I see that 'glory'? We are predisposed to look for it in the full-color placid Vermont farmstead covered in ten inches of pristine snow that appears on the cover of our January devotional booklet. But Psalm 29 implies you might do better watching a Weather Channel re-run of the Six Worst Storms of the Decade. We *say* we agree with this in our hymns but perhaps without much conviction. We have all too little memory of singing:

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5 Paul F. Boller, Jr., *Presidential Anecdotes* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 210.

His chariots of wrath the deep thunderclouds form,  
and dark is his path on the wings of the storm.<sup>6</sup>

Or:

... and clouds arise and tempests blow  
by order from your throne.<sup>7</sup>

Maybe sometimes we're not looking in the right places. When we see Yahweh's storm pounding and pummeling His world, perhaps our first response should be 'Glory!'

Finally, at the end of the psalm, David wants us to be **resting in Yahweh's adequacy for His people** (vv. 10-11). In these two verses David gives us a double revelation of Yahweh, as both reigning King (v. 10) and sustaining God (v. 11).

In verse 10 we meet something of the dual nature of Yahweh's kingship. The first line mentions the flood, *mabbûl*, the word always used of what we call Noah's flood (Gen. 6–8). Since the reference is to a previous historical event, I think the 'perfect' Hebrew verb should be translated as a past tense. Hence: 'Yahweh sat (enthroned) at the flood.' The next line uses the same verb but a different form to point to Yahweh's continuing kingship: 'And Yahweh has seated (himself) as king forever.' So there's a double claim: there is a premier moment of Yahweh's kingship – at the flood, and there is the ongoing exercise of His kingship – forever. (The

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6 'O Worship the King,' stanza 2.

7 'I Sing the Mighty Power of God,' stanza 3.

earlier episode was not a flash in the pan – His sovereignty continues.)

Why does this matter? Well, we might have a little more put-down theology operating here. In pagan materials like *The Gilgamesh Epic* the gods go berserk over the flood. They ‘were terror-stricken at the deluge’, ‘cowered like dogs and crouched in distress,’ and ‘Ishtar cried out like a woman in travail’.<sup>8</sup> The gods brought the flood and then were terrified and scared spitless at what they had let loose. But in the Bible we don’t have a bunch of divine nervous breakdowns: ‘Yahweh [emphatic] sat enthroned at the flood.’ He was there. He was in control. He sat as King at the flood, at that supreme chaotic event in the past (v. 10a) and He remains as King forever (v. 10b) – on through whatever His people may face in post-flood time. And that includes times as depicted in verses 3-9 when all seems like chaos in excelsis. Even in that Yahweh reigns.

Now David adds that additional touch: Yahweh is not only reigning King (v. 10) but sustaining God (v. 11):

Yahweh will give strength to his people;  
Yahweh will bless his people with peace.<sup>9</sup>

We are right back, then, to Psalm 28 (see 28:8)! And, after all the fireworks of verses 3-9, it is fascinating that the last word of the psalm is ‘peace’. But we mustn’t miss the double emphasis: reigning King, sustaining God. For

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8 See Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: Phoenix, 1963), 85, 249.

9 ESV translates verse 11 as a wish or prayer. I think that is wrong. The subject in both lines (‘Yahweh’) is emphatic, which seems to go better with a statement than a wish.

though Yahweh is King (v. 10), it's as if He gets down off His throne to put fresh heart into His people.

David McCullough tells about Harry Truman running in a primary election for an eventual US Senate seat. It was 1934 and Missouri was in dire need of rain. On a blistering summer day, near Mexico, Missouri, Truman saw a farmer in a field having trouble with his binder. He stops the car, climbs over the fence, gives a brief introduction, takes off his coat and, as the local paper told it, proceeds 'to set up the binder under a hot sun for his new found friend'.<sup>10</sup> Of course Truman got some political capital out of that but still the deed showed a man who was willing to come into the everyday dilemmas of his fellow citizens. That seems to be the assurance of verse 11 in the context of this psalm. The God whose voice shatters cedars also 'climbs over the fence' to sustain and stabilize His people.

One can hardly study Psalm 29 without conjuring up the episode in Mark 4:35-41. Jesus, asleep in the boat, the storm that even terrified the fishermen among the disciples.... Fully awakened, Jesus rebukes the wind and stifles the sea. Here in the psalm Yahweh brings the storm, in Mark 4 Yahweh calms the storm (cf. v. 41, 'Who then is this?'). Either way He is Lord of the storm. And, anyway, we know that as long as Jesus is in the boat nothing too bad can happen!

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10 David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 209-10.

LIVING LIFE  
BACKWARD

HOW ECCLESIASTES TEACHES US TO LIVE

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IN LIGHT OF THE END ◀ DAVID GIBSON

## LET'S PRETEND

Preach the gospel. Die. Be forgotten.

NIKOLAUS LUDWIG VON ZINZENDORF

The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.

<sup>3</sup> What does man gain by all the toil  
at which he toils under the sun?

<sup>4</sup> A generation goes, and a generation comes,  
but the earth remains forever.

<sup>5</sup> The sun rises, and the sun goes down,  
and hastens to the place where it rises.

<sup>6</sup> The wind blows to the south  
and goes around to the north;  
around and around goes the wind,  
and on its circuits the wind returns.

<sup>7</sup> All streams run to the sea,  
but the sea is not full;  
to the place where the streams flow,



there they flow again.

<sup>8</sup> All things are full of weariness;  
a man cannot utter it;  
the eye is not satisfied with seeing,  
nor the ear filled with hearing.

<sup>9</sup> What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done,  
and there is nothing new under the sun.

<sup>10</sup> Is there a thing of which it is said,  
“See, this is new”?

It has been already  
in the ages before us.

<sup>11</sup> There is no remembrance of former things,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of later things yet to be  
among those who come after. —Ecclesiastes 1:1–11

## **The Explosive Gift**

The development of imagination is one of the most intriguing things that happens as little toddlers begin to explore their world. Suddenly, in just a matter of weeks, the sitting room or garden in which the toddler plays becomes a zoo, a garage, a farm, a hospital, a palace, a tea party, a battlefield, a sports stadium. A world of “let’s pretend” opens up to inspire and to cultivate real understanding of the world. The toddler is ushered into new relationships and creative language by pretending to be someone he is not. If you manage to eavesdrop, you will hear all sorts of conversations as the toddler scolds and pleads and says “sorry” and “thank you” to a host of imaginary friends.

But learning the difference between the pretend world and the real world can often be a confusing process. In the real shop you can’t just buy whatever you want. In the real hospital people are actually in pain, and the doctors can’t always make everyone better. In the real world making amends is sometimes the hardest thing possible. Real tears take longer to dry.

The book of Ecclesiastes is one of God's gifts to help us live in the real world. It's a book in the Bible that gets under the radar of our thinking and acts like an incendiary device to explode our make-believe games and jolt us into realizing that everything is not as clean and tidy as the "let's-pretend" world suggests.

Ecclesiastes is the words of "the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem,"<sup>1</sup> and he begins with shock tactics. The very first thing he wants to tell us is that "all is vanity," "vanity of vanities." If you want readers to wake up and stop pretending about what life is like, that's a pretty good way to get their attention.

### The Meaning of "Vanity"

Of course, to commence in such a direct and stark way poses its own problem. What does it mean to say everything is "vanity"?

I want to propose that many well-intended Bible translations have actually led us astray by translating the Hebrew word *hebel* as "meaningless" in this context. We tend to read this word as if it's spoken by an undergraduate philosophy student who comes home after his first year of studies and confidently announces that the universe as we know it is pointless and life has no meaning. But that is not the Preacher's perspective. He will later make statements such as "Better is a handful of quietness than two hands full of toil" (4:6). If one course of action is *better* than another, then clearly not everything is "meaningless."

In fact, the Hebrew word *hebel* is also accurately translated as "breath" or "breeze." The Preacher is saying that everything is a mist, a vapor, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke. It's a common biblical idea:

Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths,  
and my lifetime is as nothing before you.  
Surely all mankind stands as a mere breath [*hebel*]!  
Surely a man goes about as a shadow!  
Surely for nothing [*hebel*] they are in turmoil;

man heaps up wealth and does not know who will  
gather!

When you discipline a man  
with rebukes for sin,  
you consume like a moth what is dear to him;  
surely all mankind is a mere breath [*hebel*].  
(Ps. 39:5–6, 11)

O LORD, what is man that you regard him,  
or the son of man that you think of him?  
Man is like a breath [*hebel*];  
his days are like a passing shadow. (Ps. 144:3–4)

The Preacher’s portrayal of life is this: “The merest of breaths . . . the merest of breaths. Everything is a breath.” He will take the rest of his book to unpack exactly what he means, but here are some ways to think about it.

### **Life Is Short**

You know what happens when you blow out a candle. How long does the puff of smoke last? You can smell it and see it. It’s very real. But it is also transient, temporary, and vanishes quickly. It comes and goes without a permanent impact or a lasting impression on the world.

You have found yourself saying exactly what you used to hear older people saying all the time: “Time flies the older you get.” Your grandparents say it’s as if they blinked, and now here they are in an old person’s body. We are born, we live, we die, and it all happens so quickly. Nothing seems to last. “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting [*hebel*]” (Prov. 31:30 NIV). Joan Collins said that the problem with beauty is that it’s like being born rich and then becoming poor.

The book of Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means for our lives to be like a whisper spoken in the wind: here one minute and carried away forever the next.

## **Life Is Elusive**

But the smoke in front of your eyes is not just transient; it is also elusive. Try to grab the smoke, put a bit in your pocket, and keep it for later. You can't get your hands on it. It is a real, physical thing, and yet it dodges your fingers as soon as they get near it; your very attempt to get hold of it blows air at the smoke and speeds its disappearance.

Ecclesiastes is a meditation on how life seems to elude our grasp in terms of lasting significance. If we try to gain control of the world and our lives by what we can understand and by what we can do, we find that the control we seek eludes us.

Consider knowledge and understanding. In some measure we can understand how the world works, but why does it always rain on the days when you don't bring your umbrella? Why is the line you don't join in the supermarket always quicker than the one you do? Why do you feel low, even when you can't really put your finger on a specific cause? Why do people you know and love die young or suffer long-term ill health while the dictator lives in prosperity into his old age?

Or consider what we do with our lives. We can pour our whole life into something, and it might succeed, or it might fail. You might land the big job in the city, and the bank might go bust the next month—you never know. How much control do you really have over whether your job is secure, or how healthy you will be, or what will happen to interest rates and house prices, over whom you will meet and what you will be doing in ten years' time?

Not long ago I was building sand castles on the beach with my daughter. With some success we built a large castle, dug a moat around it, and surrounded it with smaller castles and turrets decorated with shells. She was proud of her work, and we enjoyed being absorbed in our task. But eventually—and to her great surprise—we had to retreat as the tide encroached and the waves engulfed our handiwork. The foaming water returned our project to a knobbly patch of ordinary beach. How long do sand

castles last? And how much control do we have over the castle we have constructed? We build for a short time only, and always subject to forces beyond our control. That is what our lives are like. Instead of sand and sea, the Bible uses grass and wind to make exactly this point:

As for man, his days are like grass;  
he flourishes like a flower of the field;  
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,  
and its place knows it no more. (Ps. 103:15–16)

These pictures hit home. When we consider the brevity of our lives set against the millennia of the earth, we know that what the Preacher says is true. Except, of course, in everyday life we pretend it isn't. We imagine we will live forever, or at the very least that someone else will get cancer, not us. We think our lives are built with granite, not sand. We pretend we're in control. We imagine that we can make a difference in the world and accomplish things of lasting significance. After all, that's why we go to work each day. It's also why we have a midlife crisis when we look back and see that who we are and what we've done doesn't seem to amount to very much.

And so Ecclesiastes sets out to demolish our pretense by confronting us with reality. The Preacher begins the process with a question:

What does man gain by all the toil  
at which he toils under the sun? (Eccles. 1:3)

This question is the key to the opening section of the book. Everything else that follows in verses 4–11 is intended as the answer. The responses to questions are often implicit and indirect in Ecclesiastes because it is part of the Bible's Wisdom Literature. This kind of writing mixes bald, direct statements (v. 2) with indirect analogies and pictorial representations (vv. 4–8), since the aim of

the writing is to reflect on the complex reality of the world as we find it.

Wisdom Literature asks, what does it mean to fear the Lord in the world the Lord has made? Along with Job, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means to be alive in a world that God made and called good, yet which has also gone so very wrong, often in catastrophic ways. The Preacher experiments with everything around him and similarly wants us to reflect on our experience of the world. Look at your life and what's happening to you. What does that tell you about life in general? How should we make sense of it? Can we ever make sense of it? Wisdom Literature uses proverbs and pithy sayings, riddles and provocation, question and answer, prose and poetry, to force us to look at things from a different angle. Its aim is to “wound from behind.”<sup>2</sup> Like a punch in the back, it makes painful points we didn't see coming and which leave us blinking in surprise.

That's exactly what is happening here. The implied answer to the question of verse 3 is “nothing.” From a life full of labor and toil under the sun, people gain absolutely nothing. The word *gain* conveys the idea of something left over, remaining at the end. It refers to “the human desire to show a profit, to be in the black, whether financially or otherwise.”<sup>3</sup>

This is what's at stake in the question of verse 3: at the end of my life, what will the surplus be? What will I leave behind that will count as a lasting monument to all my effort?

The Preacher provides the answer by painting an incredibly stark picture. He sketches humankind's place on the canvas of the entire universe to show, in graphic terms, just how and why there is nothing to be gained. I leave only one thing behind, and that's the earth I used to live on, remaining right where it was when I first arrived, only now it spins without me. My life will come and go. If I leave children in the world to carry on my legacy, they themselves are simply part of the generations who will come and

go, and all they will leave behind is the universe carrying on as before. We haven't altered the cosmic merry-go-round. Nothing we do changes the fact that we labor and toil and then die, and the earth just stays there.

Everything is a breath, our lives the merest of breaths.

### **Life Is Repetitive**

The Preacher pictures the momentary and elusive nature of human life with a beautiful rhythmic pattern to his poetry. Read Ecclesiastes 1:4–10 aloud and feel the lyrical tilt with its tidal ebb and flow. That's the point. Everything either goes around and around, or comes and goes; it rises and sets; what has been will be again; what has been done will be done again; what is present will soon be past.

In verses 5–8 the Preacher focuses on a threefold pattern in the world that is matched by a threefold pattern in human experience. The activities of sun, wind, and water follow the same course as the activities of speaking, seeing, and hearing. The point is that the world itself doesn't seem to go or get anywhere, for everything is cyclical rather than linear, so why should humans get anywhere?

The sun chases its tail. The wind goes to the south and comes back around again to the north. Streams flow into the sea, and the water evaporates, and then streams flow into the sea again and it is never full. So is the world, and so it will always be. So is humankind, and so we will always be. People are like the insatiable sea. Just as water pours into the ocean again and again without ever filling it, so the things of the world pour into human beings via their eyes and ears and back out through their mouths, and yet they never reach a point of complete satisfaction:

The massive reality of creation thus critiques the aspirations of all those tiny mortal beings who stand within creation as transient creatures. There is no reason to assume that individuals should “gain” from their toil when creation as a whole does not.<sup>4</sup>

The experience of observing constant motion without lasting achievement is so wearisome that no amount of speech can catalogue it. The eye “never reaches the point that it cannot take in more, nor does the ear become so filled with sound that it cannot accept any more impulses from the outside world.”<sup>5</sup> Humans never finally think, “This is it. I’m full. I have seen it all, said it all, and heard it all. I have given out and taken in all that I can.”

This language could, of course, be extremely positive. Taken on their own, these words about the limitless capacities of the human body might point to endless potential, healthy curiosity, and childlike wonder at the world in which we live. There is always so much to see and hear. But they are followed by perhaps the most famous words in the book of Ecclesiastes:

What has been is what will be,  
and what has been done is what will be done,  
and there is nothing new under the sun. (1:9)

The Preacher’s perspective is this: humans long to come across something in their lives that will break the constant repetitive cycle, something to say or see or hear that will be truly new and therefore significant—but there is nothing. No such thing exists. Whatever we see and hear has already been and gone, covered by the sands of time and simply rolling around again, perhaps in a different guise but fundamentally the same as before.

In *Hamlet’s BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*, William Powers argues that our constant connection to digital media and screen-based forms of communication is suffocating our ability to be people of substantial depth. Perhaps if anything in the world is new, then surely it’s our technology, with rapidly evolving ways of sending messages and forming virtual communities, such that we seem to be presented with new challenges for what technology means for us as persons. Not so, according to Powers: “Though we barely realize it, every day we use connective tools that were invented thousands of



years ago.” He consults seven thinkers throughout world history who each “understood the essential human urge to connect and were unusually thoughtful about the ‘screen equivalents’ of their respective epochs.”<sup>6</sup> Human beings have wrestled throughout the ages with constantly changing forms of communication. There is already a rich seam of reflection on what human beings need to preserve about themselves as they interact with others. What seems new is in fact old. Hamlet used the BlackBerry of his day.<sup>7</sup>

The point Powers makes about the digital age applies to everything under the sun. A new government is still a government, and we’re all familiar with those. A revolution heralds a new era, and we’ve seen it all before. A new baby is still a baby, and the world has always been full of them. Even landing on the moon is still a form of adventure and exploration that has been with us since humans have walked the earth. Indeed, space travel is a good example of precisely the Preacher’s point. He doesn’t mean no “new” things are ever invented in the world, for clearly that is not true. He means there is nothing new we can ever discover to break the cycle and so satisfy us. When we conquer our solar system, humanity will then try to conquer the galaxy beyond it. We never have our fill, and that basic human impulse that led us to space in the first place “has been already in the ages before us” (v. 10). There is nothing new about humanity in the unfolding of all our progress.

Remember the Preacher’s aim. He is showing that at the end of the day, human beings gain nothing from all their toil under the sun. There’s no surplus because they are never full enough to have something left over. There’s no gain because the universe itself is cyclical and everything that is comes and goes. There’s no profit because whatever is has already been. If there’s “nothing new under the sun,” what’s the point in toiling to make or find or leave something new? It simply can’t be done.

You gain nothing from grinding your fingers to the bone, because the world will go on impervious to what you’ve done, and

it will not remember you anyway. It will not even remember the children we are yet to have (v. 11). How's that for perspective when your daughter graduates from college and your son clinches that multi-million-dollar deal?

No one will remember them.

### **Prepare to Die**

The Preacher has answered his own question by pointing to the cyclical comings and goings of the world. His answer is that people do not gain from their labor and toil because ultimately they are going to die and be forgotten. Life stretches ahead of the young employee with dreams of a fulfilling career and a happy family; but it will all come and go. She is going to die and will not be remembered.

Many interpreters of Ecclesiastes suggest the Preacher is simply presenting something that is true only if life is lived without God. They understand the phrase “under the sun” to signify the secularist’s perspective. If we consider life without God in the frame and look at the world as we see it, that is, under the sun, then there is no alternative but to say that everything is a mere breath. The Preacher, however, wants us to know that “under the sun” is not all there is. And so we may well want to ask: surely the Christian way of looking at life is different? If I’m a follower of the Lord Jesus, doesn’t that change everything?

Well, it is true that knowing Christ does provide a whole new angle—the true angle—on what it means to be alive. We will see how Ecclesiastes points us to this. It’s certainly true that for the Preacher the world under the sun is not all there is, and he has things to say that will radically alter our perspective on this life.

But in the poetry that opens his book the Preacher is not commenting on what life is like without Christ. He is not saying this repetitive roundabout is what life is like from a secularist perspective. This is not what the world feels like from the viewpoint of existential nihilism, or postmodern navel gazing. It’s just what the

world is like. It's reality. It's the same for everyone, Christian or non-Christian, adherent or atheist: we each live under the sun.

In fact, it's probably better to see that phrase as a temporal marker more than a spatial marker: "In Scripture, the sun is a marker of time (Gen. 1:14) and the phrase 'under the sun' . . . refers to a *now* rather than a *there*."<sup>8</sup> It's a way of saying that for as long as the earth lasts, in this period of time, this is how things are. This side of eternity, life is a breath. We do the same things over and over again in a world repeating itself over and over again, and then we die, only to be followed by our children who will do the same things in the same way and then meet the same end.

Being a Christian doesn't stop this being true. Rather, it should make us the first to stop pretending that it isn't true. That is the Preacher's aim. It may not make perfect sense to us yet, but he is carefully laying the foundations for the main argument of his book: only preparing to die will teach us how to live. And part of establishing that argument is the very simple point of 1:1–11. In these days, under the sun, it is unavoidably true that we live in a world where we will soon be dead.

