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THE REASON FOR GOD and *THE PRODIGAL GOD*

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Walking with God
through
Pain and Suffering

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*¹

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)²

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.³ 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

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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.⁴

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.”⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ 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.”⁸

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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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 a 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.”

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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.”¹¹