

SAMPLE CHAPTER—FOR PREVIEW ONLY

CHAPTER 1

STORY

“THEN IT WAS YOU WHO WOUNDED ARAVIS?” “IT WAS I”. “BUT WHAT FOR?”

“CHILD,” SAID THE VOICE, VERY DEEP AND LOW SO THAT THE EARTH SHOOK, “I AM TELLING YOU YOUR STORY, NOT HERS. I TELL NO ONE ANY STORY BUT HIS OWN” (ASLAN IN C.S. LEWIS, THE HORSE AND HIS BOY).

My Dear Fellow-Travelers,

I have described to you how I was sitting my office minding my own business when I was interrupted by that unpleasant phone call informing me that I had been issued a personalized, gold-embossed invitation to join the cancer club. My first reaction was, “But I never applied for membership”. Nevertheless, I had been chosen and my membership was therefore not optional. I clearly recall the question that leapt to my suddenly frantic mind: “Why me?” Such calamities are common in the world, but I am not supposed to experience them. I had lived a half century cancer-free, and now suddenly I was cancer-full, and it irked me. I did not deserve this and did not want this and certainly had not asked for this, but this is what I have nonetheless. . . but why?

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Right when your Travel Writer was asking the “why me?” question, another Valley Dweller was asking it too. In the summer of 2010 the popular author and atheist Christopher Hitchens was diagnosed with cancer. With his usual candor, he described his battle with the illness in an article he wrote for Vanity Fair. *“I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste. I had real plans for my next decade and felt I'd worked hard enough to earn it. Will I really not live to see my children married? To watch the World Trade Center rise again? . . . To the dumb question “Why me?” the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not? I sometimes wish I were suffering in a good cause, or risking my life for the good of others, instead of just being a gravely endangered patient. Allow me to inform you, though, that when you sit in a room with a set of other finalists, and kindly people bring a huge transparent bag of poison to plant into your arm [his chemotherapy treatment] and you either read or don't read a book while the venom sack gradually empties into your system . . . You feel swamped with passivity and impotence: dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water”.*¹

Exactly, Christopher. “Why me?” Since arriving in The Valley, I’ve discovered that virtually everyone here has gone a round or two with that question. It’s only logical that we should. As I’m sure you are discovering along with Christopher and me, it is only reasonable to want to know why we’ve been issued a possible death sentence and forced to take up residence on the edge of mortality. Was it something

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I did? Something I failed to do? Whatever it was, it must have been a whopper of a sin or omission to snag me this disease. It would just be nice to know don't you think? Inquiring minds in The Valley want to know, and so as your Travel Writer, allow me to give you this heads up. You will most certainly be asking the "why me?" question (if you are not already), so it is good to pack your bags in advance with some answers. Having them from the start will make your journey here ever so much more pleasant.

As for me, I had been living a reasonably boring, law-abiding life, paying my fair share of taxes and raising a family and getting up and out to work each day to do my imperfect best to honor my Creator along the way. I had also reached the ripe old age of 53, and figured that cancer was one bullet in life I had successfully dodged. But then this. In the course of one phone call that lasted maybe three minutes, life as I had known it was instantly changed. Unexpectedly, the San Andreas Fault opened under my size eleven and a half's and I just wanted to know, needed to know, why? Why *me*?

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WHY ME?

I admit now that my initial “why me?” was not actually a real question. When I raised it, I was neither conversing with the ceiling nor George Lucas’ “Force” nor the Tooth Fairy. I was talking to God. No, I was actually cross-examining God. Ok, honestly, I was lambasting God. For the nature of the inquiry is not honest asking, but angry accusing. I was not truly seeking information when I bellowed “why me?” I was actually indicting God for dereliction of duty, as in: “Lord, this is *me* suffering down here, Hello? It appears that you have fallen down on the job and I want you to know I don’t like it one little bit and I wish you would get with the program and do your duty and get me out of this jam ASAP”.

My observation as your Travel Writer is that it is good to go ahead and get that emotional outburst out of the way initially so that a clearer perspective can ensue. I’m a seminary-trained man of the cloth with a functional knowledge of theology which, I realized clearly in calmer moments, answers the “why me?” question at altitude for the whole human race. So even as I threw the “why me?” at God, He nudged me to acknowledge I already knew the answer. I suspect He will do the same for all of you, my fellow travelers.