## **Learn to Live**

The Preacher wants us to let the reality of our death sink into our bones and lodge itself deep in our hearts. But that's because he's writing a book about what it means to live. He wants the consequences of our fast-approaching disappearance from the earth to work their way out into all the realities of the way we see the world and the way we view ourselves within that world. The single question that animates him is this: If we won't live forever, or even long enough to make a lasting difference to the world, how then should we live?

It takes the whole of Ecclesiastes to answer that question, and I want to unpack it in the successive chapters of this book. The argument is cumulative, and we need to allow the Preacher to make his case bit by bit, like an artist painting on a canvas.

At the outset, 1:1–11 sketches a very basic point: accepting death is the first step in learning to live. Wise people simply accept that they are going to die. As Douglas Wilson puts it, “A wise believer is a man who knows the length of his tether.”<sup>9</sup> This point may seem so obvious as to be simplistic. But, in fact, it’s highly significant when we stop and think about how much energy we devote to not accepting it.

The reality is, we spend our lives trying to escape the constraints of our created condition. Opening our eyes to this is a significant breakthrough. To be human is to be a creature, and to be a creature is to be finite. We are not God. We are not in control, and we will not live forever. We will die. But we avoid this reality by playing “let’s pretend.”

Let’s pretend that if we get the promotion, or see our church grow, or bring up good children, we’ll feel significant and leave a lasting legacy behind us. Let’s pretend that if we change jobs, or emigrate to the sun, we won’t experience the humdrum tedium and ordinariness of life. Let’s pretend that if we move to a new house, we’ll be happier and will never want to move again. Let’s pretend that if we end one relationship and start a new one, we won’t ever feel trapped. Let’s pretend that if we were married, or weren’t married, we would be content. Let’s pretend that if we had more money, we would be satisfied. Let’s pretend that if we get through this week’s pile of washing and dirty diapers and shopping lists and school runs and busy evenings, next week will be quieter. Let’s pretend that time is always on our side to do the things we want to do and become the people we want to be. Let’s pretend we can break the cycle of repetition and finally arrive in a world free from weariness.

We long for change in a world of permanent repetition, and we dream of how to interrupt it. We long for lives of permanence in a world of constant change, and we strive to achieve it. We spend our lives aligning our better selves with a different future that we envisage as more rewarding. And in it all we are simply trying to

make permanent what is not meant to be permanent (us), and by constant change we are trying to control what is not meant to be controlled (the world). The seasons and natural cycles of the world are content to come and go, but we sweat and toil to make believe that it will not be so with us.

Ecclesiastes urges us to put this behind us once and for all and adopt a better way of thinking. Stop playing “let’s pretend” and instead let history and the created world be our teachers. Think about the generations who lived before us. Look at the tides and the seasons and the patterns that God has stitched into the very fabric of creation. Things repeat themselves over and over and over again, and so it is time to learn that life has a repetitiveness built into it which we are not meant to try to escape. The very rhythms of the world are a pointer to what it means to be part of the created order as a human being. Stop thinking that meaning and happiness and satisfaction reside in novelty. What is new is not really new, and what feels new will soon feel old.

C. S. Lewis captured the essence of this point in his book *The Screwtape Letters*. A senior devil, Screwtape, is writing to his junior devil nephew, Wormwood, with advice on how to get Christians to turn away from the Enemy (God). Screwtape counsels Wormwood on humanity’s constant desire to experience something new:

The horror of the Same Old Thing is one of the most valuable passions we have produced in the human heart—an endless source of heresies in religion, folly in counsel, infidelity in marriage, and inconstancy in friendship.<sup>10</sup>

God has made change and newness pleasurable to human beings. But, says Screwtape, because God does not want his creatures “to make change, any more than eating, an end in itself, He has balanced the love of change in them by a love of permanence.”<sup>11</sup> Change and constancy are the two balancing weights on the seesaw of human experience, and God has given humanity the means

to enjoy both of them by patterning the world with rhythm. We love the fact that springtime feels *new*; we love the fact that it is springtime *again*. And the Devil goes to work right at this point.

Screwtape explains:

Now just as we pick out and exaggerate the pleasure of eating to produce gluttony, so we pick out this natural pleasantness of change and twist it into a demand for absolute novelty. This demand is entirely our workmanship. If we neglect our duty, men will be not only contented but transported by the mixed novelty and familiarity of snowdrops *this* January, sunrise *this* morning, plum pudding *this* Christmas. Children, until we have taught them better, will be perfectly happy with a seasonal round of games in which conkers succeed hopscotch as regularly as autumn follows summer. Only by our incessant efforts is the demand for infinite, or unrhythmical, change kept up.<sup>12</sup>

This is exactly what the Preacher wants us to spot. Where we are unsatisfied with the rhythmical repetition of our lives, it is because we are pretending that things should not be like this for us as human beings. To want infinite change—in other words, to “gain” something—is to want to escape the confines of ordinary existence and somehow arrive in a world where, on the one hand, repetition does not occur and, on the other, permanence for our lives does. But neither is possible. As we search for something new under the sun, so we are searching for absolute novelty, and it does not exist: “The pleasure of novelty is by its very nature more subject than any other to the law of diminishing returns.”<sup>13</sup>

When you think that at last you’ve made a decisive change in your circumstances, you will soon want to change something else. Whatever it is you think you’ve gained, it will soon vanish from the earth like morning mist, and you along with it too. Part of learning to live is simply accepting this. One day you will be dead and gone, and the world will go on, probably without even

remembering you. A hundred years after your death, the chances are, no one will ever know you lived.

If this depresses you, then keep reading. There's still a lot to learn. But if it cracks a wry smile on your face, you're halfway to happiness. For the Preacher is going to show us what we should, and should not, expect out of life. He is not just saying there's no gain after we've chased the wind; he will insist there's no need for the chase in the first place. There is no gain to be had under the sun, and that's precisely the point.

None need be sought.

### **Questions for Discussion or Personal Reflection**

1. What are your impressions of the book of Ecclesiastes?
2. Explain the meaning of "vanity" in Ecclesiastes in your own words.
3. List three things you would like to change about your life and three things you would like to stay the same.
4. Can you think of instances when you felt you had "gained," only to find that in time you were dissatisfied again?
5. How can it be liberating, rather than frustrating, to know that life is repetitive?
6. Do you find the message of this first chapter depressing or promising?



O DEATH,  
**WHERE  
IS THY  
STING?**

COLLECTED SERMONS



**JOHN MURRAY**  
Foreword by SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON



## This I Call to Mind

*This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not . . . The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.*

—LAMENTATIONS 3:21–22, 24

The prophet Jeremiah lived in those days when Judah was carried into captivity. The book of Lamentations consists of the lamentations of Jeremiah connected particularly with the desolations of Zion. That is perfectly obvious from the preceding and the succeeding parts of this book. At the beginning of the first chapter, we read:

How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!  
How is she become as a widow! She that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies. Judah has gone

into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude: she dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest: all her persecutors overtook her between the straits. (Lam 1:1–3)

And again at the beginning of the second chapter:

How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool in the day of his anger! The Lord hath swallowed up all the habitations of Jacob, and hath not pitied: he hath thrown down in his wrath the strong holds of the daughter of Judah; he hath brought them down to the ground: he hath polluted the kingdom and the princes thereof. He hath cut off in his fierce anger all the horn of Israel. (Lam 2:1–3)

And yet again, at the beginning of the fourth chapter, there is a similar refrain:

How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter! (Lam 4:1–2)

These are Jeremiah's lamentations, but they are the lamentations of Jeremiah because of the Lord's indignation against

Zion, against the people of his possession. We read that “the Lord’s portion is his people” and that “Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut 32:9), but now Jacob has gone into captivity and is trodden down: “Our gold is become dim.” The Lord’s indignation is perfectly apparent even at the beginning of our chapter. “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath” (Lam 3:1).

Jeremiah was so identified with the welfare of Zion in his interests, in his affections, in his aspirations, and in his hopes, that mourning and weeping now took hold of the inmost recesses of his being. That is the portrait that we have in this particular book. Can it be otherwise with us today? It is one thing to read this book of Lamentations as a commentary on the past, but it also has relevance for us. “These things happened . . . for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come” (1 Cor 10:11). “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for the instruction which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).

So, the book of Lamentations has a great lesson for us. Our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes must likewise be identified with that to which the Old Testament Zion corresponded: the church of Christ. If we do not identify ourselves—in our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes—with the church of Christ, then we do not identify ourselves in our faith and affection with him who is the head of the church. You can never separate Christ from his church or the church from Christ. Christ is meaningless apart from his interest in the church; it was

for the sake of the church that he came into this world. “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word to present it to himself a glorious church” (Eph 5:25–27).

And, as we can never think of Christ apart from the church or the church apart from Christ, so our own interest in Christ can very well be gauged by our interest in his church. We can well take up the lamentations of Jeremiah as we may take up the lamentations of another prophet: “Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste” (Isa 64:11). We cannot disassociate ourselves from the situation in which the church of Christ finds itself. There is a corporate responsibility, and we cannot possibly disassociate our own responsibility from that which afflicts the church of Christ in our particular day and generation. We cannot shrug our shoulders and say that we have no responsibility for the plight in which the church of Christ finds itself when our gold has become dim and our wine mixed with water (Lam 4:1; Isa 1:22). There is the grave danger that people in a particular location or in a particular denomination will shrug their shoulders and say that we have no responsibility. My friends, there is a corporate responsibility that we cannot divest ourselves of.

Not only is there this corporate responsibility for the defecation and the impurity that are so rampant in the professing church of Christ, but we are responsible for our own individual, personal iniquities. Another prophet said, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me” (Mic 7:9). You

cannot read this chapter of the lamentations of Jeremiah without recognizing, on the part of Jeremiah himself, a profound sense of his own sin and the indignation of the Lord against him for his iniquity. “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light” (Lam 3:1–2). There is, here, profound recognition of his own individual, personal iniquity, and frustration in self-humiliation before God.

Not only do we find the reflection in this chapter of the indignation of the Lord against the sin of Zion and even against Jeremiah himself because of *his* own personal, individual iniquity, but we also find a reflection of those mysterious dispensations of God’s providence that are ever tending to bewilder even the people of God. God’s providences to his people are not all dictated by his anger and indignation. There are indeed providences that are the expression of his indignation for his people’s iniquity, and there are indeed dispensations of chastisement, which, of course, are always for sin and for its correction. But there are also those dispensations of God’s providence that do not find their explanation in God’s indignation against the particular recipients of these dispensations.

If you take, for example, the patriarch Job, God did not visit him with afflictions because of indignation for his iniquity. Not at all! There was something in the unseen spirit world that was the explanation of Job’s affliction. And yet, notwithstanding the fact that the dispensations of God’s providence to him were not dictated by God’s indignation against him, Job could nevertheless say, “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where

he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him” (Job 23:8–9). Job was encompassed with great darkness and bewilderment because he did not understand at that time the unseen purpose of God in the tribulation that overtook him.

So it is often the case with the people of God, as Jeremiah says in this very chapter, “He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer” (Lam 3:6–8). And again, “Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through” (Lam 3:44). When the people of God have to walk in darkness and have no light in the mystery or the abyss of God’s providential dealings towards them, and they cannot understand the reason, it causes the bewilderment and the distress of heart, mind, and soul reflected in Lamentations 3.

Now all of that is simply by way of introduction, in order to appreciate that pinnacle of praise, of thanksgiving, and of hope that we find in the words of our text. In the face of all this perplexity, darkness, dismay, even bewilderment, in the face of this profound sense of the indignation of the Lord against Zion and against the prophet himself individually, is there any outlet of confidence, joy, and hope for the prophet in this unspeakable situation of grief and sorrow and travail? Yes, there is! “This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope.” And what is the secret of this hope? Jeremiah remembered certain things; there were certain considerations that he called to mind, that entered into his thought, notwithstanding the bewilderment, the darkness, and the dismay that possessed the inmost recesses of his heart

and being. Very briefly I'm going to call your attention to these particular considerations that the prophet called to mind.

First of all, there is his own self-humiliation before God: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam 3:22). The prophet recognized that he had not received, that there had not been visibly dealt to him, that which was equal to the measure of his deserts. God had visited him with much less affliction than his iniquities deserved (Ezra 9:13). We find this expression of his own self-humiliation and his abasement before God so eloquently set forth in Lamentations 3:28–30:

He sitteth alone [that is, the person who is in this particular situation of self-humiliation] and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach.

He giveth his very cheek to God himself, who smiteth him! Here is humble recognition of what the prophet says again in a later part of this chapter, "Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:39).

Self-humiliation is far too frequently overlooked in our relationship to God and is the very starting point for deliverance. Of course, it is the very starting point for deliverance even at the inception of the Christian life, but it is also the starting point for deliverance for the people of God themselves when they are under God's afflicting hand and when they are experiencing those bewildering dispensations of his providence. Self-humiliation before God recognizes that however bitterly God may be dealing with

us, however severe may be the dispensations of his providence, however stinging may be the aloes of his holy displeasure and wrath, we have not received anything yet that is equal to the measure of our deserts. Why should a living man complain for the punishment of his sins, when he thinks that what he deserves is not the afflictions of this life—however severe they may be—but the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13)?

I tell you, my friends, that a great deal of the superficiality that is in the church of God today, and a great deal of the impiety that even characterizes the people of God, is due to this failure to recognize that we are ourselves in the presence of God. We fail to measure ourselves by the criterion of God's holiness, his majesty, his justice, and his truth. When we apprehend the glory and the majesty of God, then the only reaction that is proper and that can be appropriate to our situation is that of the prophet Isaiah: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5).

That, my friends, is the starting point for any deliverance—deliverance at the inception of Christian profession and faith, and deliverance in the pilgrimage of the people of God as they experience the bitterness of God's dispensations toward them. We shall never properly assess God's dispensations to us—whatever their character and whatever their purpose in the divine mind—until we prostrate ourselves before God in the recognition of our own iniquity. "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. . . . Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:22, 39).

The second element in this text that fills the mind of the prophet with hope, with confidence, and with expectation—and



that likewise must fill our minds with hope and expectation—is the mercy and the compassion of the Lord. “This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness” (Lam 3:21–23). I tell you again, my friends, that we cannot have any true appreciation of those provisions of God’s grace for our deliverance at the very inception of the Christian life on into the pilgrimage of the people of God until we have an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

The fact that God is merciful is the outlet from our misery—our outlet from our misery at the beginning and in every onward step of our pilgrimage until we come to the “city which hath the foundations, of which God is the builder and the maker” (Heb 11:10). The fact that the Lord is the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to wrath, abundant in loving kindness and truth, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exod 34:6–7)—that’s the outlet. You can see this so conspicuously in the case of Jeremiah. It is that great truth so emblazoned on one of the psalms so familiar to us: “For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations” (Ps 100:5). Don’t you see that what the prophet here lays hold upon is the mercy and the faithfulness of God, and these are the key notes of this great psalm of thanksgiving: the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his truth—his *faithfulness*—endureth to all generations.

May I plead very humbly, my friends, that as we prostrate ourselves before God’s majesty in recognition of what our iniquity deserves, let us also have the apprehension of the mercy of

God in Christ Jesus. Let us reach out our hand to him in faith. Oh, let it be humble faith, faith as of a grain of mustard seed. Nevertheless, in the outreach of that faith, we have the guarantee of experiencing the exaltation that the prophet Jeremiah reflects in this particular chapter.

The third element that Jeremiah recalls to mind, and therefore has hope, is found in verse 24 of this chapter: “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.” The Lord is my *portion*. You don’t ascend to a higher pinnacle of faith in the whole of Scripture than that which the prophet enunciates at this particular point: “The Lord is my portion.” We read, of course, in the Scripture that “the Lord’s portion is his people” and that “Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut 32:9). God has peculiar delight in his people, which is why he sent his Son into the world that he might redeem his people from all iniquity and present them “faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24). The Lord’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. But you also have the complementary truth: the Lord is the portion of his people.

Perhaps there is nothing in the New Testament that enunciates what you might call the very apex of the Christian privilege, the very apex of God’s provision of grace, than that expression of the apostle Paul that “we might be filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). Being filled unto all the fullness of God is the New Testament counterpart of this Old Testament concept of the Lord being the portion of his people. It means that we come into the very possession of God himself, that God is ours. If Christ is ours, then all things are ours, and God himself is ours. You find it in that very psalm that we were singing,

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Ps 73:25–26).

I tell you, my friends, that eternity will not exhaust the meaning of that truth that God is our portion; we can only have a very dim glimmering of it even at the very best. But it is something that is *true*, and it is something that you are to appropriate. “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul.” And if God himself is the portion of his people, surely everything in his dispensations to them is the unrolling of his own favor and his own mercy. If God is our possession, then no evil can befall us (Ps 91:9–10).

That’s the third; now the fourth: and that is hope. “The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:25–26). Oh, my friends, what endless misery we reap for ourselves, and what dishonor we do to the God who is the portion of his people, when we take illegitimate methods of getting away from the bitter dispensations of God’s providence. We must wait. God doesn’t dispense to his people all his favor in this life or at any one time in this life. We have to wait; we have to have hope.

You know how utterly hopeless is a situation in which there is no hope. If a person is caught in the toils of tribulation, of distress, and perhaps of pain and torment, what a difference it makes if there is just a glimmer of hope. If a person is overtaken by a very serious disease and is racked with pain, what a difference between whether the person has absolutely no hope of deliverance from it and whether that person has even a glimmer

of hope. Hope gives him endurance; it gives him a measure of patience. He is willing to endure it or she is willing to endure it because there is going to be deliverance. That is what is true in a much more transcendent realm in reference to our relationship to God and our relationship to the dispensations of his providence. "It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord." To quote again the word of another prophet, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness" (Mic 7:9).

It is this hoping and waiting of which the prophet Isaiah speaks, "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" (Isa 40:31). The secret of endurance, patience, and waiting with expectation is submission to God's providences until he brings us forth to the light, and we shall then behold his righteousness. This hope is well-grounded for the reasons that have been already enunciated: that the Lord is full of compassion and of tender mercy and that the Lord is the portion of his people. Therefore, there cannot possibly be anything else but a glorious finale; it can't be otherwise! If the Lord is the portion of his people, and if that has its issue in our being filled unto all the fullness of God unto the plentitude of that grace and truth that reside in the mediator Jesus Christ and that have been communicated to his people, then there cannot possibly be but a grand and glorious finale.

Now fifth and finally, what the prophet here brings to mind and what fills him, therefore, with hope and expectation is the

vindication of God himself, that there is no arbitrariness in God. You might think that that's a sort of anticlimax. You might think that it is not on the plane of these other great truths like the lovingkindness and tender mercy of God or that the Lord's portion is his people and that God is the portion of his people. You might not think that it is on the plane of the glorious hope set before the people of God of a grand finale, a finale that will fill their hearts with praise and thanksgiving throughout the endless ages of eternity. But the vindication of God himself is not an anticlimax; it is on the very summit of faith. You find it in verses 33 to 36: "For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. To crush under his feet all the prisoners of the earth. To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the most High, to subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not." That was no anticlimax for Jeremiah.

And it should not be an anticlimax for us, either. What is the secret of the fact that there is no arbitrariness in God, that he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men? It is just this: that the Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his works (Ps 145:17), that the judge of all the earth will do right (Gen 18:25). I tell you, my friends, that whatever may be our affliction, however much we may cringe under the chastening hand of God, and however much the arrows of the Almighty may enter into the innermost recesses of our being (Job 6:4)—when we have come to the point of vindicating God's ways by recognizing that he is holy, just, sovereign, and good, then we have the outlet, then we escape. "As a bird under the snare of the fowlers, our soul is escaped and our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth" (Ps 124:7–8). "The Lord," we can then say, "will light

my candle so that it shall shine full bright; the Lord, my God, will also make my darkness to be light” (Ps 18:28).

My friends, I would appeal to you, as I would address my own heart and soul, that the very secret of escape in the midst of tribulation and darkness and anguish is that we are able to justify God. And we are able to justify God in all his works because we recognize that we always have less than our iniquities deserve. There is a very close connection between that which the prophet first brings to remembrance—self-humiliation before God because of his own iniquities—and that which has just been enunciated in verses 33 to 36—the vindication of the justice and holiness and goodness of God.

We must never forget that God does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. God is never motivated by vindictive revenge. He is, indeed, motivated by vindicatory justice, but never by unholy, vindictive revenge. And that’s what is enunciated here as elsewhere. The Lord does not afflict willingly (that is, arbitrarily); he doesn’t afflict simply for the sake of afflicting. God is not *vindictively* executing his wrath; he is *vindicatorily* executing his wrath. It is the same great truth in another connection that the prophet Ezekiel sets forth in the words of God himself: “As I live,” saith the Lord God, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek 33:11).

It is well for us, my friends, whatever may be the dispensations of providence to us, to recognize his sovereign holiness and bow before his sovereign majesty. When we are able to do that, we shall also be able, in the strength of God’s grace and by the energizing of his Spirit, to rejoice with the prophet: “The Lord is

my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in him. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Lam 3:24; Ps 73:26). In these days, when we are encompassed about with so much that causes dismay, that causes us to walk in darkness and have no light, may we, by the grace of God and by the effectual application of the Holy Spirit, be able to reproduce in our own experience, faith, and hope, that blessed assurance described by the prophet: “This I have called to mind, therefore have I hope.”



Oh God, we praise and magnify thy name that thou hast not dealt with us after our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. And we praise thee that thou dost give us the precious privilege of receiving thy Word in all its fullness. May it be reflected in our hearts in faith and love and hope. Oh, grant that we may be more than conquerors through him that loved us, knowing that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For his name's sake, amen.



PIERCING  
HEAVEN

|  
PRAYERS  
*of the*  
PURITANS

|  
Robert Elmer, Editor





HELP ME REST IN  
GOD'S LOVE.



GOD STOOPS TO THE WEAK AND  
UNWORTHY

Who are we, and what is our father's house, that you have brought us here?

And now, O Lord God, what will your servants say to you? We are silenced with wonder, and must sit down in astonishment. We cannot utter the least of your praises.

What does the height of this strange love mean? And what does it mean to us, that the Lord of heaven and earth should condescend to enter into covenant with dust, and take into his bosom the viperous brood that has so often spit their venom in his face?

We are not worthy to be as the handmaids, to wash the feet of the servants of our Lord; how much less are we worthy to be your sons and heirs, and to be made partakers of all these blessed liberties and privileges you have settled upon us!

But for your goodness' sake, and according to your own heart, you have done all these great things. Even so, Father, because it seemed good in your sight.

This is why you are great, O God, for there is none like you, nor is there any God besides you. Amen.

—*Joseph Alleine*

## GOD HAS MARRIED HIS PEOPLE

What nation on earth is like your people?

You, God, came to redeem us as a people for yourself. You have confirmed us to yourself, to be a people for you forever; and you, Lord, have become our God. Wonder, O heavens, and be moved, O earth, at this great thing!

The tabernacle of God is with us, and you will dwell with us, and we will be your people; and you yourself will be with us, and be our God.

We are astonished and ravished with wonder, for the infinite breach is made up, the offender is received, God and man reconciled, and a covenant of peace entered into. Heaven and earth are all agreed upon the terms.

O happy conclusion! Will the stars dwell with the dust? Or the wide distant poles be brought together?

But here the distance of the terms is infinitely greater. Rejoice, O angels; shout, O seraphim; O all you friends of the bridegroom, be ready with the marriage song.

Look, here is the wonder of wonders: for you, Jehovah, have betrothed yourself forever to your hopeless captives, and you declare the marriage before all the world. You have become one with us and we with you.

You have bequeathed to us the precious things of heaven above, and the precious things of the earth beneath, and you have kept back nothing from us.

And now, O Lord, you are that God, and your words are true. You have promised this goodness to your servants, and have left us nothing to ask from your hands except what you have freely granted already.

Establish forever the word which you have spoken concerning your servants. Do as you have said; and let your name be magnified forever, saying, "The Lord of hosts, he is the God of Israel."

Amen, hallelujah!

—*Joseph Alleine*

## TO THE GOD WHO BENDS DOWN TO REACH US

Precious Lord Jesus! Oh for grace to love you, who have so loved us! You stoop to call such poor sinful people your own, and love them as your own, and consider every thing done for them and done to them as to yourself.

Show my poor heart a portion of that love, that I may love you as my own and only Savior, and learn to love you to the end, as you have loved me and given yourself for me, an offering and a sacrifice to God.

Precious Lord, continue to surprise my soul with the tokens of your love. All the tendencies of your grace, all the evidences of your favor, your visits, your love-tokens, your pardons, your renewings, your morning call, your mid-day feedings, your noon, your evening, your midnight grace.

All, all are among your wonderful ways of salvation, and all testify to my soul that your name, as well as your work, is, and must be, wonderful.

Jesus, you put forth your hand and touched a leper! Deal with me the same way, precious Lord. Though I am polluted and unclean, yet reach down to put forth your hand and touch me also.

Put forth your blessed Spirit. Come, Lord, and dwell in me, abide in me, and rule and reign over me. Be my God, my Jesus, my Holy One, and make me yours forever.

Yes, dearest Jesus, I hear you say that you will be for me, and not for another. So will I be for you. Oh! You condescending, loving God, make me yours, “that whether I live, I may live to the Lord; or whether I die, I may die to the Lord; so that living or dying, I may be yours.”

—*Robert Hawker*

## IN THE BEAUTY OF JESUS

In your beauty, blessed Lord, we see a fullness of grace, truth, and righteousness. It corresponds exactly to the wants of poor sinners—your blood, to cleanse. Your grace, to comfort. Your fullness, to supply.

In you there is everything we can want: life, light, joy, pardon, mercy, peace, happiness here, glory hereafter.

Do I not see you, my King, in your beauty, when I behold you coming with all these for me? So I must cry out with the psalmist, “I will love you, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my strength and my song; and he is become my salvation.”

And that is not all. Because when I see the King in his beauty, I see him also in his love. Yes, blessed Lord, you are so beautiful, for you have so loved poor sinners that you give yourself for them.

And we know that our love for you did not come first, but your love to us came first. Your love prompted ours. Your love filled our hearts and, by your Spirit, first prompted our minds to look toward you. That makes you lovely indeed.

And now, Lord, every day's view of you increases that love, and brings home your beauty more and more. The more often you stoop to visit my poor soul, the more beautiful you appear.

Every appearance, every view, every glimpse of Jesus, tends to make my God and King more gracious and lovely to my soul, and adds fresh fervor to my love.

Come then, you blessed, holy, lovely one, and ravish my spiritual senses with your beauty, that my whole soul would be filled only with the love of Jesus every day. Until that day when, from seeing you here below, through your grace, I come to look upon you, and live forever in your presence, in the full beams of your glory in your throne above.

— *Robert Hawker*

## THE SHEPHERD OF NEW BELIEVERS

Great Shepherd of your sheep, is this how you deal so sweetly with your little ones? That explains why young believers, in the first seasons of knowing you, find so much blessed refreshment.

You gather the lambs and carry them in your bosom. You do this in a way that fully proves your love and compassion for the needs of your flock.

Yes, Lord, you are the one who restores my soul. Praises to your name, for you do it all in such a way that proves it to be for your great name's sake. Your grace comes freely and without reprimand.

“He restores my soul, and leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.”

Dear Lord Jesus! Grant me this happy frame of mind, that I may say with David, “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise!” Amen!

— *Robert Hawker*

## SING THE SONG OF GLORY

Great, glorious, everlasting Redeemer! You are indeed both the High Priest and the altar, both the Sacrifice and the Sacrificer. Your one offering has both put out the fire of divine wrath and caused the holy flame of love and peace to burn there instead, which has kindled in every heart of your people.

Lamb of God, you have delivered us from the wrath to come!  
You have made our peace in the blood of your cross.

By your blood you have quenched the just fire of divine indignation against sin. You have quenched no less than all the fiery darts of Satan. You have subdued the flaming antagonism of our hearts, with all their fiery lusts and burning affections.

What will I say to you? What will I say of you? What will I proclaim concerning you, the Lord our righteousness?

Lord, help me to begin the song, and never entertain sin or Satan—not even death itself, or allow it for a moment to interrupt the heavenly note.

Instead let your name fill my entire soul and vibrate on my dying lips, so that I may open my eyes in eternity, while the words still hang there.

“To him who has loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and made us kings and priests to God and the Father; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

—*Robert Hawker*

## ENJOYING THE FAVOR OF GOD

Lord Jesus, I seek you and your favor beyond all the riches of the earth, and all the enjoyments of the world.

Lord, help me never to forget that it was your favor that brought you down from heaven. Your favor that prompted you to die, to rise again, for poor sinners. Your favor which makes you wash us from all our sins in your blood.

All of your grace here, all the glories of redemption hereafter—everything was bought and the result of your favor.



Precious Lord, please show me your renewed favor, day by day. And let those visits from you be so gracious, so sweet, and so continual, that I may think or speak of nothing else.

I pray for grace to spend all the moments of my life here, receiving your grace and love, and bringing you love and praise, until you take me home to live at the fountain of your favor. That is when the whole happiness of eternity will be in the praises of God and of the Lamb, and we will enjoy “the favor of him who dwelt in the bush.”

— *Robert Hawker*

## THE FATHER PLANNED IT ALL

Almighty Father, it is your special mercy to give your Son, and with him all things, to the highly favored objects of your everlasting love.

From all eternity, you planned, ordered, willed, appointed, and prepared the great salvation of the gospel. You chose Christ as the head, and the Church as the body of this amazing work of redemption.

You have carried out all the great designs. You strengthen and complete everything in our final salvation—in grace here, and glory hereafter.

Blessed, holy, and compassionate Lord God! For the sake of Jesus fulfill this promise daily in my soul. Bear me up, carry me through, and strengthen me in Christ, that I may walk in his name, until you bring me in to see his face in your eternal

home, and I dwell under the light of his countenance forever,  
amen.

— *Robert Hawker*

## THE BLESSED WORK OF THE SPIRIT

Oh blessed Spirit, to whom I owe such unspeakable mercies,  
let me, Lord, contemplate you today as the gracious, kind,  
compassionate Comforter.

For you are the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. And with mercy you  
sympathize with all the followers of Jesus in our afflictions, both  
of soul and body.

How tenderly you show us our sins, and lead us to the blood of  
Jesus to wash them away.

How sweetly you visit, encourage, strengthen, instruct, lead,  
and guide us into all truth.

And how powerfully at times, by your restraining grace, you  
enable us to put to death the deeds of the body, that we may live.

Holy, blessed, almighty Comforter! Continue your visits to us.  
Come, Lord, and abide with me, and be with me forever. Prove  
that you are the Sent of the Father, and of the Son, by coming to  
me in the name of Jesus, by teaching me all the precious things  
concerning Jesus, and by acting as the one who reminds us of  
Jesus.

In you and by your blessed work, I may know and live in the  
sweet enjoyment of fellowship with the Father, and with his

Son Jesus Christ, through the influence of the Holy Ghost, the Comforter. Amen.

— *Robert Hawker*

## JESUS ONLY

Lord, when you asked Mary in her sorrow, “Woman, why do you weep? Whom do you seek?” our souls reply with her, “We seek Jesus alone.”

Oh then, to hear our own names called upon, as hers was: “Mary!” Our answer brings out every affection of the heart: “Rabbi! My Lord and my God!”

Yes! You, altogether lovely Lord, the fairest and first among ten thousand—I will go with you. I would forget my own people and my father’s house. For my father’s house is a house of bondage, because I was born in sin, and formed in iniquity. I am a child of wrath, just like everyone else, and by nature dead in trespasses and sins.

It is you, blessed Jesus, who have delivered me from the wrath to come. It is you who have quickened me by your Holy Spirit to a new and spiritual life. It is you who have sent your servants to call me to yourself, and have betrothed me to yourself forever.

Is there anyone who would still ask me, “Will you follow this man?”

My whole soul would outrun the question, and, like the apostle, I would answer, “To whom else will I go?”

Even the angels will witness for me. I have none in heaven or earth but you. Yes, you, dearest Redeemer! I will go with you,

follow you, live with you, hang on you, die with you. Not even death itself will separate you and me.

Oh let me feel in my soul those precious words of yours, concerning your church: “I will call them my people.” And my whole soul will respond to the gracious sound, and say, “the Lord is my God.” Amen.

—*Robert Hawker*

ALISTAIR BEGG

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# PRAY

Learn to Pray Like an Apostle

# BIG

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“Helps you feel not just like you *should* pray, but that you *can*.”

KEVIN DEYOUNG

ALISTAIR BEGG

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# PRAY

Learn to Pray Like an Apostle

# BIG

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The logo features a stylized, light gray bird-like shape above the text.  
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To the memory of T. S. Mooney,  
who remembered me daily at “the best place.”

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**TRUTHFORLIFE**<sup>®</sup>  
THE BIBLE-TEACHING MINISTRY OF ALISTAIR BEGG



## PRAYER IS SPIRITUAL (BUT NOT IMPRACTICAL)

When I read Paul's prayers, I am always struck by the fact that many of the matters that are the focus of my prayers are absent in his.

Read his prayers in his letter to the Ephesians (or anywhere else in his epistles), and what is striking is the absence of material issues. This absence is especially striking when we consider that Paul was in prison in Rome. But he doesn't pray about his predicament; he doesn't ask that he might be released. That would be legitimate—he's the one who wrote in Philippians 4 v 6...

*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank him for his answers.*

*(Living Bible paraphrase)*

Paul wrote that, and he believed that, and so must we. But we also need to acknowledge with Paul the fact that these

concerns are not the ultimate concerns. All that matters may be brought before God, but what we bring before God is not always what matters most.

### **SOMETHING BIGGER THAN HEALTH**

The believers in Ephesus were in one sense just like us. They had concerns for food and for clothes and for shelter. They would have thought about and talked about and worried about being married or getting married... being parents or wishing they were parents, or wishing some days they weren't parents... employment, paying taxes, wealth, health... but there's no mention of these matters at all in what Paul prays for them.

In fact, praying about health (which, if we had the chance to listen in on the prayers of Western Christians, would likely come in at number one) is rare—almost non-existent—in the Bible. So why are we praying about it so much?

It's because we don't want to die.

We want to live. We've got a sneaking suspicion that what we've got now, this side of death, is actually better than what God has for us then, on the other side of death. So we want to hang on to what we've got. But instead, we need to believe—really believe—that these things are true:

*God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly*

*places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.*

*(Ephesians 2 v 4-7)*

You have now been raised with Christ into the heavenly places. You have been made part of a family that will never come to an end. One day, you will live in a new heaven and a new earth. You will see your God face to face and, with a heart no longer burdened and distracted by sin and a body no longer broken and decaying in frailty, you will praise him.

And you and I just want to pray that we'd stay healthy and live long?! All that matters may be brought before God, but what we bring before God is not always what matters most.

When the eyes of our hearts are opened to our future, it changes our lives now—it reorders our priorities and our prayers. We pray less about the practical details of this life, and first and foremost about the spiritual realities of our eternal life. Eternal matters matter more; the concerns of today less. We live out, and we pray based on, the truth that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1 v 21).

But, time-bound and fallen creature that I naturally am, I often forget the spiritual and eternal element of reality. That's why the things that fill my prayers are so regularly absent from Paul's—and why the things that fill his prayers are so regularly absent from mine. He has his eyes fixed on eternity. His prayers are spiritual. We need to make ours so, too.

**NO MORE “BE WITH”**

To do that, I want to erase the two words that shut most of our prayers down. Here they are:

“Be with...”

If you were to record my prayers, I have a sad suspicion you’d hear a lot of “be with”: “Dear Lord, I pray you will be with Tom as he goes to work, and be with Mary also, who’s having her wisdom teeth removed on Tuesday, and be with... and be with... and be with... and be with us all. Amen.”

This is unimaginative. It’s limited. It’s certainly not spiritually ambitious, like Paul is. And it is, I think, unnecessary. Jesus said, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28 v 20). He’s promised to be with Tom and with Mary. It’s a bit of a waste to make the sum total of my prayer for them the request that Jesus would do what he already said he’d do, and has already started doing.

Search the Scriptures, and you won’t find a prayer recorded that just asks God to “be with” his people. The prayers of the saints have far more weighty, far more spiritual concerns. Go to Nehemiah. In the opening section of Nehemiah, word comes to him in exile, working as the cupbearer of the Persian king, telling him that the walls of God’s city, Jerusalem, are broken down and the gates are burned with fire. It is a complete fiasco up there. Nehemiah is brokenhearted by this; he decides that he will seek to do something about it. But, of course, he knows the truths we saw in the previous chapter of this book, and so...

*As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said..."*  
*(Nehemiah 1 v 4-5)*

You can read his prayer, right there in Nehemiah 1:

*O LORD God, please be with all the people in Jerusalem...*

No, he doesn't say that!

He says (and I'm paraphrasing), *O God, you great and awesome and magnificent God, who rules over the universe. We, your people, bow before you and confess our sins and our shortcomings before you.*

Can you see what he's doing? He's getting spiritual before he gets practical. He knows that the issue of the walls in Jerusalem is a metaphor for the real spiritual condition of the people. The reason that the wall is collapsed and broken down is because of the spiritual needs of their hearts. So Nehemiah prays first about what matters most: *Lord, I must confess our sins. Lord, I must acknowledge our complete dependence upon you. Lord, let us turn our gaze to the things that really matter, because we have completely lost sight of what's going on.*

Look at the prayers of Daniel, and he's the same. In Daniel 9, in the middle of the oppression of God's people, as chaos surrounds the people of God, he doesn't pray about practicalities. He prays about the grandeur and glory of God and his kingdom, and the fact that he is sovereign. It's immense. I'm humbled by him; I'm

humbled by Nehemiah; I'm humbled by Paul. How small, how narrow-minded are my prayers. How "be with" are my prayers.

In my experience, those of us who are parents are particularly at risk of this kind of attitude when it comes to our children. If you have kids, here's one way to diagnose whether your prayers are over-practical and under-spiritual. What do you pray for your kids, when you pray for them (if you do)? Would our prayers for our children reveal that we understand that their spiritual condition matters more than their financial or relational or vocational well-being? Would our prayers reflect the truth that their position in Christ matters infinitely more than their position in school or college or the office or society?

All that matters may be brought before God, but we must always bring before God those things that matter most.

## THE HUB

Don't take my word for this, though. Take Jesus' word.

In that famous passage in Matthew 6, Jesus talks to his followers about legitimate practical concerns—their food, their clothes, their lives. And he doesn't rebuke them for caring about those things. But he does say, *Let's think about this. Have you ever seen birds putting up a factory to make stuff? Why not? Because our Father feeds them. And have you ever seen the flowers sewing their clothes or heading down to the mall to make sure they have the right kit? Why not? Because no matter what clothes we manage to get, we'll never match the amazing natural beauty of God's creative handiwork. So, Jesus says, let me tell you what to do:*

*Seek first the kingdom of God and his  
righteousness... (v 33)*

That's prioritizing spiritual things.

*... and all these things will be added to you.*

In other words, to paraphrase Jesus, he says, *If you take care of my things, I'll take care of your things.*

The hub—the center of our lives and our actions—is always spiritual. Think about a bicycle wheel—the hub there is the key to all the spokes. If that hub is weak or ill-fitting, so that the spokes are buckling, loose, or unattached, then the spokes will be ineffective and insufficient in enabling the wheel to take you in the direction you need to go. The hub is crucial. And when it comes to each of us, our hub is spiritual. The reason that Paul bows his knees before the Father who is in heaven and prays in this way is because he wants to show the Ephesians that this is what really matters. And so spiritual matters are what the focus of our prayers—not the entirety, but the focus—must be.

### **SPIRITUAL CHANGE IS PRACTICALLY SEEN**

When the spiritual hub of my life is solid, then the practical spokes will be strong. We tend to live as if, and pray as if, what we most need is help with this practical issue or that specific life problem. And we all have particular situations that we need divine help with and divine transformation in. But it's as we grow in our appreciation of the gospel that our lives will change to reflect that gospel.

The Ephesian Christians knew that because they'd experienced that. Ephesus was a city that was prosperous as a result of its ability to trade, and prominent on account of being the site of the great temple of Artemis or Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. That temple both drove pagan, magical worship and underpinned the local economy.

It was in that setting that Paul turned up and proclaimed the lordship of Jesus. Day after day, month after month, he “spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God ... so that all the residents of Asia [modern-day Turkey] heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks” (Acts 19 v 8, 10).

Ephesus was a spiritual battleground. New believers were leaving a life dominated by the occult and by the power of spiritual forces (v 11-17). And that spiritual transformation led to practical change:

*Many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (v 18-20)*

It must have been a quite magnificent bonfire as these Christians brought their books of magic together and burned them in a public forum. Don't miss the value of this reading material—fifty thousand pieces of silver.



That is a substantial amount of money. Imagine the conversations:

“What has happened to these people? Why are they burning all their books?”

“Well, they have a completely different view of the world.”

“You mean they don’t believe in spiritual stuff anymore?”

“Oh no, they do. But they’ve started to believe that Jesus of Nazareth is alive beyond his death, and that he forgives sins and that he is all-powerful over every sphere.”

“Well, that sounds crazy. What idiots, to burn their books. They might at least have sold them.”