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Why am I sick with cancer? Answer. Because cancer and all of its insidious anti-human allies of disease and disaster and death are the collateral damage of a world broken by sin at the behest of Satan, the great enemy of our souls. An old French Huguenot pastor who had by no means mastered English was once the guest preacher in a British church. His outline for a sermon on the devil that he preached was: *“Who the Devil He is, What the Devil He is Doing, and Where the Devil He is Going!”* His essential and accurate message was that what the Devil (he) is doing in this world is making war on God and people. That reminds me that one of my nurses gave me a bumper sticker that I mistakenly put on my office door to publically identify my enemy: “STUPID CANCER”. But I was wrong. Cancer is not my ultimate enemy. Satan is.

Cancer is just one of Satan’s many tools deployed to bring death, which is the stock and trade of evil and darkness. Death is the ultimate expression of Satan’s hatred toward human beings who, as creatures made in the image of God, remind him constantly of God. As the "imago dei", we humans are “just a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5) now, but are destined to be revealed and exalted as God's children who will one day judge those very angels (of which Satan is but one).² Because in all of these ways we remind Satan so much of God, he does to us what he can’t do to God, but wishes he could. If the Devil can’t kill God (and even he knows he can’t do that), then he will settle for maiming and killing people both

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physically and spiritually. The Devil's ultimate intention for the children of God is not good, but evil; not life, but death; not mercy, but murder.

This poses a credibility challenge to people still living in Myopia. Is the deadly opposition of the Evil One difficult for you to believe? Then hear Jesus who characterized Satan so: "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him" (John 8:44). Do you hear that? The primo Murderer, the Granddaddy of all homicidal maniacs, the longest-active and most dissembling manslaughter-maker in the history of the entire universe is the Devil. He loves to kill people. There was never a time when killing people wasn't pure delight to the Devil. And his rap sheet shows that he has murdered MILLIONS of them since the beginning of time through holocaust's and abortions and disasters and yes, diseases like cancer. This puts that comical little red-suited pitchfork-packing horned putz of youthful picture-books in a new light, doesn't it? As long as living human beings are dying in droves, Satan is one happy camper.

This is the bad old news: we human inhabitants of planet Earth have a vicious enemy who wants to murder us all both spiritually and physically in time and for eternity. But it is this dark and disturbing bad old news of Satan's murderous bloodlust that makes the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ so beautiful. The Good News is that we have a Friend who wants to give us spiritual and physical life

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for time and eternity. The bad news is that Satan is a Murderer. The Good News is that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the LIFE (John 14:6). The bad news is that the Devil kills. The Good News is that Jesus Saves. The bad news is that Satan wants to kill you. The Good News is that Jesus died so that you can never die. Hear his words of invitation to you and me: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Nothing is more vital in darkness than light. Nothing is more vital in death than life. And nothing makes light and life more beautiful than the occasional cancer-induced reminders that the decisive battle in spiritual warfare was fought and won by Christ at the Cross and through his Resurrection. As Paul the Apostle wrote, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” ([Colossians 2:15](#)). In other words, Jesus has already whipped our Adversary, the Devil. The writer to the Hebrews affirmed this very victory in writing, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14–15). Our faith is in the ultimate victory of Christ and in our eternal life with Him in Heaven. Though we have an enemy who lands the odd withering blow, we also have a Savior who has landed Satan’s death blow

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and nullified the evil-caused damage in time and eternity. It gives me great pleasure as your Travel Writer to remind you of these wonderful truths! As Tim Keller reflects,

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I am reminded of a line from Tolkien's Lord of the Rings: "The hands of the king are healing hands, and thus shall the rightful king be known". As a child blossoms under the authority of a wise and good parent, as a team flourishes under the direction of a skillful, brilliant coach, so when you come under the healing of the royal hands, under the kingship of Jesus, everything in your life will begin to heal. And when he comes back, everything sad will come untrue. His return will usher in the end of fear, suffering, and death.³

WHY ME AND NOT THEM?

Perhaps you are like me as you grapple with the "why me?" question. You are realizing that everyone suffers the collateral damage of a sin-broken world, whether through cancer or any number of other scourges wielded by the enemy of your soul. That's a theologically legitimate answer that stands biblical muster. But still there is unease in your heart. The theological answer doesn't satisfy. That is when it might

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dawn on you as it did me that it is not the answer that is defective, but the question. Perhaps, like me, you have to admit that what you are really obsessing about in light of your cancer is not “why me?”, but “why me and not *them*?”