The point is this: your hub—your spiritual belief system and view of God—drives your practical actions. And so when Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, he didn’t say, *You need someone to sort out the political and civic structures of your city.* He didn’t say, *You need to get some laws on the statute books that ban the riots you’ve been subjected to and the occult worship your city has been oppressed by.* No—Paul says to them, and us, that what we really need to know is the truth of the gospel. What we really need to know, or rather, who we really need to know, is Jesus. We need to know with assurance all that is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to know what is true of us now and we need to be aware of what will be true of us on the day when all things are wrapped up. Paul says, *I’m praying for that. You’ll stand firm if you know truth.*

We’re the same. What you and I need more than anything else is to be made experientially aware of the truth

and reality of the Lord Jesus Christ—we need to know “the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Ephesians 1 v 19). Too often, our Jesus is too weak. We’ve got a view of Jesus that somehow puts him fighting for a place in the pantheon of gods—fighting for his position in the great story of spiritual history. We need to understand that Jesus wears a crown that infinitely outshines and eternally outlasts any and every other power—that he is, as the old hymn “Crown Him With Many Crowns” puts it, the Lord...

*Whose power a scepter sways  
From pole to pole, that wars may cease,  
And all be prayer and praise.*

And we need to understand that he is...

*... the Lord of years,  
The Potentate of time.  
Creator of the rolling spheres,  
Ineffably sublime. (Matthew Bridges)*

If we know this Jesus, we will each have a firm hub in the center of our lives, and we will each pray.

### **THOSE THINGS THAT MATTER MOST**

So, when you start to pray, what’s the concern that fills your vision?

You are facing a huge issue in your job? You need God’s help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel. You need to know how to fix your marriage? You

need God's help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel. You are so worried about something one of your kids is into? You need God's help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel. You are facing serious health problems? You need God's help with that, and so what you most need to know is the gospel.

We will see as we continue to enjoy Paul's prayers for the Ephesians how gospel truth makes a difference, in prayer and practicalities. But first, we need to start to pray spiritually. We need to start there—and then, as we move on to our practical concerns in our prayers, we need to let the way we pray about them flow from the spiritual truths we've prayed about. Let's not allow the focus of Paul's prayers to be absent from ours. All that matters may be brought before God, but we must always bring before God those things that matter most.

*Father, thank you for not sparing your own Son and giving him up for us all. I know that this is what really matters. Thank you too that, along with him, you freely give us all things. For the many ways in which you provide for the practical concerns of my life, I praise you; and I ask that those practicalities would never become my sole or even primary focus. Help me to seek the help of the Holy Spirit in dealing with different and difficult matters, and most of all to remember what matters most. In Jesus' name. Amen.*

CHARLES H. SPURGEON  
*Revised & Updated by Tim Chester*

*The*  
PROMISES  
*of*  
GOD

*A New Edition of the Classic Devotional  
Based on the English Standard Version*

# MARCH 11

This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand  
. . . that all this assembly may know that the LORD  
saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the  
LORD's, and he will give you into our hand.

*1 Samuel 17:46–47*

Let this point be certain: the battle is the Lord's, and we may be quite sure of the victory. And we may be sure of a victory that will best display the power of God. The Lord is too often forgotten by all people, even by the assemblies of Israel. And when there is an opportunity to make people see that the Great First Cause can achieve his purposes without the power of man, it is a priceless occasion which should not be missed. Even Israel looked too often to the sword and spear. It is a grand thing to have no sword in the hand of David, and yet for David to know that his God will overthrow a whole army of foreigners.

If we are indeed contending for truth and righteousness, let us not wait until we have talent, or wealth, or any other form of visible power at our disposal. Instead, with whatever stones we find in the brook and with our own usual sling, let us run to meet the enemy. If it were our own battle we might not be confident. But if we are standing up for Jesus, and fighting in his strength alone, who can withstand us? Without a trace of hesitation let us face the Philistines. For the Lord of Hosts is with us, and who can be against us?

# MARCH 14

As one whom his mother comforts,  
so I will comfort you.

*Isaiah 66:13*

A mother's comfort! Ah, this is tenderness itself. How she enters into her child's grief! How she presses him to her chest and tries to take all his sorrow into her own heart! He can tell her everything, and she will sympathize as nobody else can. Of all comforters a child loves his mother the best. It is true even for many full-grown men.

Does the Lord condescend to play the role of a mother? This is goodness indeed. We readily perceive how he is a father. But will he be like a mother as well? Does not this invite us to holy familiarity, to unreserved confidence, to sacred rest? When God himself becomes the Comforter no anguish can long remain. Let us pour out our trouble, even if sobs and sighs should become the language we use. He will not despise us for our tears, just as our mother did not. He will consider our weakness as she did. He will put aside our faults, only in a surer, safer way than our mother could do. We will not try to bear our grief alone—that would be unkind to one so gentle and so kind.

If we begin the day with our loving God, we will finish it in the same company, since mothers do not grow weary of their children.

## MARCH 15

Therefore say, “Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far off among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a while in the countries where they have gone.”

*Ezekiel 11:16*

Banished from the public means of grace, we are not removed from the grace behind the means of grace. The Lord who places his people where they feel like exiles will himself be with them. He will be to them all that they could have had at home in the place of their sacred assemblies. Take this promise as your own if you are called to wander!

God is to his people a place of *refuge*. They find sanctuary with him from every adversary. He is their place of *worship* too. He is with them as he was with Jacob when he slept in the open field and woke, saying, “Surely the LORD is in this place” (Gen. 28:16). To them he will also be a sanctuary of *peace*, like the Most Holy Place, which was the noiseless abode of the Eternal. They will be kept from fear of evil.

God himself, in Christ Jesus, is the sanctuary of *mercy*. The ark of the covenant is the Lord Jesus, and Aaron’s rod, the pot of manna, the tables of the law are in Christ our sanctuary. In God we find the shrine of *holiness* and of *communion*. What more do we need?

Oh Lord, fulfill this promise and always be to us like a little sanctuary!

# MARCH 16

What you have learned and received and  
heard and seen in me—practice these things,  
and the God of peace will be with you.

*Philippians 4:9*

It is good when a man can be profitably copied so minutely as Paul might have been. Oh, for grace to imitate him this day and every day!

If we, with the help of divine grace, put into practice the teaching of Paul, we may claim this promise. And what a promise it is! God, who loves peace, makes peace, and breathes peace, will be with us. “Peace will be with you” is a sweet blessing. But for the God of peace to be with us is far more. For in God we have the fountain as well as the streams, the sun as well as his beams. If the God of peace be with us, we will enjoy the peace of God that passes all understanding (Phil. 4:7), even though outward circumstances threaten to disturb us. If people quarrel, we are certain to be peacemakers, if the Maker of peace is with us.

It is in the way of truth that real peace is found. If we quit the faith or leave the path of righteousness under the notion of promoting peace, we will be greatly mistaken. First pure, then peaceable, is the order of wisdom and of fact. Let us keep to Paul’s line, and we will have the God of peace with us as he was with the apostle.



## MARCH 17

Do not be afraid of them,  
for I am with you to deliver you,  
declares the LORD.

*Jeremiah 1:8*

Whenever fear comes in and makes us falter, we are in danger of falling into sin. To be conceited is to be dreaded, but so is cowardice. “Dare to be a Daniel” (Philip B. Bliss). Our great Captain should be served by brave soldiers.

What a reason for bravery there is here! God is with those who are with him. God will never be absent when the hour of struggle comes. Do they threaten you? Who are you that you should be afraid of a man that will die? Will you lose your position? Your God whom you serve will find bread and water for his servants. Can you not trust him? Do they pour ridicule upon you? Will this break your bones or your heart? Bear it for Christ’s sake and even rejoice because of it.

God is with the true, the just, the holy, to deliver them; and he will deliver you. Remember how Daniel came out of the lions’ den, and the three holy children out of the furnace (Daniel 3, 6). Your case is not as desperate as theirs. But even if it were, the Lord would bear you through, and make you more than a conqueror. Fear to fear. Be afraid to be afraid. Your worst enemy is within your own heart. Get to your knees and cry for help, and then rise up saying, “I will trust, and will not be afraid” (Isa. 12:2).

*Gospel Hope When Life Doesn't Make Sense*



# *Suffering*

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

## The Comfort of God's Sovereignty

I didn't know that I could feel so out of control. I am a doer and a planner. I tend to have a project-oriented way of approaching life. I know exactly what I want to accomplish every day, how fast I need to work, and all that needs to be in place to finish my task. I tend to hate delay and chafe against interruptions. I am always aware of everything I need to control in order to get things done. And I know the people I need to support my efforts. You wouldn't generally characterize me as "controlling" in the negative sense of what that means, but you would surely see me as task oriented and maybe on my bad days a little too much of a self-sovereign.

Then I got sick. I want to take you back to those first moments that I wrote about in chapter 1. That first hour in the emergency ward examining room is a case study in loss of control. Suddenly things got very serious. Five physicians were poking, prodding, and pricking me from seemingly every direction. I was told that my questions couldn't be answered and that I wasn't going to leave the hospital anytime soon. Suddenly my life was

in the hands of people I didn't know, my body was doing things it shouldn't do, and the rest of my life and ministry was on hold. As they wheeled me to a longer-term room, I was having trouble processing it all. Processing is what I do, helping people make sense of their lives from the perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ. I wasn't processing; I was reeling. I was bombarded with so many questions that I was confused.

I could feel my life being yanked out of my order-loving hands. Then those horrible spasms started. My body shook and cramped, with accompanying spikes of intense pain, and I had no ability to turn it off. I never thought that I would be afraid of my own body, but I was. I was so out of control that everything else important to me faded into insignificance. All I could think of was surviving the physical trauma that had invaded my body. Just when the spasms began to subside, the doctors visited my room with dire descriptions of my diagnoses.

I kept asking the doctors when I would be released, but they evaded my question. I wanted to get back to my routine and my project-oriented lifestyle. Little did I know of the multiple surgeries, hospital stays, and months of convalescing that would become my life for a long time. Little did I know that I would never again be physically the same. I was in the throes of something I had no power to control, and other than doing what the doctors told me to do, there was nothing I could do about it.

### **Suffering Clarifies Who Is in Control**

Hardship has the power to burst the bubble of our self-sovereignty. I don't think I'm alone in saying that I'm tempted to give myself comfort by convincing myself that I have more control over people, places, and things than I actually have. We want to believe that if we eat the right things and do the right exercises, we can control our health. We buy into thinking that if we parent our children well, we can guarantee that they will

turn out all right. We want to believe that if we budget well, invest wisely, and save carefully, we can assure a good financial future. We want to think that if we dedicate ourselves to a loving marriage, we can secure its health and permanence. These are all good things to do, but the assumption that doing them controls outcomes is just not true.

From the very first breath of Adam, the Bible confronts our delusions of and desire for control. It is clear that Adam and Eve were not created for independent, self-sufficient living but for dependent, others-reliant living. And, like Adam and Eve, we don't have what it takes to make it well on our own because we don't have the power to supply all we need for this to be possible. Adam and Eve weren't made to make up their own rules and to live as they thought best. They were made to live inside the boundaries of the rules and purposes of someone greater. And they weren't placed in a world that would submit to their commands and do their bidding. They were called to be the resident managers of a world created and held together by the sovereign power of God.

Yes, we've been given many natural intellectual, emotional, and spiritual gifts, and if we exercise them as God intended, we can do much to help our lives be relatively comfortable and stable. But we can't take credit or blame for things we had no power to produce. If I were in control, there is no way I would have allowed physical travail into my life. In fact, I will make a confession. If I were in control, I wouldn't let difficulty of any kind, big or small, into my life. Hardship confronts us with our tendency to assume that we're in greater control than we really are, and because we think we are, we take way more credit for the good things in our lives than we should. The opposite is true as well. Because we assume greater control than we actually have, we blame ourselves for things we have no power to cause. A loving wife of an unfaithful husband haunts herself with

questions about what she could have done to keep him from wandering. Good parents blame themselves for the spiritual and relational rebellion of their children. People who have invested with untrustworthy investors kick themselves for being so trusting. Even children tend to find reasons to blame themselves for the separation of their parents. In all these cases, people are adding to their suffering by assuming power and control that they didn't have and never will have.

Suffering causes us to scan our lives and face the fact that we control very little. So we mourn not only our suffering but also what it has forced us to admit about ourselves. Our loss of the illusion of control also adds to the fear that accompanies suffering.

But realizing we are not in control is also one of suffering's biggest blessings. It's one of difficulty's paradoxical comforts. The fear and pain of being out of control stand before us as doorways to something very good. It's only when we give up the delusion that we've been or can be in greater control that we can find rest in the One who is in control in our place. Suffering proves that helplessness is the portal to help. It is only when we abandon our independence that we find rest in one greater. Hopelessness is the only doorway to hope. When we forsake our trust in our power, we're then ready to entrust ourselves to the power of another. Our smallness and weakness aren't our greatest dangers; the greatest danger is the delusion that we are bigger and stronger than we are or ever will be. Here is suffering's paradox: the very things we would do anything to avoid, the very things that confront our understanding of who we are, and the very things that cause us the most pain become the very things that usher into our lives the blessings of the help, hope, peace, and rest that we all long to experience.

I want to examine one more thing before I unpack the comforts every sufferer can find in God's sovereign control of all things. I want you to think with me about mystery. God does

things that will remain a mystery. God brings into our lives life things that confuse us. At times we struggle to reconcile what God has said with what he's done. Sometimes God's declaration of who he is seems to contradict what he has ordained. Sometimes God's plan doesn't make sense. At times God appears bad, even though he tells us he is good. At times it is hard to live in the tension of what God has promised and what he has brought our way. There are passages in life when we live with more mystery than clarity. We all face times when we cry out for answers that we'll never get but that seem impossible to live without. Painful times come when we cry, "Why?" "If only \_\_\_\_\_," or "How long?"

Everyone faces moments when a cloud of mystery covers theological clarity. In these moments we don't want a theological outline or a set of wisdom principles. We cry out for an answer that will dispel the mystery that has us in its emotional and spiritual hold. At times we are tempted to withhold our trust until God gives an explanation. There are times when we're tempted to believe that we won't be able to trust until we are able to understand, that our peace of heart is dependent on mysteries being solved.

Here's the problem. God's secret will is called his "secret will" because it's secret. In his Word God graciously defines his character, and unfolds his grand redemptive plan, but he doesn't explain himself when it comes to the details of how and why he rules his world the way he does. This means that embracing the truth of his sovereignty doesn't remove the confusion of mystery from our lives. So rest and peace of heart will never be found in understanding what God has ordained for us and his world, because we'll always lack understanding to some degree. God knows that we are incapable of carrying the burden of sovereign knowledge that he carries, so he lovingly protects us by telling us

what we need to know: we are to rest in him and live as he has ordained, while he protects us from what would overwhelm us.

When our children were young and I had to say no to something they wanted, they would say, “Daddy, why? Why?” I knew that they wouldn’t be able to understand my reasons, so I would say, “Daddy would love to tell you why, but you would not understand. You can get mad at Daddy and say, ‘My daddy is a bad daddy because he says no to me,’ or you can say, ‘I don’t know why my daddy said no to me, but I know my daddy is a good daddy who loves me.’” Then I would say, “Trust your daddy. I really do want what’s best for you.” Because we don’t understand, and because things around us or near us don’t always seem good, it is tempting to question the wisdom, love, and goodness of God. It is tempting to let our situational confusion begin to sow seeds of doubt, leading us to question truths that the Bible makes clear and that we have held dear.

When Job, who had lost everything, asked God for a reason for his suffering, seeking answers that we all tend to cry out for in the devastation of hardship, God didn’t give him answers. Stop and read Job 38–41 and then consider Job’s response. Rather than giving Job answers he wouldn’t understand and that his heart couldn’t contain, God answered Job by pointing to himself, to his presence, power, and glory. He knew that Job’s instinct was to seek answers, when what Job really needed was to seek God. Nothing good ever comes when a sufferer withholds trust in God because he’s unable to understand why something bad has happened. Yet there are moments when I am tempted, and you will be tempted, to do just that.

So where do we run with our questions? What do we do with our lack of answers? It never works to demand what you’ll never have. It never works to require of God what he, in his love and wisdom, knows it’s best not to give. So the rest of heart that every sufferer longs for never comes from demanding understanding.



Rest comes from putting your trust in the One who understands and rules all the things that confuse you. God is never caught up short. He never has a second of confusion. He never regrets what he's done. He is never confused as to what to do. He has no quandaries, and he never lives with unsolved mysteries. He rules all things, he knows all things, and there is nothing that he doesn't understand.

But there's more. The One who rules and understands everything is the definition of all that is right, true, faithful, loving, powerful, and gracious. His rule is always good because he is good. So it's very important to not allow the confusion of suffering to redefine for you who God is. Rather, we all need to accept the limits of our understanding, while we let God's declaration of who he is in Scripture define the hope we can have, because he is with us in our suffering and rules all the details of it. Hope is found not in trying to solve all the mysteries that suffering brings our way but in running into the arms of the One who has no mystery and offers us his presence, power, and promises.

### **Understanding the Comfort Found in God's Rule**

For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;  
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
and he does according to his will among the host of  
heaven  
and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
and none can stay his hand  
or say to him, "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:34b–35)

I love these words spoken by Nebuchadnezzar, a powerful ruler in ancient Babylon, after he'd been humbled by the hand of God. These are words of humble surrender and also of glorious hope for anyone struggling through the hardships and disappointments

of life. May these words be written on our hearts and give hope to us when nothing else in life can. I want to use these words as a backdrop for unpacking the practical, life-giving hope that God's sovereign rule offers to every one of his suffering children.

### *1. God's Rule Stretches from before Origins to beyond Destiny*

It's hard to stretch our imagination far enough to grasp that there never was nor will there ever be a moment in the history of the universe that is out of control. God ruled from his throne before the universe was created and set in motion; God sits on his throne right now, and he'll continue to rule after the world as we know it has passed away. It may not look like it, you may not understand it, and you may quarrel with how he does it, but every second of the past, present, and future passes under his careful rule.

This is practical and hope giving for all of us because every second of our lives, from conception to final destiny, is under his sovereign management. Yes, we face things we never thought we'd face, and, yes, many of those things are very hard. No, we can't always discern why God makes the choices that he, in his infinite wisdom, makes, but we shouldn't allow hardship to lead us to conclude that something has gotten in the way of his rule. As Nebuchadnezzar rightly states, nothing in heaven or on earth can stop his rule or force him to give account for it.

His words paint a huge contrast between God and us, and we need to let that sink in. I can't even keep control of my car keys, let alone the things that give shape and direction to my life. But that shouldn't cause me to conclude that these things are out of control, because they are under God's control. His will is always done. His plan always succeeds. Everything in creation does his bidding. And he's infinitely wise and perfectly good. We shouldn't interpret suffering as evidence of his absence, weakness, distance, or lack of care.

This means that there's never a moment when I can't go for help, and there's never a moment when God is incapable of helping me, because he rules everything that needs to be ruled so that he can give me the help that I need. *Have you let suffering weaken your belief in the moment-by-moment rule of your Lord?*

## **2. God's Rule Is Global**

When we go into a new location, a different situation, or a new community of people, we often experience anxiety. This natural anxiety is the result of the limits of our understanding and personal power when we enter a place we don't yet know or an experience we've never had. No wonder our minds race and our hearts beat a little faster. We wonder what we'll have to face, how we'll be treated, and whether we'll make it through.

Such is the experience of anyone who has ever suffered the unexpected. I had never been seriously sick; I had never endured a long hospital stay; I had never been too sick to do what God called me to do; I had never experienced intolerable pain; I had never endured failing, damaged kidneys; I had never had to face surgery after surgery; and I had never had to face the fact that I will bear significant physical weakness until I die. No wonder I was assaulted with grief and fear. No wonder I was a bit paralyzed by the impossibility of it all. No wonder.

It's here that God's global sovereignty is so precious. Your story will take you places you never thought you'd be. Your life will travel roads you don't feel ready to travel. You'll end in places far from what you would have chosen. There will be situations in which you wonder how in the world you got there. Wherever your story takes you, you'll never arrive there first, because your Lord is already there in sovereign presence and power, and he rules that place in infinite wisdom and holiness. He has the power to do what he wills, and the way he rules is always right.

David captures this well with these familiar words from Psalm 139:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me. (vv. 7–10)

*Could it be that you've forgotten that the hard place you're in right now is ruled by your Lord of wisdom, power, and grace?*

### ***3. God's Rule Is Individual and Detailed***

One of my all-time favorite Bible passages is Acts 17:26–27, which says that God “made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us.” I don’t know if I can give justice to the amazing reality that these verses capture, but I will try. When you think of God’s sovereignty, you shouldn’t mentally picture God on a throne somewhere off in the distant heavens organizing the big events of the universe. The picture Paul gives in Acts couldn’t be more different.