This is an important initial admission for new residents of the Valley. Our adversity as cancer-victims would not be so difficult nor other people’s health so divisive if we felt that everybody experienced both in equal measure. But all do not and (it is embarrassing but true) the insult added to the injury of what seems to be outrageous unfairness in my life (cancer) is unusual blessing in the lives of others (health). As a result, I struggle often here in the Valley with interpreting God’s treatment of me through the subjective lens of how He treats others. I am constantly tempted to conclude that my lot in life is acceptable only if my pain is not greater nor my blessings less than those around me. And so I get on my high horse with God and demand to know, why me and not them? Maybe you have done the same thing. If so, welcome to the party!

That’s what happened to Ronnie Stanley, a young man who paid a visit to The Valley some years ago. 1961 had been a tough year for this senior quarterback for the Baylor Bears. He’d lost his starting job to a sophomore underclassman. Ignored by the head coach and banished to the bench, he still hoped for one more chance. It came in the last minute of the last game of Stanley’s football career. The setting was

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the 1961 Gotham Bowl, an ill-fated promotional attempt in the late sixties' to create the Rose Bowl of the east. Played in the creaking old Polo Grounds in New York City, "The Gotham" that year featured unbeaten Utah State against underdog Baylor on a frigid December afternoon. The crowd? A sparse few hundred. The weather? Freezing bleak. The music? The New York City Department of Sanitation Band. They proudly provided half-time entertainment clad in their occupational "uniforms" – dingy work overalls. The competition? A yawner. Baylor racked up a 24 – 3 lead by game's end.

Ronnie Stanley's opportunity for redemption came in the final seconds of this forgettable game. The coach put him in for the last play, albeit at great disadvantage. His arm was cold, but he had instructions to throw deep. As he faded back to pass, an opponent hammered him, breaking Stanley's leg just as he released the football. His "wounded duck" pass was intercepted and returned for hapless Utah's only touchdown. My heart goes out to Ronnie Stanley. As an old high school quarterback, I've thrown my share of fluttering interceptions and endured my share of broken bones. It's a sickening feeling to descend so precipitously from the glory status you'd dreamed to the "goat" status you'd dreaded. But in any disappointment contest, I readily surrender to Stanley.

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He spent that night alone in a New York hospital room while his teammates celebrated their win at the Peppermint Lounge, a famous Manhattan nightspot. Between pain pills, embarrassing memory flashes of his pitiful pass attempt and the humiliating season that preceded it tortured Ronnie Stanley. Here he was, a former star ignominiously bereft of his starter status, shunned by the coach, playing his last down of football on a dismal day in a dilapidated stadium before a few belligerent fans and a garbage department band. How's that for going out with a bang? He'd entered a meaningless game for a meaningless play and a meaningless injury with the result that his suddenly terminated football career seemed a meaningless waste. And he was the only one. Why me and not them? Now he would spend Christmas in a cast, away from home, all alone with the looping, taunting question, why me? Chances are you've never had an experience exactly like Ronnie Stanley's Gotham Bowl adventure. But especially if you're battling cancer right now, it is highly probable that you commiserate with him as the isolated victim of an outrageous inequity.

Here's an important cause and effect relationship that I've learned as your Travel Writer here in Cancerland. When I succumb to the notion that God has treated me unfairly, emotional poison flows through my veins. I become angry, bitter, and hopeless. But most devastating, my faith fails in the One whom I've effectively thrown overboard as a delinquent Deity. I imagine that thoughts like these occupied

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Ronnie Stanley's mind in that hospital room. His beef wasn't so much that his pass got intercepted, but that the other guys' passes got completed for touchdowns. It wasn't so much that his leg was broken, but that no one else had an ambulance ride that night. "Why me and not them?" It wasn't so much that he missed the trip to New York City's Peppermint Lounge, but that his buddies partied there without him until dawn. "Why them and not me?"

In reality, Stanley's situation was not so bad. Though disappointed and injured, he might have remembered that time heals broken bones and that football is just a game. Somewhere in the world that night was born a child with withered legs that would never walk, no matter how much time passed. Somewhere in the world that night was a refugee camp where losing didn't mean mere disappointment, but death. But in tough times, few of us are grateful because our attention is riveted on the Peppermint Lounge, not the refugee camp. Comparing himself to his peers virtually guaranteed that Stanley's response to pain would be self-pity, not praise. And comparing has the same effect on you and me.