Paul wants us to know that God’s sovereignty is gloriously more than a “big event” rule. He wants us to know that God cares about and is involved with the details of our lives, and Paul gives us specific examples. He says that God determines our “allotted periods” and the “boundaries of [our] dwelling place.” You may read that and think, “What in the world is he talking about?” When Paul talks about “allotted periods,” he means the

length of your life, and when he says, “boundaries of their dwelling place,” he means the address where we live. Think of God as directly involved with the length of the life of everyone who has ever lived and the exact address of everyone who has ever walked the face of the earth! He is just that present and powerful!

But there is more here. God has chosen to rule this way to be near to each one of us. Sure, Paul believes in God's *transcendent* sovereignty, the fact that he exists above all, but here he is teaching the truth of God's *immanent* sovereignty, his nearness. Paul want us to know this because wherever we are, whatever we are going through, God is so near that we can reach out and touch him. He is sovereignly close. He is reachable, touchable, in your time of need. The God who is your hope in suffering is near because he has been and will ever be involved with even the little details of your life. His sovereignty guarantees that God is reachable in those moments when you think there is no helper who can reach you with what you need. *Are you in the habit of telling yourself that God's rule promises that he is always near?*

#### ***4. God's Rule Is an Expression of His Character***

God's sovereignty would not be such a huge comfort were it not for the fact that his rule is an expression of his glory. His rule is an expression, not a contradiction, of his love. His rule is an expression, not a compromise, of his wisdom. His rule never betrays his grace. His rule is an extension of his justice. His rule pictures his holiness. He rules in mercy. His sovereignty is tempered, directed, and expressed by his character. Because of this, in all your pain and confusion you can rest assured that the One who rules over every hard thing you experience is trustworthy because he is perfectly holy, lovingly wise, and good in every way. *When you are confused by God's rule, do you remind yourself of his character?*

### ***5. God Rules for Our Benefit***

At the end of Ephesians 1 Paul assures his readers that God not only rules but he rules all things for their sake. He says that Jesus now rules over everything for the sake of the church. Let this sink in for a minute. In amazing grace God has chosen to expend his power and authority in a way that directly benefits his children. You and I may not understand it or think that we are experiencing it, but God's rule is benevolent and redemptive. He does what he does not just for his own glory but also for the glory of his children. His sovereignty has you and me in view. As he rules, he remembers us. He remembers every promise he has made, what we need, what we are going through, the broken, groaning world he's left us in, and what it's like to walk in our shoes. The One in charge of it all is for us and exercises that authority for our benefit. *Do you remind yourself that the One who rules everything, rules it all for your good?*

Yes, we all live in moments, locations, situations, or relationships that seem to be spinning out of control, but they are not out of control. Yes, they are way beyond the scope of our control, but they are under the rule of One who is not only in complete control but is also perfectly good in every way. By the grace of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God is your Father. He exercises his sovereignty with a father's love for you. He hears your cries for help, and he stays near, and he is always reachable. He has authority you will never have, and he exercises it with a wise and loving heart for your benefit and the benefit of each of his children.

### **Review and Reflect**

1. How has suffering forced you to acknowledge that you aren't in control?



# THE WHOLE ARMOR OF GOD

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*How Christ's Victory  
Strengthens Us for  
Spiritual Warfare*

IAIN M. DUGUID

## DRESSED FOR BATTLE

Ephesians 6:10-13

Over recent years, there have been many television shows aimed at helping people get properly dressed. Sometimes the premise revolves around watching experts help people to pick the right outfit for a wedding. At other times, someone with a woefully poor fashion sense receives a total makeover with the help of fashion gurus and serious spending. As someone who is no expert in clothing trends, I find such programs fascinating. However, I would like to see follow-up programs six months later. Were the people's lives genuinely transformed by their new fashion insights, or have they reverted to their old habits, redonning saggy spandex and sandals with socks?

Christianity is a religion about helping people become properly dressed, although not in the sartorial sense. Sins against fashion ought not to be held against you in the community of



believers. But Paul advises the Ephesians that there are certain things Christians must put off and others they must put on, just like in the television shows. More specifically, he tells us to put on the Christian armor so that we can be properly equipped to stand up to the assaults that will inevitably come our way in this fallen and spiritually dangerous world.

Life here on earth is hard—often very, very hard. According to the Bible, life is not a picnic but a *battle*, an armed struggle against a powerful adversary. To engage in that battle properly, we need a spiritual makeover in which our flimsy, inadequate natural attire is replaced by suitable armor and weaponry. So Paul concludes this magnificent, gospel-saturated letter, Ephesians, with a final charge to be prepared to engage with the battle of life in the right way.

In this book, we are going to unpack each of the pieces of armor he describes, but first we shall look at three perspectives that orient us to the larger fight: the scale of our need, the vastness of God's provision, and the call to stand.

## THE SCALE OF OUR NEED

Paul spares no effort in describing the seriousness of our opposition. We don't wrestle with flesh and blood but against the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness (Eph. 6:12). If that sounds scary, it is because it is meant to. The devil is a very real, very powerful opponent, far too powerful for us to take on in our own strength. This is a salutary reminder to people in our Western context, who are inclined to ridicule the idea of a literal devil. Many find the idea of a cosmic being whom we can't see, feel, or touch and who promotes evil in this world unthinkable. Of course, the devil in whom they don't believe is, in their minds, often not the biblical figure but a rather ridiculous image

with hooves and horns. Who could seriously believe in that creature? It is convenient for the devil when people don't believe in his existence. Then he can pursue his nefarious schemes unsuspected and undetected.

Yet who doubts the reality of evil in this universe? Almost everyone agrees that some things are not merely tragic but genuinely evil. Gassing millions of Jews in the death camps of Poland is evil. Press-ganging young African children into an army, getting them high on drugs, and then sending them into battle is evil. Trafficking women in the sex industry is evil. Where does all this evil in the world come from? Man's natural inhumanity to man hardly seems a sufficient explanation for evil on this scale. Is it possible that there is another factor, a supernatural spiritual dimension, to all of this moral depravity? If you believe that the universe you see around you is all there is, then you have no rational basis on which to be shocked and outraged at evil. What we call "evil" must then be interpreted simply as an emotional response within us to dangerous things, triggered by evolutionary biology. But the Bible has a richer and deeper explanation for the sad world we find ourselves in, an explanation that allows us to recognize the profound reality of evil and the invisible spiritual forces that lie behind its constant reappearance in different shapes and forms.

The Ephesians to whom Paul was writing were not modern materialists. They were very well aware of the spiritual forces around them, as people in other parts of the world continue to be. Yet even to them, Paul makes a point of highlighting the power of the opposition we face:

We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness. (Eph. 6:12)

Some of the terms that Paul uses here may have been in use in Ephesus as titles for various spiritual beings; Ephesus was a hot-bed of occult interest, as Acts 19:18–19 makes clear.<sup>1</sup> To these people, already convinced of Satan’s reality, Paul strongly underlines the power of the opposition that faced them—the same power that faces us. To use Peter’s language, Satan “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet. 5:8).

Of course, adding to the imbalance in this wrestling match is the fact that although our opponents are not flesh and blood, we are. We are not principalities and powers or cosmic rulers but ordinary flawed, fallen, flesh-and-blood mortals. You might think that we have no business engaging in this combat; in the language of Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, it is hobbits against orcs, an unequal contest. Yet this is exactly the battle in which we are engaged. Serving in the Lord’s army is not an option reserved for those particularly devoted to God. The choice is not whether you will be a Christian soldier or a Christian civilian but whether you will be a prepared Christian soldier or an unprepared one. And an unprepared soldier of flesh and blood will not be able to stand against the scale of the spiritual forces ranged against him or her.

What is more, this conflict takes place in the midst of “this darkness.” In many respects, the dark world in which we live is Satan’s playground. There are tempting sights, sounds, and tastes in this world that dazzle and allure us into sin. There is much around us that seems desirable and many powerful temptations that find a ready ally in our flesh. Earthly objects are very real to us, while heavenly realities seem ethereal and intangible. Satan also has centuries of experience as a tempter, knowing exactly

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1. See Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 14.

which temptations are most likely to draw our individual human nature into sin, whether giving ourselves to a particular form of excess or to a subtle self-exalting pride that flows from a belief in our own righteousness. The powerful combination of the world, the flesh, and the devil is inevitably overwhelming, left to ourselves. This is why Paul doesn't merely say, "Bring the armor of God along with you on the off chance that you might need it." Rather, he says, "You will need it; so put it on."

As a skilled tempter, Satan also knows how to use the difficulty of the combat to his own advantage. As a child, I used to watch the science fiction program *Dr. Who*. Some of the doctor's opponents I particularly remember from those early days were the Cybermen. These terrifying bionic creatures loudly proclaimed, "Resistance is useless," sending me scurrying behind the sofa week after week. In the same way, the devil often seeks to frighten us into submission, shouting at us, "Resistance is useless!" He pretends to even greater power than he has, presenting a particular temptation to us as utterly irresistible. He says to you: "You can't help yourself. It's the way you were made. You need this sin to be happy. What is the point of resisting? You know you are going to lose in the end, so you might as well just give in now."

## **THE SCALE OF GOD'S PROVISION**

To combat this strategy, we need to understand the scale of the provision God has given us. Paul's desire is that we should be able to stand against the schemes of the devil, and to that end he begins by outlining God's far greater power. Even before he introduces the opposition forces, Paul tells us that we are to be strong in God's awesome, magnificent power, a power that is beyond compare. The words Paul uses here in Ephesians 6:10 are

an echo of the same Greek words that he used in 1:19 to describe the power of God that raised up Christ.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the power with which we have been equipped for our struggle against sin and Satan is the very same power that brought Christ back from the dead.

This is not just the power that would be required to raise someone like Lazarus from the dead (see John 11:1–44). Raising the physically dead is no big deal, comparatively speaking. Yet the power of God is great enough to raise *Christ* from the dead, Jesus Christ who was buried in death under the full weight of God’s wrath against sin—the sin of every one of his people throughout all ages, including you and me. This power of God not only raised Jesus Christ back to life but lifted him to the heavenly realms, so that he is now seated at the right hand of the Father in glory. There is real power, far greater even than the terrifying power ranged against us! The one who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

## SELF-DIRECTED SANCTIFICATION?

That brings us to the call to stand. Paul says, “Be strong in the Lord. . . . Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil” (Eph. 6:10–11). What many of us hear in these words is a call to triumphant action, as if it is completely up to us to take on the devil and withstand his schemes. If we would just put on the whole armor of God, we should therefore constantly be able to stand firm against all of Satan’s schemes. God has done his part perfectly in making the armor available; now it is up to us to choose whether to use it. Meanwhile, God appears helpless in heaven, waiting to see

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2. The ESV’s “Be strong” and “the strength of his might” represent three Greek words: *endunamoo*, *kratos*, and *ischus*.

how it all turns out. When this wrong understanding holds sway, Christians get sorted into one of two camps. Some choose to be radical disciples of Jesus and live an epic life by putting on that armor. Others, by their neglect, become those “loser” Christians who are regularly tripped up by the devil’s schemes, falling into sin daily, leaving God perpetually disappointed. In reality, many of us find ourselves daily in the second category: we are often unwilling and unable even to think clearly about the armor, let alone put it on. If sanctification were as simple as some suggest (“Just try harder to put on the armor!”), we would not fail and fall in the Christian life nearly as much as we do. Not for nothing does the Heidelberg Catechism remind us that even the holiest men (and women) make only “small beginnings” on the road to obedience in this life.<sup>3</sup>

An inevitable result of this self-focused perspective on our spiritual growth is that we become proud of ourselves and judgmental of others if we think that we are doing well in our struggle against sin and Satan. After all, *we* chose to put on God’s armor while they made poor choices. Alternatively, we feel utterly crushed if we are all too aware of our frequent failures and compromises with the world, the flesh, and the devil. Perhaps we find ourselves riding an emotional roller coaster between those two extremes: ecstatic and happy when we succeed in our battles against sin but depressed and anxious when we all too often fail.

In reality, God’s awesome power is not something we can choose to tap into, as if we were in charge of the process; rather, it is something inevitably at work within all those whom God has chosen and called according to his purpose. At the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul reminds us that God predestined

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3. Heidelberg Catechism, answer 114.

us before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight, according to the good pleasure of his will, so that we should be for the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:4–6). God hasn't left it up to us to decide whether that purpose will succeed! No, his mighty power is at work for every believer in Christ to accomplish his ultimate purpose of presenting us to himself holy and blameless, to the praise of his glory. As Paul said in Philip-  
pians 2:13, it is *God* who is at work in us, both to will and to work for his good purpose.

That mighty power of God is at work for our spiritual growth in two distinct ways. First, it was demonstrated outside us in the once-for-all work of Christ in resisting sin and Satan in our place; and, second, it is demonstrated inside us through the ongoing, progressive work of the Spirit, renewing our hearts and minds. In both these ways, God is sovereign over the whole process of sanctifying his church from start to finish. There will be nothing in which any of us can boast on that last day.

## **THE ARMOR OF GOD IS GOD'S ARMOR**

Let's unpack that idea in connection with God's armor. Our sanctification rests first and foremost on the finished work of Christ in our place. As we shall see, the armor of God is quite literally God's armor—armor designed for and worn by God first and foremost. The armor God gives us to defend and protect us against Satan's onslaught is the armor that he has already worn in the decisive battle on our behalf. We fight and stand firm against Satan only in the strength that comes from the victory that Christ has already won for us.

That is why each of the various pieces of armor points us to Christ. The belt of truth is the belt that girds the messianic king

in Isaiah 11:5. The breastplate of righteousness and the helmet of salvation come from the divine warrior's arsenal in Isaiah 59:17. The feet shod with gospel readiness are the feet of those who proclaim the arrival of Messiah's kingdom in Isaiah 52:7. God himself is the shield of faith, as he describes himself in Genesis 15. The sword of the Spirit, the Word of God, is the weapon wielded by the promised servant of the Lord in Isaiah 49:2.

What God clothes us with is nothing less than his own armor, the same armor that Christ has already worn on our behalf in his lifelong struggle with the mortal enemy of our souls, Satan himself. Unlike armchair generals who watch the fighting from a safe distance, Jesus has himself worn the armor and won the victory. You are called to wear the armor of God not because that's what Jesus would do if he found himself in a similar situation; you are called to wear God's armor because that is what Jesus has already done, wearing God's armor all the way to the cross. He stood firm against Satan's schemes throughout his earthly life and ministry. Each of those specific temptations to which we have given in this week—lust, gossip, anger, pride, self-exaltation, lying, coveting—are temptations he faced and stared down in your place. What is more, Jesus laid his life down for you in winning the victory that lets loose God's sanctifying Spirit in your life. Because of his victorious life, death, and resurrection, the same power that raised Christ up from the dead is now at work inside you and me through the ongoing work of the Spirit, raising us from spiritual death to new life. However, that ongoing work of the Spirit in your life is ultimately no more under our control than God's first work of regenerating us.<sup>4</sup> In

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4. See Westminster Confession of Faith 16.3: "[Christians'] ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ. And that they must be enabled thereunto, beside the graces they have already received, there is required an actual



John 3, Jesus compares the process of becoming a Christian to birth. Just as a baby doesn't have control over the time and circumstances of her birth, so God chose when to regenerate you and bring you to faith in Christ. Even after a child is born, she cannot choose to grow or not to grow. She may wish to be taller or shorter, but wishing won't make it so. In the same way, we are not in control of the process of our spiritual growth. The God who has started a good work in us *will* bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). Even though we are not passive but are to fight with all our might, our sanctification is ultimately God's work from beginning to end.

That perspective is enormously encouraging in our daily struggle with sin and Satan. We often imagine we are fighting alone in our struggles against sin. Not at all. Your victory over sin belongs to Jesus, not you. Jesus's struggle was the decisive one, not yours. His victory on the cross purchased your complete sanctification, your ultimate holiness before God. His Spirit is at work within you growing you at the rate that he intends toward his goal of your complete purity. Your sanctification is where he plans for it to be.

That doesn't mean that we'll never have to struggle with sin, of course. Quite the reverse: Paul clearly expects us to be engaged in a daily life-and-death struggle with Satan in all of his awesome power. The imagery of armor and battle shows us that the fight against sin must involve blood, sweat, and tears. Philippians 2:12–13 tells us to work out our own salvation *because* God is at work in us. But Christ's victory over sin at the cross means that your struggle against sin is never hopeless. God will ultimately sanctify you—he has promised to do so. On that last day, you

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influence of the same Holy Spirit, to work in them to will and to do, of his good pleasure." Compare the similar emphasis in the Canons of the Synod of Dordt 5.4.

will rise to new life in Christ and stand in God's presence, made perfect forever. Sin and Satan shall not have ultimate dominion over you.

This means that in the midst of the pain of the frustrating daily struggle against sin and Satan, you can plead with God to continue to advance that process here and now. It gives you hope to keep on trying, even in areas of your life where sin continually seems to have the upper hand. It means that when you are seeing real advance in your life, you will know that it is nothing you have accomplished. God's Holy Spirit deserves the glory, not you.

## THE GLORY OF OUR WEAKNESS

Indeed, in pursuit of glory, the Spirit often turns us over to ourselves to show us just how weak we really are. You can see this in the life of King Hezekiah. He had walked with God for many years and seen much of God's goodness to him. But in 2 Chronicles 32:21, we are told that God left Hezekiah to himself, to uncover what was in his heart. The result was his greatest sin, proudly showing the Babylonians around his treasures in an effort to persuade them that he could be a good ally against the Assyrians. This explains the puzzling nature of our struggle. We often assume that since God is holy and hates sin, his primary goal is that we should always stand strong in our battle against sin. However, the Spirit has no interest in turning us into independent creatures who can stand in our own strength.<sup>5</sup> Rather, he wants us to see clearly the reality that we have no power within ourselves to take up God's armor and stand, unless God himself empowers us to do that. We are called to "be strong in the Lord" (Eph. 6:10), not to be strong in ourselves. Left to ourselves, we will certainly

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5. On this, see John Newton, "The Advantages of Remaining Sin," in *Select Letters of John Newton* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2011), 150–55.

fall to the schemes of the devil. As the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it:

The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, his own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.<sup>6</sup>

Did you catch what the confession is saying? The confession says that the righteous and holy God *often* leaves his own children in the grip of manifold temptations, experiencing the corruption of their own hearts, for his own holy purposes. He desires above all that we would grow in humility and dependence upon his grace. The confession accurately describes our experience. We learn the depravity of our own sinful nature, the vast superiority of Satan's skill, our constant need of Christ's perfect sacrifice, and the ongoing power of the Holy Spirit within us most often through our experience of our own sin and failure rather than during our few moments of spiritual triumph. As John Newton would say, we don't learn of the depth of the corruption of our nature simply by being told it; we learn it through bitter experience as we struggle with sins that seem as natural as breathing—and as hard to give up.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing teaches us the power of Satan or our utter dependence upon God more than our constant spiritual failures. If I

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6. Westminster Confession of Faith 5.5.

7. See John Newton, "The Advantages of Remaining Sin," 153.

make repeated resolutions to give up a certain sin, and I fast and pray and still find myself giving in to it, what else can I conclude but that I am indeed the weakest of Christians? When I resolve over and over not to say the unkind and prideful words that repeatedly spring into my mind, but still find myself hurting people and exalting myself regularly, what shall I say except, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24).

Nothing gives us more passion for the righteousness of Christ than a specific and growing awareness of our own brokenness. When I am strong and living the Christian life well, I may be fond of the gospel as a concept, but when I see more clearly the ongoing depth of my sinfulness, then I cling to the gospel like a drowning man to a life belt. Nothing gives us a greater desire for the completion of the Spirit’s work on the last day, and our full deliverance from the battle against this body of death, than those times when the conflict with remaining sin in our lives is at its fiercest.

Those who are not yet believers in Christ are often comfortable with their sin; for them, there really is no struggle. But when God begins to work, people start to see the ugliness of their own heart, and they begin to sense their need of a redeemer—someone to rescue them from themselves. Jesus is precisely that Redeemer, who both fights the battle in their place and then engages the battle inside and alongside them through the powerful work of his Holy Spirit.

Life is a battle for Christians; Jesus told his disciples to take up their cross (Matt. 16:24), not to take up their armchair. We are engaged in conflict against an enemy whose strength and skill far outmatch our own. But it is a battle that we have been equipped to fight in the sure knowledge that we’ve been enlisted on the

winning side. We take up our cross because our Savior first took up his. We wear God's armor because Jesus wore it first. In the final analysis, standing our ground simply means clinging desperately to Jesus Christ as our only hope of salvation. In that attitude of dependent trust is true victory. For all of his power and wiles, Satan has no ability to snatch away those who are trusting in Christ, for they are the children of God, and their Father will not let them go. They have been entrusted by the Father into the safe keeping of the Son and are indwelt by the Spirit himself.

Everything you need for your salvation has been accomplished for you by Jesus Christ, and he himself is now working in you by his Spirit to work out that salvation. Sometimes God will demonstrate his power in you by enabling you to stand strong against Satan's devices; at other times, his purpose is graciously to allow you to fall to teach you equally important lessons about your own weakness and the glorious sufficiency of his grace to save and sustain the weakest of the weak. Either way, the glory will all be his on the last day.

So "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might"; take your stand against the devil, protected by the armor that God has provided. Fight the good fight with all your might. Wrestle with all the energy that the Spirit gives you. But in the midst of that standing, fighting, and wrestling, don't forget to rest in the finished victory of Christ and the assurance that the Spirit's perfect sanctifying work in your life is what counts.

## **FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**

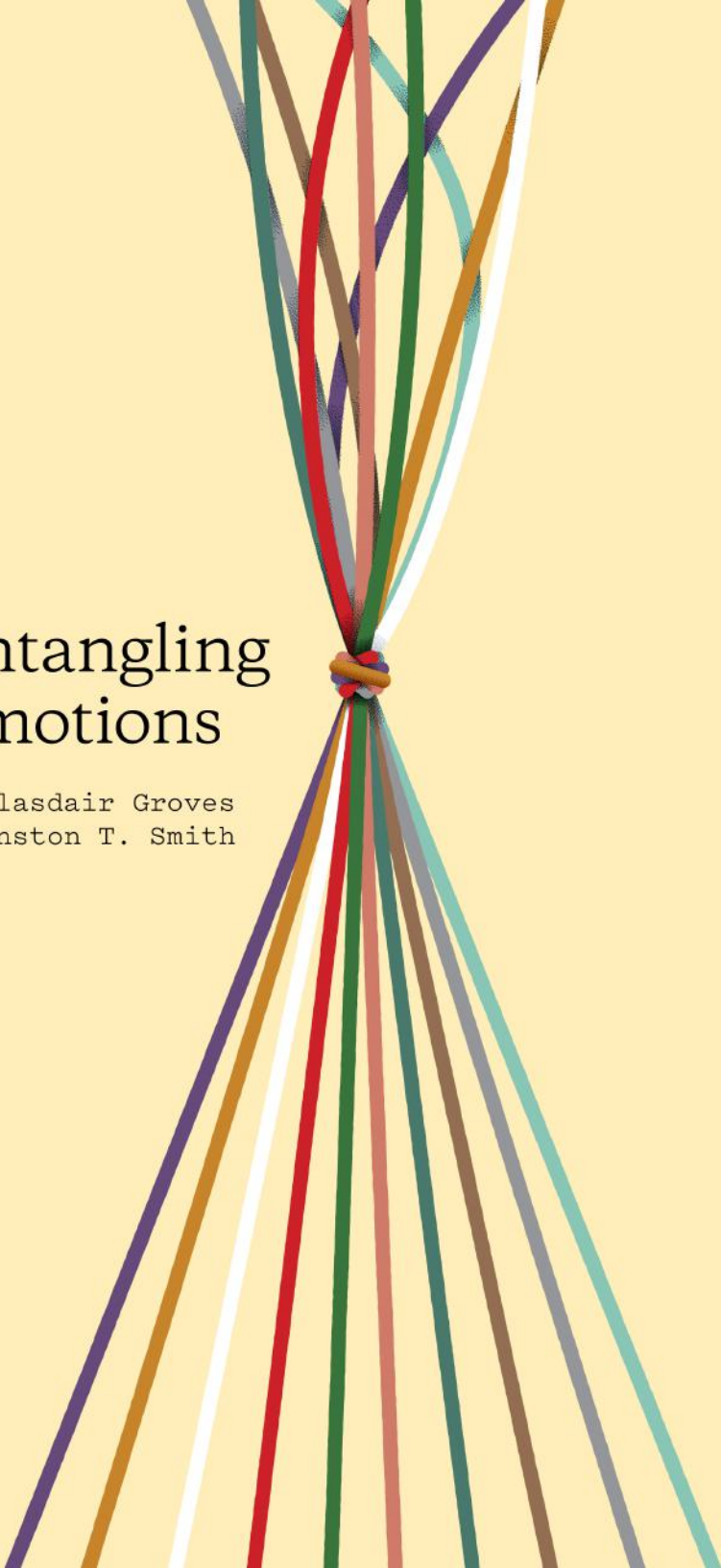
1. Do you believe that life is a battle? How have you experienced that reality recently?

2. Do you take seriously the reality of Satan's role in the conflict?  
How does that impact the way you approach difficult situations?
  
3. Does Satan more effectively tempt you by showing you the seductive attractiveness of sin or by threatening to overpower you?  
How have you experienced these different modes of temptation?
  
4. Why does it matter that the power God has equipped us with is the same power that raised Christ from the dead?
  
5. What difference does it make to the sanctification process if we really believe that it is God's work from beginning to end? Why is it important that Jesus wore spiritual armor first?

2. What about the mystery of God tends to frustrate you? What about it do you find comforting?
  
3. Job in his suffering questioned God, but God simply pointed to himself rather than answer Job's questions. Why? Where do you see God's care in this response?
  
4. In your suffering, how have you allowed yourself to forget God's constant presence, rule, and character?
  
5. Paul Tripp reminds us that God in his goodness rules over all things for our good. How does this encourage you, and where have you seen it in your life?

### **Heart Reset**

- Job 38:1–42:6
  
- Acts 17:26–27
  
- Ephesians 1:15–23



# Untangling Emotions

J. Alasdair Groves  
& Winston T. Smith



## Engaging Fear

If you've stayed with us this far, then you know at least two things about the Bible's view of emotions: they are shaped by what you love, and you should engage them wherever you find them. In this final section we will take the framework we've hammered out in the first two-thirds of the book and apply it to some of the most common troubling emotions. Thus, each of the chapters in part 3 will look at how one particular emotion *communicates*, *relates*, and *motivates* (as we laid out in chap. 2) and then offer suggestions to help you *identify*, *examine*, *evaluate*, and *act* (as we talked about in chap. 8) in response to that emotion.

We begin with the emotion of fear for two simple reasons. First, "fear" comes to us with an incredible number of names in the English language (we haven't done the research but wouldn't be surprised if this were true of most or all languages). Words like *uneasy*, *worried*, *nervous*, *anxious*, *tense*, *uptight*, *spooked*, *haunted*, *scared*, *afraid*, *panicked*, *terrified*, and *petrified* occupy slightly different points on the spectrum, but all express some version of the same core experience. As with the Eskimos, who supposedly have more than forty words for different kinds of snow, when your vocabulary balloons with terms for the same core concept, you know you've hit on a profound cultural concern.

The second reason we start with fear is simpler and more personal: you may well have picked up this book because you struggle with fear. How do we know that? Because fear is everywhere. Everyone deals with it, but, unlike anger, which everyone deals with too, fear is much more commonly recognized and admitted. Fear is certainly the most common emotion we've seen drive people to seek counseling.

We are not trying to provide an exhaustive approach for dealing with fear; hundreds of other such books already exist. Our hope is to help you see your fear a little more clearly and deal with it more effectively so that you can profit from and apply the rest of this book as much as possible.

With all this in mind, we will answer two questions: What is fear, and how should we engage it?

## **What Is Fear?**

### ***What Fear Communicates***

Fear, whether mild uneasiness or abject terror, has a simple message: something you value is under threat. Something bad might happen to something you care about. The future holds potential for loss.

Because of this and because fear is so common to us, your fears are probably the single best map of what you actually value. Fear points directly to what we treasure, whether health, wealth, acceptance, comfort, straight As, or winning a game of tiddly-winks. You'll be more nervous about having enough money to make mortgage payments than about whether you have a stick of gum because you care more about having a house than about having a nice snack (unless you're sixteen and on a first date and you forgot to brush your teeth). You'll lose more sleep at night worrying about your children than about your chickens.

Communicating value is exactly what Paul's "anxiety" is doing in 2 Corinthians 11:28. As we discussed in chapter 2, Paul is not confessing sin to his readers when he tells them, "There is the daily

pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.” No, he is honestly expressing what is on his heart: the church, God’s kingdom, the welfare of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He knows all too well that wolves in sheep’s clothing beset the fledging congregations he has hatched. He is rightly concerned over the young faith of those he has brought to Christ, the daily temptations believers face to be selfish and self-indulgent, the danger of internal conflict in the body, and so on.

It speaks extraordinarily well of Paul that his greatest suffering, the capstone at the end of a long list of grueling trials in ministry, is fear for the survival and flourishing of Christ’s bride.

To be sure, Paul’s anxiety isn’t nervous nail-biting. Instead, his letters show fear that is deeply compatible with, even *driven by*, his faith because it flows from his love for God and his spiritual children. It’s a fear that leads him straight to God. Of course, most of us are slower than Paul to run to God in our fears, and fewer still can honestly say their deepest concern is the glory of God and the welfare of the church. Fundamentally, however, whether our fears are as godly as Paul’s or not, we learn a great deal about our true values and deepest commitments when we look at the constellation of our fears.

Where fear flourishes, there your heart will be also.

### ***How Fear Relates***

Our fears not only tell us what we love; they also push us toward extremes in relationships. Fear urges us to either jump back from others or cling to them like driftwood in a shipwreck, depending on our perception of what will most likely make us feel safe.

Take, for example, a woman afraid of being judged by friends at church. One natural strategy would be to pull away from her friends and keep a safe distance so that they see only what she wants them to see. This also leaves fewer touch points where her friends could evaluate (and thus judge) what she does or says. It limits her exposure to the telltale signs of disapproval in their

faces, voices, and unspoken choices, for which she is on high alert. Such a strategy can easily become a self-exacerbating cycle. The more she keeps others at arm's length, the more weight rests on each encounter she does have. The added pressure on each encounter in turn increases her sense of anxiety (because the relationship has become more distant and thus fragile). Then, heightened anxiety will likely lead this woman to be more undone by even slight hints of judgment she rightly perceives. It will also make her more likely to read condemnation into words and gestures where it is completely absent. Naturally, all of this will reinforce her sense that she needs to pull away to protect herself, deepening the cycle.

On the flip side, imagine a slightly awkward young man who has experienced repeated rejection from girls he has been interested in but who now is in a dating relationship. He will probably be overattentive to his girlfriend's every twitch or mood, overeager to spend time, overquick to do whatever she wants when they go out. In short, he will cling to her for reassurance about the relationship and for evidence he's still in her good graces. Many women will find such attention pleasant at first, but inevitably it eventually smothers actual love, trust, and attraction. Though our young friend would not put it this way, he values *having* a girlfriend more than the girl herself, and she always eventually feels it.

While these examples show how fear can lead us to unhealthy and self-serving relational patterns on both extremes, fear shared honestly and without manipulative intent can greatly strengthen relationships. Nothing so powerfully quenches the fire of fear as the presence of someone we trust. In fact, even someone we don't know well can bring a surprising amount of comfort.

Counselor and author Ed Welch, our colleague, talks about his sheepish discovery that he felt less nervous taking the trash out at night in the alley next to his house simply because his cat was there with him! How much greater, especially in our fears, is the underappreciated promise of Scripture that God will be with us!

How many times have we heard ourselves casually pray—often throwing in the phrase while thinking what to say next—that God would “be with” someone? The hope and comfort of God’s commitment to be present and stand with us, drawing close and never leaving, are terrible things to trivialize. After all, if a friend or even a cat with us takes the edge off our fears, how much more the abiding company of Immanuel?<sup>1</sup>

God chose to come among us in the flesh, enter our hearts with his very Spirit, and ultimately bring us to be physically with him forever. Surely such intimacy is beyond our comprehension. Yet, while this is vastly beyond sufficient for us, God does not expect or even want us to go it alone during our lives on this earth; he actually built us to *need* each other as well. He is enough, and yet he has chosen to use the fellowship we have with each other to encapsulate and reinforce his presence with us. “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them,” Jesus said (Matt. 18:20). Thus, while there are exceptions to every rule, you will be better off in your fears when you vulnerably share them with a trusted friend.

### ***How Fear Motivates***

The classic phrase you hear is that fear energizes us toward “fight or flight.” This is a helpful summary. To clarify and expand this slightly, fear motivates us to seek *safety*, *control*, and *certainty*. All three are good and right things to seek in the face of danger.

All three, however, can go bad in a hurry.

We’ve watched countless people—whether a wife feeling hurt by her husband, someone who was grievously sinned against as a child, or simply someone with a timid personality—grasp after safety, control, and certainty *at all costs*.

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1. *Immanuel* is Hebrew for “God with us” and is the name the prophet Isaiah gives to the Messiah, God come down to bring justice and peace. God’s incarnation in the flesh was the most stunning act in history, and the breathtaking nature of his choice to remain with us through the constant, abiding presence of his Spirit, which even David, Moses, and Abraham did not experience, is impossible for us to fully grasp.

But anything pursued at all costs will ultimately cost more than you can afford.

Safety is great, until you cling so tightly to it that you are no longer willing to step out of your zone of (perceived) refuge even to love others or obey God. Good desires for responsibly shaping our environment or obtaining confident clarity about the outcome of our choices easily become ugly demands for a total control and absolute certainty we creatures were never meant to have.

Fundamentally, the problem with all three of these methods of guarding against our broken and dangerous world is that they present a frightfully strong temptation to trust in ourselves rather than God. In Psalm 20, the psalmist says that some “trust in chariots and some in horses” (v. 7), meaning any and every kind of power we muster for ourselves. He contrasts this with a better trust, a trust in “the name of the LORD our God” (v. 7). When safety, control, or certainty becomes our fundamental hope in the face of fear, we are trusting in chariots and horses—which is to say, ourselves. Why do we lean on our own strength? Because at least we know what we are getting (or so we think). Yet, in our desire to be safe through maintaining control and certainty, we implicitly accuse God of not having our best interest at heart. Such faithlessness in God’s good plans for us and our safety have been at the heart of sin since Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden.

We’ll say it once more: safety, control, and certainty are not bad! Proverbs urges us to seek safety, saying the wise see trouble coming and hide themselves (22:3). And Scripture constantly calls us to seek wisdom and to see truth clearly, which is a kind of certainty. The Bible even has an extremely high view of control, if by “control” you mean the right exercise of whatever strength and responsibility you have. Whether you are a business executive organizing deals or a three-year-old organizing dolls, bringing order and fruitfulness to your world is good. Indeed, Paul spills a great deal of ink calling church leaders to direct and shape the growth of their congregations’ faith and community. In short, the

problem is not with self-protection or the desire to bring order and predictability to the world around us.

Instead, the caution we want to give is simply this: in this fractured life, you will never be completely safe, fully in control, or 100 percent certain of what is coming next. You were never meant to be. Instead, dangers, dependence, and uncertainties are signposts that point us not to a strategy but to a Person: the One whose control and utterly certain character are our only real safety.

Don't trust your life and treasures to your mind, your bank account, your personality, or your accomplishments. They are all chariots and horses that can't save (we've not met many people who struggle with putting their trust in literal chariots these days). Your only path to real safety lies in trusting God by engaging him in your fears.

## **How Should We Engage Fear?**

### ***Identifying Fear***

As is true for any emotion, engaging fear starts by simply realizing it is there. Here are some typical fingerprints that fear leaves.

Physically, strong fear tends to cause shortness of breath, increased heart rate, clammy palms, tensed muscles, and racing thoughts. Nervous twitches (in the face or a constant fidgeting of hands or legs) are not uncommon too. Milder, more baseline fear might show up as digestive issues (ulcers and irritable bowel syndrome can both result from long-term anxiety), headaches, fatigue, and, frustratingly, a whole host of other difficult-to-pin-down symptoms. Basically, given enough time, fear can gnaw on pretty much any part of your body. This doesn't mean that every unexplained physical symptom stems from unaddressed anxiety! It does mean, however, that your fears are probably having a bigger impact on your body than you realize.

Fear also drives us toward patterns of behavior. Some find themselves checking things repeatedly to make sure they are okay, even when they know what they're going to find (a condition

known as obsessive-compulsive disorder in its more intense forms). Others expose their fear by giving constant warnings to those around them to be careful, not climb so high in the tree, not take that risk, and so on.

Perhaps the simplest telltale sign of fear in your life is a tendency to ask *what if* questions: What if we don't have enough money to cover this or that? What if we get there and they've already left? What if no one likes my project? What if I'm not ready when they call on me? *What ifs* look to the future and import all the angst of possible dooms while writing the presence and help of God out of the picture.

Lastly, given that fear communicates what is important to you, there's a good chance you are feeling fearful if something or someone you care about is under some kind of threat, even if you aren't aware of feeling anything at all. For example, you may be aware that your child is being influenced by a bad crowd or that your job might be eliminated without being aware that you are anxious. It stands to reason, however, that if someone or something that matters to you (including yourself!) is in trouble or has an uncertain future, fear is probably lurking close by.

### ***Examining Fear***

Now that you've identified some form of fear in yourself, it's time to look at what is going on in that fear. Our examination will hunt especially hard for traces of two things: what you are caring about and what you are actively doing (or not doing) to deal with the fear. Here are three helpful questions to get you started.

*In what contexts do I feel this fear?* This first question is asking what factors are pressing your fear's buttons. Is there a particular location that makes you nervous every time you're there? For example, some people are afraid to go home, because of tension, physical violence, or loneliness. Others become anxious in the dark (a fear far more common among adults than you'd think!).



Some people fear a particular stretch of road after an accident. People fear churches, elevators, airports, forests, or driving in a city. I (Alasdair) get spooked when swimming in water if I don't know how deep it is.

Another kind of context is time. Certain seasons, events, or times of day can produce anxiety. Some people, for example, dread the holidays, painful dates on the calendar associated with grief, or dates with high expectations (Valentine's Day is often more stressful than romantic).

Still other fears swirl around people and activities. Are there particular people in whose presence you immediately tense up? What about particular activities—prepping dinner, driving across bridges, using public restrooms, touching door handles, playing sports, presenting at a meeting?

A wise examination of your fear starts by observing whatever is happening around you when you feel afraid.

*What are you doing about your fear?* The second question follows on the heels of the first. What do you find yourself doing in response to the places, people, times, or activities that spark your fear?

Do you self-medicate, or escape with alcohol, Facebook, mindless smartphone games, daydreams and fantasies, or overwork? Do you plunge deeper into the swirl of your anxious thoughts, racing endlessly to solve problems in your head, like a hamster on a wheel? Do you get irritable and critical of those around you? Do you turn honestly and desperately to prayer?

Remember though: the fact that you may not be proud of your reaction doesn't mean the underlying concern itself is invalid! We'll say more about this in a moment, when we talk about how to evaluate your fear.

*What are you valuing?* The simplest form of this question is *Why would I care if X happened?* Listen to your fears. They are telling you something very important about the shape of your

hopes, your dreams, and, most fundamentally, your worship. Examining your fear is a chance to put names on your treasures, to listen to what they are communicating.

### ***Evaluating Fear***

As we've said, fear can be good. Many fears are rooted in valid concerns for valid loves. Think of Paul's care for the churches, leading to his anxiety in 2 Corinthians 11:28; his love for the Philippians, producing anxious concern to let them know one of their number had recovered from illness (Phil. 2:25–29); his familial relationship with the Thessalonians, compelling him to send Timothy to find out if their faith and fellowship were holding after he left (1 Thess. 3:5).

On the other hand, our daily experience and the story of Scripture are full of examples of fear shutting hearts away from God rather than herding them toward him.

It is easiest to start by evaluating your reaction to your fear rather than the fear itself. Ask, *Is my reaction to this fear godly and constructive, or am I acting in destructive and sinful ways?* Now remember, as we just said above, a poor response does not necessarily mean the fear you are responding to is wrong or coming out of a disordered love. That said, if your fear is encouraging isolation, anger, self-medicating, health issues, growing distance between you and the Lord, or things like these, *something* is out of place. Your prayer in such moments is that God would help you see what is wrong, whether that is loving the wrong thing, loving the right thing too much, demanding certainty and control to protect something you rightly love, destroying more important things in an effort to save whatever you fear is at risk, or some other faulty response. The Bible offers us a reorienting hope in our fears: no matter what the danger or what we are valuing, God can be trusted with our treasures, and every fear ought to drive us straight toward the Lord in prayer, obedience, and fellowship!

A second, slightly harder evaluation question follows: *How likely will the feared event come to pass?* Fear is a notorious

exaggerator and false prophet of doom.<sup>2</sup> While fear rarely evaporates simply because you realize the chances of harm are low, evaluating the magnitude of the threat is still important in preparing to respond. Many of us have had that itch in the back of our minds that we forgot to lock a door at home after we left, even though we know we probably did it on autopilot. While it would be a big deal if the house were broken into, realistically the chances are extremely low that we forgot; and, even if we did, there is a good chance no one would take advantage. The point is that evaluating fears as overblown can be rightly relieving.

On the other hand, as I (Alasdair) write these words, Hurricane Irma is howling across the Atlantic Ocean toward Florida with a projected landfall in the next forty-eight hours. Hundreds of thousands of people along the coast, in low lying areas, and in trailer parks have been ordered to evacuate. These people don't know for sure what will happen, but their fear of the storm destroying their homes and killing them if they stay is definitely justified by the high probability that their communities will be leveled by a storm surge. Here is an example of fear rightly warning people of a very realistic danger, and our evaluation ought to take that into account.

So what if, as is very often the case, you're not sure how likely the fear really is? What if you suspect you're being overdramatic, but you don't feel able to trust your own judgment or evaluation?

Ask someone you trust about it!

A closely related issue needs evaluation as well: how big a deal would it be if your fear came true? Say, for example, you've lost a receipt for the new toaster you bought. The chances of needing to return the toaster under the warranty may be quite small, but there *is* still a chance. However, even if it does break and you can't get a refund because you lost the receipt, your loss is small. It's just not that big a deal if you end up having to buy a new toaster

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2. Edward T. Welch, *Running Scared: Fear, Worry, and the God of Rest* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2007), 51–52.

or go without bagels and English muffins. Sometimes, however, our fears fixate on the lost receipts in our life, and we worry a lot about fairly minor trials that would have a minimal impact even if the worst-case scenario came to pass.

The previous two evaluation questions—important as they are in seeing our situation clearly and even bringing a certain amount of relief—do little to help us bring the core of our fears to the heart of our faith. Here then are two final questions that probe deeper and pave the way for the gospel to meet us, whether our fears hit us or pass us by.

First, *should* you even care about this threatened thing in your life? Or, to put the question a different way, how does God see your situation? For example, a man might be deeply afraid that his cherished secret life with pornography will be discovered. In this case, the point is not whether his fear is highly realistic (his wife is going to see the credit card report) or extremely unlikely (he's a tech guru who covers his tracks meticulously). The point is that he should not be treasuring this awful cancer in his life in the first place. Instead he ought to actually *long* to be found out. In fact, he ought to bring himself into the light and confess his sin to his wife and close friends. Now, all of us can and should have compassion on him even as he dreads the shame of his sin being exposed; all of us have sinned in ugly ways, and it does indeed hurt when others see how dark our hearts can be. However, the fear of losing his beloved digital mistresses is fundamentally flowing out of a love for something he ought to hate. He badly needs to evaluate the heart of his fear and see that the problem is the object of his love, not the extent of his anxiety.

Second, even if you *should* value the thing you fear to lose, has healthy valuing become poisonous idolatry? Sometimes it isn't pornography but a successful ministry or a sunny day for your cookout. Ministry and sunshine are good desires. But either can ascend to the throne of our hearts and become a cruel tyrant rather than a gift from God we hope for but don't depend on. Fear

exposes the idols of our hearts very effectively, just as it also puts a spotlight on the good places where God has shaped our desires in righteous and healthy ways. Thus fear gives a vital message to the popular pastor who dreads going to the pulpit Sunday mornings because each new sermon bears the mounting weight of sustaining his reputation: the godly goal of a flourishing ministry is warring against God himself for his heart.

What is your fear telling you about what *you* love?

### ***Acting in Response to Fear***

What then should you do about your fear?

It depends.

It depends on what your examination and evaluation show you. It depends on how important or troubling a pattern you are observing. It depends on what else is going on in your life. We can make a few general suggestions, however.

First, and foremost, learn to turn to Scripture. We've mentioned how Psalm 27 speaks to our anxieties. Even a literal host of heavenly armed men trying to slash and stab you cannot overcome the "stronghold of [your] life" and his protection, in this life and the next. First Peter 5:7 is stunningly simple: hurl your fears straight into his hands; lay your fragile treasures in his lap; give him your anxiety. Why? Because he cares for you. He "cares" in both senses: he thinks about you, feels for you, has an interest in how you are doing; and he looks out for you, acts on your behalf, takes care of you. He promises to be with his children no matter what, till the end of time and beyond (Josh. 1:9; Matt. 28:20). He promises that he will always see your obedience, and not even a cup of cold water given out of love for Christ can be wasted (Matt. 10:42). He invites you to come to him when you are exhausted and overwhelmed (Matt. 11:28–30). He forgives your sins (Ex. 34:6–7a).

This is not a list of abstract truths to memorize (though memorizing them might be very wise!). These are real words from a real God who really can and will do everything he promises. These

commitments from a Person you can trust with your very life is an unparalleled reason for hope in the face of fear.

On the other end of the spectrum, it probably doesn't hurt to get your breathing under control. Anxiety may be your heart's way of communicating that your treasure is under threat, but, as we said in chapter 4, it writes that message on the slate of your body. Taking deep, measured, slow breaths and exhaling slowly is a common-sense way to preach the truth of safety in Christ to a body quivering with dread.

Some exercise wouldn't be a bad idea either. Someone once quipped that "exercise is the most underused antianxiety medication." Going for a run rarely makes your fears go away, but just as taking a deep breath or two exerts a check on a pounding heart, so regular physical exertion can reduce anxiety's ability to commandeer your body's systems and convert them into a megaphone for a story of doom.

Ironically, many anxious people struggle to rest as well. Busyness, be it work or play, can drown out the "eternal inner murmur"<sup>3</sup> that things aren't going to be okay. For those who build endless moats of activities to keep fear at bay, rest can feel like putting down the drawbridge and welcoming the invader into the castle keep. It is hard to rest when everything inside you cries out that a successful career, a growing bank account, well rounded children, a flourishing women's Bible study, or a satisfying leisure schedule, any of which take effort from you, is *the* thing keeping you safe! Anxiety pushes many onto a treadmill that never slows down.

If this is you, however, you can't afford *not* to slow down. For you, slowing down is faith.

When you stop checking email in the evening, step down from a leadership role, or even take five minutes to breathe or go for

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3. Judith Shulevitz, "Bring Back the Sabbath," *New York Times*, March 2, 2003; an online version may be accessed at <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/02/magazine/bring-back-the-sabbath.html>.

a walk, you implicitly entrust yourself and the things you care about into God's hands. By choosing to rest rather than throw yourself into the fray, you are literally, actively placing the battle and its outcome in God's hands. This doesn't mean self-indulgence or laziness is a virtue. It does mean that refusing to run endlessly and choosing to rest, even in the smallest ways, are a profound declaration that your hope is in God rather than yourself.

On the flip side, many anxious people struggle with procrastination, which is just as fear driven as workaholism. The procrastinator fears the discomfort of doing the work, the uncertainty of the outcome, or both. When you find yourself instinctively punting the most important projects in order to rearrange the sock drawer or play one more game (or read one more paragraph or send one more text or . . . ), your need is exactly the same as the anxious worker bee above: to entrust yourself and your work to God. It's just that the application is the opposite. For you, faith will be pressing into what you are responsible to do. In doing so, you entrust the pain of the process (usually overblown in your mind anyway) and the eventual success or failure of your project into his hands (where it has been from the beginning).

What if you find that you somehow struggle with both a faithless self-protective activity *and* a faithless self-protective procrastination? Welcome to the club. What a blessing that our patient Father knows that our fear is quite capable of driving us in opposing directions at the same time. He walks patiently by our side, rescuing us from one danger at a time, teaching us to trust him in our work and in our rest.

Two final types of action apply to us all.

First, seek out and seize opportunities to face your fears. "Face your fears" is, of course, an overused cliché. Yet this is so for a reason: there is enormous value in turning toward, rather than fleeing from, the things we dread. This turning must *not* be an exercise in *self*-trust. But when we *engage* our fears with God, we can have enormous confidence that God will strengthen and grow

us. So drive across that bridge. Be honest with your friend about that challenge in your relationship. Keep silent about your irritation rather than harping on it yet again in your effort to control the other person. Go skydiving. Give more money to your church and charities. Take a vacation. Take on a new way to serve.

Second, go on the offensive against any area in your life where you are self-medicating. Resist, cut back, give it up. It's amazing what you learn about yourself when you get rid of a crutch you've been leaning on. (Isaiah records how even God's enemies can see that such weak and ineffective crutches are sharp sticks that pierce your hand when you put your weight on them—Isa. 36:6.) Every time you run to a bottle, a screen, or an event instead of your heavenly Father, you are *disengaging* from your emotions and from him.

Don't be deceived. Each of the many above actions is ultimately more than an action. Actions always reveal our core beliefs and confidence. We always ultimately vote with our feet. You can choose to make any of the changes in this chapter by simply saying, "Okay, I'll try it." But you won't sustain any change in your life unless the love of your heart changes along with your actions. Only those who are growing in their love for God will be able to trust him. Yet, far from narrowing to a few elites the field of those who can overcome fear, this actually gives hope that all of us can do it! Why? Because every fear brought to the Lord, every anxiety or terror weathered under the shelter of his wings, reinforces our choice to trust. This means that even the smallest acts of faith, in God's mercy, are self-perpetuating. As the Psalms demonstrate over and over, every little taste of God's help and closeness in the face of our fears sparks greater love for God, which he in turn lovingly cultivates into deeper faith and changed lives.

### **Questions for Reflection**

*As you deal with your own fear:*

1. What have you learned about fear that was new to you?
2. What have you learned about your own fear?



3. Which of the steps (i.e., identify, examine, evaluate, act) is the hardest for you with your fear?

*As you help others with fear:*

1. Are you good at recognizing when others are fearful? Can you see fear when it is tucked under anger or hidden by self-confidence?
2. What is your instinctive approach to those who fear? To validate them? To challenge them? To comfort them? To run from them?
3. What passages most speak to *you* in your fear? How could you share those passages with someone else? Can you talk about how the Lord has helped you without stealing the conversation and making it about you?

*New York Times* Bestselling Author of  
*THE REASON FOR GOD* and *THE PRODIGAL GOD*

TIMOTHY  
KELLER

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Walking with God  
through  
Pain and Suffering

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## Introduction

### The Rumble of Panic beneath Everything

*I think that taking life seriously means something like this: that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation . . . of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false.*

—Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*<sup>1</sup>

*I will bless the LORD at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and be glad. O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together! (Psalm 34:1–3)<sup>2</sup>*

Suffering is everywhere, unavoidable, and its scope often overwhelms. If you spend one hour reading this book, more than five children throughout the world will have died from abuse and violence during that time.<sup>3</sup> If you give the entire day to reading, more than one hundred children will have died violently. But this is, of course, only one of innumerable forms and modes of suffering. Thousands die from traffic accidents or cancer every hour, and hundreds of thousands learn that their loved ones are suddenly gone. That is comparable to the population of a small city being swept away every day, leaving families and friends devastated in the wake.

When enormous numbers of deaths happen in one massive event—such as the 1970 Bhola cyclone in Bangladesh, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, or the 2010 Haiti earthquake—each of which killed 300,000 or more at once—it makes headlines around the world and everyone

[ 1 ]

## WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

reels from the devastation. But statistics are misleading. Such historic disasters do not really change the suffering rate. Tens of thousands of people die every day in unexpected tragedies, and hundreds of thousands around them are crushed by grief and shock. The majority of them trigger no headlines because pain and misery is the norm in this world.

Shakespeare understood this when he wrote:

Each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry,  
New sorrows strike heaven on the face.<sup>4</sup>

Evil and suffering are so pervasive that the statistics I just recounted hardly make us blink. Yet we must blink. Author Ernest Becker spoke about the danger of denying the misery of life and the randomness of suffering. When we hear of a tragedy, there is a deep-seated psychological defense mechanism that goes to work. We think to ourselves that such things happen to other people, to poor people, or to people who do not take precautions. Or we tell ourselves that if only we get the right people into office and get our social systems right, nothing like this will happen again.

But Becker believed such thinking fails to “take life seriously” or to admit the “lived truth of the terror of creation . . . of the rumble of panic underneath everything.”<sup>5</sup> That panic comes from death. Death is irreducibly unpredictable and inexorable.

The same message comes through in an article written in *The New York Times Magazine* during the time of the “Beltway Sniper,” who was shooting people in the Washington, DC, area in what appeared to be a completely random way, without concern for race or age. Ann Patchett wrote:

We are always looking to make some sort of sense out of murder in order to keep it safely at bay: I do not fit the description; I do not live in that town; I would never have gone to that place, known that person. But what happens when

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there is no description, no place, nobody? Where do we go to find our peace of mind? . . .

The fact is, staving off our own death is one of our favorite national pastimes. Whether it's exercise, checking our cholesterol or having a mammogram, we are always hedging against mortality. Find out what the profile is, and identify the ways in which you do not fit it. But a sniper taking a single clean shot, not into a crowd but through the sight, reminds us horribly of death itself. Despite our best intentions, it is still, for the most part, random.

And it is absolutely coming.<sup>6</sup>

Patchett and Becker expose the common ways we seek to deny the rumble of panic. This book is an effort to do what they urge—to take life seriously. I want to help readers live life well and even joyfully against the background of these terrible realities. The loss of loved ones, debilitating and fatal illnesses, personal betrayals, financial reversals, and moral failures—all of these will eventually come upon you if you live out a normal life span. No one is immune.

Therefore, no matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our career—something will inevitably ruin it. No amount of money, power, and planning can prevent bereavement, dire illness, relationship betrayal, financial disaster, or a host of other troubles from entering your life. Human life is fatally fragile and subject to forces beyond our power to manage. Life is tragic.

We all know this intuitively, and those who face the challenge of suffering and pain learn all too well that it is impossible to do so using only our own resources. We all need support if we are not to succumb to despair. In this book we will argue that inevitably this support must be spiritual.

## “Let the Afflicted Hear and Be Glad”

On our wedding day, Kathy and I spoke our vows to each other in front of our friends and families. To the traditional words of commitment we added a passage of Scripture—Psalm 34:1–3—which is engraved on the inside of our wedding rings.

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.

My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!

Saying our vows was a heady moment, and the lofty words of the text enhanced it. We were embarking on a lifetime of Christian ministry together, and we anticipated boldly presenting the God we knew to the world. At the time, however, we almost completely ignored the words at the center of the passage. The text’s definition of ministry success is that “the afflicted hear and be glad.” One of the reasons that phrase was lost on us then was because, as Kathy said later, “at that age neither of us had suffered so much as an ingrown toenail.” We were young, and the hubris of youth does not imagine pain and suffering. Little did we understand how crucial it would be to help people understand and face affliction, and to face it well ourselves.

As I took up life as a minister, I tried to understand why so many people resisted and rejected God. I soon realized that perhaps the main reason was affliction and suffering. How could a good God, a just God, a loving God, allow such misery, depravity, pain, and anguish? Doubts in the mind can grow along with pain in the heart. When I sat with sufferers, I often found myself fielding white-hot objections to God’s existence and to Christian faith. Some years ago, a Hollywood actress was interviewed after her lover had died suddenly in an accident. She had been living without thought or reference to God for a long time,

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but once this happened she said, “How could a loving God let this happen?” In an instant she went from indifference to God to anger toward him.<sup>7</sup> It is this kind of experience that has led a host of thinkers to argue, as the writer Stendhal (Marie-Henri Beyle) did, that “the only excuse for God is that he doesn’t exist.”<sup>8</sup>

But at the same time, I learned that just as many people *find* God through affliction and suffering. They find that adversity moves them toward God rather than away. Troubled times awaken them out of their haunted sleep of spiritual self-sufficiency into a serious search for the divine. Suffering “plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.”<sup>9</sup> It is an exaggeration to say that no one finds God unless suffering comes into their lives—but it is not a big one. When pain and suffering come upon us, we finally see not only that we are not in control of our lives but that we never were.

Over the years, I also came to realize that adversity did not merely lead people to believe in God’s existence. It pulled those who already believed into a deeper experience of God’s reality, love, and grace. One of the main ways we move from abstract knowledge about God to a personal encounter with him as a living reality is through the furnace of affliction. As C. S. Lewis famously put it, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.”<sup>10</sup> Believers understand many doctrinal truths in the mind, but those truths seldom make the journey down into the heart except through disappointment, failure, and loss. As a man who seemed about to lose both his career and his family once said to me, “I always knew, in principle, that ‘Jesus is all you need’ to get through. But you don’t really know Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have.”

Finally, as I grew in my understanding of the Bible itself, I came to see that the reality of suffering was one of its main themes. The book of Genesis begins with an account of how evil and death came into the world. The book of Exodus recounts Israel’s forty years in the wilderness, a time of intense testing and trial. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is largely dedicated to the problem of suffering. The book of Psalms provides a prayer for every possible situation in life, and so it is striking how filled it is with cries of pain and with blunt questions to

God about the seeming randomness and injustice of suffering. In Psalm 44, the writer looks at the devastation of his country and calls, “Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? . . . Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?” (Ps 44:23–24) The books of Job and Ecclesiastes are almost wholly dedicated to deep reflection on unjust suffering and on the frustrating pointlessness that characterizes so much of life. The prophets Jeremiah and Habakkuk give searing expression to the human complaint that evil seems to rule history. New Testament books such as Hebrews and 1 Peter are almost entirely devoted to helping people face relentless sorrows and troubles. And towering over all, the central figure of the whole of Scripture, Jesus Christ, is a man of sorrows. The Bible, therefore, is about suffering as much as it is about anything.

Inevitably, Kathy and I found ourselves facing our own griefs. In 2002, I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer and went through surgery and treatment. Around the same time, Kathy’s Crohn’s disease became acute and she had to undergo numerous surgeries over the next few years, once enduring seven in one year. At one point, I found myself facing the agonizing possibility that I should leave the pastoral ministry because of my wife’s chronic illness. It was the darkest time of our lives so far. And we know for certain, from Scripture and experience, that there are more dark times to come. And yet also more joy than we can now imagine.

Looking back on our lives, Kathy and I came to realize that at the heart of why people disbelieve *and* believe in God, of why people decline *and* grow in character, of how God becomes less real *and* more real to us—is suffering. And when we looked to the Bible to understand this deep pattern, we came to see that the great theme of the Bible itself is how God brings fullness of joy not just despite but *through* suffering, just as Jesus saved us not in spite of but *because* of what he endured on the cross. And so there is a peculiar, rich, and poignant joy that seems to come to us only through and in suffering.

What we have learned from these years of ministry to “the afflicted” is in this volume. Simone Weil writes that suffering makes God “appear to be absent.” She is right. But in Psalm 34, David counters that though



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God feels absent, it does not mean he actually is. Looking back at a time when his life had been in grave danger and all seemed lost, David concludes, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (v. 18).

I’m writing this book because we have found in our own lives that this is true.

### **The Fiery Furnace and the Plan for This Book**

So is this a book for sufferers? Yes, but we must make some distinctions. We are all sufferers, or we will be. But not all of us are currently in an experience of deep pain and grief. Those who are not feeling it, but are seeing it in others, will have a host of philosophical, social, psychological, and moral questions about it. On the other hand, those who are in the grip of pain and difficulty *now* cannot treat it as a philosophical issue. Speaking to the questions of the nonsufferer as well as to the struggles of the sufferer in one book is not a simple task. While the afflicted person may cry out using philosophical questions—“Why do you allow such things, God?”—the real concern is personal survival. How can you survive it? How can you get through it without losing the best parts of yourself? To speak in a detached philosophical manner to an actual sufferer is cruel. And yet the experience of pain leads almost inevitably to “big questions” about God and the nature of things that cannot be ignored.

As I read books on evil and suffering, it became clear that most volumes treated the subject mainly from just one perspective. Many books used the philosophical perspective, weighing the “problem of evil” and whether it made the existence of God more or less likely or Christianity more or less plausible. Others took a theological approach, distilling and assembling all the biblical themes and teachings about pain and suffering. Finally, many books took a devotional approach, writing a series of meditations designed to help actual sufferers in the midst of their grief. There was also a smaller number of articles and books that took both a historical and an anthropological approach, examining how different

cultures have helped its members face troubles and trials. The more I read, the clearer it became that these various perspectives informed one another, and that any treatment that confined itself to only one vantage point left far too many unanswered questions.

And so I have divided the book into three parts, each part looking at the issue using somewhat different tools. What unites them is the central image of suffering as a fiery furnace. This biblical metaphor is a rich one. Fire is, of course, a well-known image for torment and pain. The Bible calls trials and troubles “walking through fire” (Isa 43:2) or a “fiery ordeal” (1 Pet 4:12). But it also likens suffering to a fiery *furnace* (1 Pet 1:6–7). The biblical understanding of a furnace is more what we would call a “forge.” Anything with that degree of heat is, of course, a very dangerous and powerful thing. However, if used properly, it does not destroy. Things put into the furnace properly can be shaped, refined, purified, and even beautified. This is a remarkable view of suffering, that if faced and endured with faith, it can in the end only make us better, stronger, and more filled with greatness and joy. Suffering, then, actually can use evil against itself. It can thwart the destructive purposes of evil and bring light and life out of darkness and death.

In the first part of the book, we will look at the “furnace” from the outside—the phenomenon of human suffering, as well as the various ways that different cultures, religions, and eras in history have sought to help people face and get through it. We also will look at the classic philosophical “problem of evil” and what responses we can give to it. Because this first part of the book surveys a great deal of scholarship, it inevitably will be a more theoretical discussion. It is crucial for seeing the entire picture but, frankly, may feel too abstract for a person in the midst of adversity.

The second part of the book moves away from more theoretical issues and begins to digest all that the Bible says about the character of suffering. This section begins a journey from the philosophical toward the personal. We could almost say that, like a parent with a toddler, the Bible is teaching us to walk, step by step. The Bible calls us to walk steadily through afflictions, and to do so requires that we understand its wonderfully balanced and comprehensive teaching on this subject—

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both profoundly realistic and yet astonishingly hopeful. This keeps us from thinking we can run from the furnace (avoid it) or quickly run through it (deny it) or just lie down hopelessly (despair in it).

Finally, the third part of the book provides the most practical material. The Bible does not perceive going through the “furnace of affliction” as a matter of technique. Suffering can refine us rather than destroy us because God himself walks with us in the fire. But how do we actually walk with God in such times? How do we orient ourselves toward him so that suffering changes us for the better rather than for the worse? Each chapter is based on one main strategy for connecting with God in the furnace of pain and suffering. They should not be read as discrete “steps” to be followed in strict order but as various facets or aspects of a single action—to know the God who says “when you pass through the waters . . . when you walk through the fire . . . I will be with you” (Isa 43:2).

If you are in the very midst of adversity, you may wish to read parts two and three of the book first. There you will find a surprising range of ways to face suffering, and they vary widely—at times almost seeming to contradict each other. Part of the genius of the Bible as a resource for sufferers is its rich, multidimensional approach. It recognizes a great diversity of forms, reasons for, and right responses to suffering. To show the many possible human responses to suffering, I have included at the end of many chapters a first-person story from someone who has encountered suffering and walked with God through it. These stories are both inspirational and realistic. The Bible does not promise that suffering will issue in full resolution or a “happy ending” in this life. But these stories show how people of faith have dealt with the varieties of suffering and walked through the furnace with God’s help. These stories are a reminder to recognize God’s presence even in the worst of times. Especially in the worst of times.

In perhaps the most vivid depiction of suffering in the Bible, in the third chapter of the book of Daniel, three faithful men are thrown into a furnace that is supposed to kill them. But a mysterious figure appears beside them. The astonished observers discern not three but four persons in the furnace, and one who appears to be “the son of the gods.”

## WALKING WITH GOD THROUGH PAIN AND SUFFERING

And so they walk through the furnace of suffering and are not consumed. From the vantage of the New Testament, Christians know that this was the Son of God himself, one who faced his own, infinitely greater furnace of affliction centuries later when he went to the cross. This raises the concept of God “walking with us” to a whole new level. In Jesus Christ we see that God actually experiences the pain of the fire as we do. He truly is God *with* us, in love and understanding, in our anguish.

He plunged himself into our furnace so that, when we find ourselves in the fire, we can turn to him and know we will not be consumed but will be made into people great and beautiful. “I will be with you, your troubles to bless, and sanctify to you your deepest distress.”<sup>11</sup>



O DEATH,  
**WHERE  
IS THY  
STING?**

COLLECTED SERMONS



**JOHN MURRAY**  
Foreword by SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

## This I Call to Mind

*This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not . . . The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.*

—LAMENTATIONS 3:21–22, 24

The prophet Jeremiah lived in those days when Judah was carried into captivity. The book of Lamentations consists of the lamentations of Jeremiah connected particularly with the desolations of Zion. That is perfectly obvious from the preceding and the succeeding parts of this book. At the beginning of the first chapter, we read:

How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people!  
 How is she become as a widow! She that was great among  
 the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she  
 become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her  
 tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none  
 to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously  
 with her, they are become her enemies. Judah has gone

into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude: she dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest: all her persecutors overtook her between the straits. (Lam 1:1–3)

And again at the beginning of the second chapter:

How hath the Lord covered the daughter of Zion with a cloud in his anger, and cast down from heaven unto the earth the beauty of Israel, and remembered not his footstool in the day of his anger! The Lord hath swallowed up all the habitations of Jacob, and hath not pitied: he hath thrown down in his wrath the strong holds of the daughter of Judah; he hath brought them down to the ground: he hath polluted the kingdom and the princes thereof. He hath cut off in his fierce anger all the horn of Israel. (Lam 2:1–3)

And yet again, at the beginning of the fourth chapter, there is a similar refrain:

How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed! The stones of the sanctuary are poured out in the top of every street. The precious sons of Zion, comparable to fine gold, how are they esteemed as earthen pitchers, the work of the hands of the potter! (Lam 4:1–2)

These are Jeremiah's lamentations, but they are the lamentations of Jeremiah because of the Lord's indignation against

Zion, against the people of his possession. We read that “the Lord’s portion is his people” and that “Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut 32:9), but now Jacob has gone into captivity and is trodden down: “Our gold is become dim.” The Lord’s indignation is perfectly apparent even at the beginning of our chapter. “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath” (Lam 3:1).

Jeremiah was so identified with the welfare of Zion in his interests, in his affections, in his aspirations, and in his hopes, that mourning and weeping now took hold of the inmost recesses of his being. That is the portrait that we have in this particular book. Can it be otherwise with us today? It is one thing to read this book of Lamentations as a commentary on the past, but it also has relevance for us. “These things happened . . . for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages are come” (1 Cor 10:11). “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for the instruction which is in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17).

So, the book of Lamentations has a great lesson for us. Our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes must likewise be identified with that to which the Old Testament Zion corresponded: the church of Christ. If we do not identify ourselves—in our interests, affections, aspirations, and hopes—with the church of Christ, then we do not identify ourselves in our faith and affection with him who is the head of the church. You can never separate Christ from his church or the church from Christ. Christ is meaningless apart from his interest in the church; it was



for the sake of the church that he came into this world. “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it by the washing of water by the word to present it to himself a glorious church” (Eph 5:25–27).

And, as we can never think of Christ apart from the church or the church apart from Christ, so our own interest in Christ can very well be gauged by our interest in his church. We can well take up the lamentations of Jeremiah as we may take up the lamentations of another prophet: “Our holy and our beautiful house, where our fathers praised thee, is burned up with fire: and all our pleasant things are laid waste” (Isa 64:11). We cannot disassociate ourselves from the situation in which the church of Christ finds itself. There is a corporate responsibility, and we cannot possibly disassociate our own responsibility from that which afflicts the church of Christ in our particular day and generation. We cannot shrug our shoulders and say that we have no responsibility for the plight in which the church of Christ finds itself when our gold has become dim and our wine mixed with water (Lam 4:1; Isa 1:22). There is the grave danger that people in a particular location or in a particular denomination will shrug their shoulders and say that we have no responsibility. My friends, there is a corporate responsibility that we cannot divest ourselves of.

Not only is there this corporate responsibility for the defecation and the impurity that are so rampant in the professing church of Christ, but we are responsible for our own individual, personal iniquities. Another prophet said, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me” (Mic 7:9). You

cannot read this chapter of the lamentations of Jeremiah without recognizing, on the part of Jeremiah himself, a profound sense of his own sin and the indignation of the Lord against him for his iniquity. “I am the man that hath seen affliction by the rod of his wrath. He hath led me, and brought me into darkness, but not into light” (Lam 3:1–2). There is, here, profound recognition of his own individual, personal iniquity, and frustration in self-humiliation before God.

Not only do we find the reflection in this chapter of the indignation of the Lord against the sin of Zion and even against Jeremiah himself because of *his* own personal, individual iniquity, but we also find a reflection of those mysterious dispensations of God’s providence that are ever tending to bewilder even the people of God. God’s providences to his people are not all dictated by his anger and indignation. There are indeed providences that are the expression of his indignation for his people’s iniquity, and there are indeed dispensations of chastisement, which, of course, are always for sin and for its correction. But there are also those dispensations of God’s providence that do not find their explanation in God’s indignation against the particular recipients of these dispensations.

If you take, for example, the patriarch Job, God did not visit him with afflictions because of indignation for his iniquity. Not at all! There was something in the unseen spirit world that was the explanation of Job’s affliction. And yet, notwithstanding the fact that the dispensations of God’s providence to him were not dictated by God’s indignation against him, Job could nevertheless say, “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive him: On the left hand, where

he doth work, but I cannot behold him: he hideth himself on the right hand, that I cannot see him” (Job 23:8–9). Job was encompassed with great darkness and bewilderment because he did not understand at that time the unseen purpose of God in the tribulation that overtook him.

So it is often the case with the people of God, as Jeremiah says in this very chapter, “He hath set me in dark places, as they that be dead of old. He hath hedged me about, that I cannot get out: he hath made my chain heavy. Also when I cry and shout, he shutteth out my prayer” (Lam 3:6–8). And again, “Thou hast covered thyself with a cloud, that our prayer should not pass through” (Lam 3:44). When the people of God have to walk in darkness and have no light in the mystery or the abyss of God’s providential dealings towards them, and they cannot understand the reason, it causes the bewilderment and the distress of heart, mind, and soul reflected in Lamentations 3.

Now all of that is simply by way of introduction, in order to appreciate that pinnacle of praise, of thanksgiving, and of hope that we find in the words of our text. In the face of all this perplexity, darkness, dismay, even bewilderment, in the face of this profound sense of the indignation of the Lord against Zion and against the prophet himself individually, is there any outlet of confidence, joy, and hope for the prophet in this unspeakable situation of grief and sorrow and travail? Yes, there is! “This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope.” And what is the secret of this hope? Jeremiah remembered certain things; there were certain considerations that he called to mind, that entered into his thought, notwithstanding the bewilderment, the darkness, and the dismay that possessed the inmost recesses of his heart

and being. Very briefly I'm going to call your attention to these particular considerations that the prophet called to mind.

First of all, there is his own self-humiliation before God: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed" (Lam 3:22). The prophet recognized that he had not received, that there had not been visibly dealt to him, that which was equal to the measure of his deserts. God had visited him with much less affliction than his iniquities deserved (Ezra 9:13). We find this expression of his own self-humiliation and his abasement before God so eloquently set forth in Lamentations 3:28–30:

He sitteth alone [that is, the person who is in this particular situation of self-humiliation] and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach.

He giveth his very cheek to God himself, who smiteth him! Here is humble recognition of what the prophet says again in a later part of this chapter, "Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:39).

Self-humiliation is far too frequently overlooked in our relationship to God and is the very starting point for deliverance. Of course, it is the very starting point for deliverance even at the inception of the Christian life, but it is also the starting point for deliverance for the people of God themselves when they are under God's afflicting hand and when they are experiencing those bewildering dispensations of his providence. Self-humiliation before God recognizes that however bitterly God may be dealing with

us, however severe may be the dispensations of his providence, however stinging may be the aloes of his holy displeasure and wrath, we have not received anything yet that is equal to the measure of our deserts. Why should a living man complain for the punishment of his sins, when he thinks that what he deserves is not the afflictions of this life—however severe they may be—but the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 13)?

I tell you, my friends, that a great deal of the superficiality that is in the church of God today, and a great deal of the impiety that even characterizes the people of God, is due to this failure to recognize that we are ourselves in the presence of God. We fail to measure ourselves by the criterion of God's holiness, his majesty, his justice, and his truth. When we apprehend the glory and the majesty of God, then the only reaction that is proper and that can be appropriate to our situation is that of the prophet Isaiah: "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5).

That, my friends, is the starting point for any deliverance—deliverance at the inception of Christian profession and faith, and deliverance in the pilgrimage of the people of God as they experience the bitterness of God's dispensations toward them. We shall never properly assess God's dispensations to us—whatever their character and whatever their purpose in the divine mind—until we prostrate ourselves before God in the recognition of our own iniquity. "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed. . . . Why should a living man complain, a man for the punishment of his sins?" (Lam 3:22, 39).

The second element in this text that fills the mind of the prophet with hope, with confidence, and with expectation—and

that likewise must fill our minds with hope and expectation—is the mercy and the compassion of the Lord. “This I recall to mind, therefore have I hope. It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness” (Lam 3:21–23). I tell you again, my friends, that we cannot have any true appreciation of those provisions of God’s grace for our deliverance at the very inception of the Christian life on into the pilgrimage of the people of God until we have an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus.

The fact that God is merciful is the outlet from our misery—our outlet from our misery at the beginning and in every onward step of our pilgrimage until we come to the “city which hath the foundations, of which God is the builder and the maker” (Heb 11:10). The fact that the Lord is the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to wrath, abundant in loving kindness and truth, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin (Exod 34:6–7)—that’s the outlet. You can see this so conspicuously in the case of Jeremiah. It is that great truth so emblazoned on one of the psalms so familiar to us: “For the Lord is good; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth to all generations” (Ps 100:5). Don’t you see that what the prophet here lays hold upon is the mercy and the faithfulness of God, and these are the key notes of this great psalm of thanksgiving: the Lord is good, his mercy is everlasting, and his truth—his *faithfulness*—endureth to all generations.

May I plead very humbly, my friends, that as we prostrate ourselves before God’s majesty in recognition of what our iniquity deserves, let us also have the apprehension of the mercy of

God in Christ Jesus. Let us reach out our hand to him in faith. Oh, let it be humble faith, faith as of a grain of mustard seed. Nevertheless, in the outreach of that faith, we have the guarantee of experiencing the exaltation that the prophet Jeremiah reflects in this particular chapter.

The third element that Jeremiah recalls to mind, and therefore has hope, is found in verse 24 of this chapter: “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him.” The Lord is my *portion*. You don’t ascend to a higher pinnacle of faith in the whole of Scripture than that which the prophet enunciates at this particular point: “The Lord is my portion.” We read, of course, in the Scripture that “the Lord’s portion is his people” and that “Jacob is the lot of his inheritance” (Deut 32:9). God has peculiar delight in his people, which is why he sent his Son into the world that he might redeem his people from all iniquity and present them “faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24). The Lord’s portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. But you also have the complementary truth: the Lord is the portion of his people.

Perhaps there is nothing in the New Testament that enunciates what you might call the very apex of the Christian privilege, the very apex of God’s provision of grace, than that expression of the apostle Paul that “we might be filled unto all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). Being filled unto all the fullness of God is the New Testament counterpart of this Old Testament concept of the Lord being the portion of his people. It means that we come into the very possession of God himself, that God is ours. If Christ is ours, then all things are ours, and God himself is ours. You find it in that very psalm that we were singing,

“Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Ps 73:25–26).

I tell you, my friends, that eternity will not exhaust the meaning of that truth that God is our portion; we can only have a very dim glimmering of it even at the very best. But it is something that is *true*, and it is something that you are to appropriate. “The Lord is my portion, saith my soul.” And if God himself is the portion of his people, surely everything in his dispensations to them is the unrolling of his own favor and his own mercy. If God is our possession, then no evil can befall us (Ps 91:9–10).

That’s the third; now the fourth: and that is hope. “The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord” (Lam 3:25–26). Oh, my friends, what endless misery we reap for ourselves, and what dishonor we do to the God who is the portion of his people, when we take illegitimate methods of getting away from the bitter dispensations of God’s providence. We must wait. God doesn’t dispense to his people all his favor in this life or at any one time in this life. We have to wait; we have to have hope.

You know how utterly hopeless is a situation in which there is no hope. If a person is caught in the toils of tribulation, of distress, and perhaps of pain and torment, what a difference it makes if there is just a glimmer of hope. If a person is overtaken by a very serious disease and is racked with pain, what a difference between whether the person has absolutely no hope of deliverance from it and whether that person has even a glimmer



of hope. Hope gives him endurance; it gives him a measure of patience. He is willing to endure it or she is willing to endure it because there is going to be deliverance. That is what is true in a much more transcendent realm in reference to our relationship to God and our relationship to the dispensations of his providence. “It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord.” To quote again the word of another prophet, “I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness” (Mic 7:9).

It is this hoping and waiting of which the prophet Isaiah speaks, “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” (Isa 40:31). The secret of endurance, patience, and waiting with expectation is submission to God’s providences until he brings us forth to the light, and we shall then behold his righteousness. This hope is well-grounded for the reasons that have been already enunciated: that the Lord is full of compassion and of tender mercy and that the Lord is the portion of his people. Therefore, there cannot possibly be anything else but a glorious finale; it can’t be otherwise! If the Lord is the portion of his people, and if that has its issue in our being filled unto all the fullness of God unto the plentitude of that grace and truth that reside in the mediator Jesus Christ and that have been communicated to his people, then there cannot possibly be but a grand and glorious finale.

Now fifth and finally, what the prophet here brings to mind and what fills him, therefore, with hope and expectation is the

vindication of God himself, that there is no arbitrariness in God. You might think that that's a sort of anticlimax. You might think that it is not on the plane of these other great truths like the lovingkindness and tender mercy of God or that the Lord's portion is his people and that God is the portion of his people. You might not think that it is on the plane of the glorious hope set before the people of God of a grand finale, a finale that will fill their hearts with praise and thanksgiving throughout the endless ages of eternity. But the vindication of God himself is not an anticlimax; it is on the very summit of faith. You find it in verses 33 to 36: "For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. To crush under his feet all the prisoners of the earth. To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the most High, to subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not." That was no anticlimax for Jeremiah.

And it should not be an anticlimax for us, either. What is the secret of the fact that there is no arbitrariness in God, that he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men? It is just this: that the Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his works (Ps 145:17), that the judge of all the earth will do right (Gen 18:25). I tell you, my friends, that whatever may be our affliction, however much we may cringe under the chastening hand of God, and however much the arrows of the Almighty may enter into the innermost recesses of our being (Job 6:4)—when we have come to the point of vindicating God's ways by recognizing that he is holy, just, sovereign, and good, then we have the outlet, then we escape. "As a bird under the snare of the fowlers, our soul is escaped and our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth" (Ps 124:7–8). "The Lord," we can then say, "will light

my candle so that it shall shine full bright; the Lord, my God, will also make my darkness to be light” (Ps 18:28).

My friends, I would appeal to you, as I would address my own heart and soul, that the very secret of escape in the midst of tribulation and darkness and anguish is that we are able to justify God. And we are able to justify God in all his works because we recognize that we always have less than our iniquities deserve. There is a very close connection between that which the prophet first brings to remembrance—self-humiliation before God because of his own iniquities—and that which has just been enunciated in verses 33 to 36—the vindication of the justice and holiness and goodness of God.

We must never forget that God does not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men. God is never motivated by vindictive revenge. He is, indeed, motivated by vindicatory justice, but never by unholy, vindictive revenge. And that’s what is enunciated here as elsewhere. The Lord does not afflict willingly (that is, arbitrarily); he doesn’t afflict simply for the sake of afflicting. God is not *vindictively* executing his wrath; he is *vindicatorily* executing his wrath. It is the same great truth in another connection that the prophet Ezekiel sets forth in the words of God himself: “As I live,” saith the Lord God, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek 33:11).

It is well for us, my friends, whatever may be the dispensations of providence to us, to recognize his sovereign holiness and bow before his sovereign majesty. When we are able to do that, we shall also be able, in the strength of God’s grace and by the energizing of his Spirit, to rejoice with the prophet: “The Lord is

my portion, saith my soul, therefore will I hope in him. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Lam 3:24; Ps 73:26). In these days, when we are encompassed about with so much that causes dismay, that causes us to walk in darkness and have no light, may we, by the grace of God and by the effectual application of the Holy Spirit, be able to reproduce in our own experience, faith, and hope, that blessed assurance described by the prophet: “This I have called to mind, therefore have I hope.”



Oh God, we praise and magnify thy name that thou hast not dealt with us after our sins nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. And we praise thee that thou dost give us the precious privilege of receiving thy Word in all its fullness. May it be reflected in our hearts in faith and love and hope. Oh, grant that we may be more than conquerors through him that loved us, knowing that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. For his name's sake, amen.