To all who are secretly exercised by these unheroic yet altogether human sentiments, take heart. You're not alone! One of Christ's most prominent disciples was outspoken on the issue of comparative fairness. Simon "The Rock" Peter was an angler by trade. I think of him as the CEO of "A&P Fishing Enterprises" (Andrew

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and Peter). As an employer, Peter paid his employee's wages based on a comparison to what others of similar production levels were making. Fairness was determined by market value. That's why Peter was so interested in what Jesus told the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21. "Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'"

When Peter heard those words, his businessman's brain engaged. If pay is determined comparatively in the physical world, why not in the spiritual? If this tight-fisted young ruler had a shot at "treasure in Heaven", what compensation might Peter, who had sacrificed to follow Jesus, command? Thus his question in verse 27: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" A rather mercenary question, wouldn't you say? Yet, do we not all raise it with God, if only subconsciously? "Lord, if I live a comparatively good Christian life, will you bless me in relation to others? And if I do more than others, will you do more for me? Can I at *least* assume that you will prevent me and my family from ever getting cancer?" Jesus' response to Peter, to Ronnie Stanley, and to us all in the Valley was the following parable which I will paraphrase for you from Jesus' words in Matthew 20:1–16.

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In the middle east, grapes were picked in September before the destructively cold and wet Autumn winds came. When a certain vineyard owner saw those storms brewing, he was motivated to get his grapes in--and fast. Down to the local labor pool he went at 6 A.M., hired a group of workers at a denarius a day, and sent them into his fields. By nine, he saw he would need more workers to finish the job, so back he went and hired more. He did the same at twelve noon and five in the afternoon, giving work to men who by then had probably lost hope for employment that day.

Finally the vineyard was harvested and the workers queued up for their wages. The last group hired was paid first. They stepped up to receive pay for work begun just an hour before. These men were still fresh. Their Levi's were pressed, their Doc Martin's unmuddied, and their Right Guard still working! Since they'd only worked 1/12 of the day, they would have been content with a pondion--worth about 1/12 of a denarius. But to their amazement, they received the full day's pay of an entire denarius.

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At first, the original workers were ecstatic. As the paymaster shelled out wages, they were calculating their take: “Hey, if these one-hour guys got a denarius, surely we twelve-hour guys will score twelve!” But their glee turned to apprehension as the next groups who had worked longer hours also received a denarius. Then came what they perceived as a slap in the face. When these exhausted men who had labored all day in the sweltering heat received their pay, they too were given one denarius. To them, that denarius was a trifling insult because it was the same amount given to those who had worked only an hour in the evening shade.

A vociferous member of this first group complained bitterly about the perceived injustice. But what was unjust? Had the employer not paid the agreed-upon wage? Yes. Had there been some breach of contract? No. So what was wrong? Not the way the owner had treated them, but the way the owner had treated them in comparison with others! He had given them employment and paid them fairly. But through comparison, they had determined that they deserved more than they had a right to expect.

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Comparing has the same effect on us today. Especially in this Valley where the stakes are so very high, we don't just want the chance to play the game, but the assurance of winning it. We don't just want the privilege of participation, but the perk of the Peppermint Lounge. Jesus' timeless parable points out the foolishness of comparison, a sentiment seconded by Paul the Apostle in 2Corinthians 10:12: "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise". So when we come to this Valley, dwelling on the question "why me and not them?" is not a biblically recommended activity? Correct!

Why not? Let me count the ways! First, comparison destroys our gratitude to God. In Jesus' parable, poor workers who lived from hand to mouth had been given a chance to earn bread for their families. An employer had hired them for a fair wage, provided them honest work, and paid them promptly for their services. They should have been grateful. But because they measured themselves against others, they were rude, selfish, and ungrateful.

Comparison destroys our gratitude to God in the same way. A friend's business mushrooms while yours drowns in accounts receivable and you demand to know, "Why him and not me?" Childless, you leave the maternity ward where a joyful neighbor has just welcomed her third child, look up to Heaven and cry, "Why her

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and not me?” Sure, you’re glad when God does generous things for others. But oughtn’t He do the same for you? Sick from chemotherapy treatments and facing an uncertain future, you crawl off the couch to attend a Bible study and pass your next-door neighbor who has not darkened the door of a church in thirty years. Why is he working on his tan while you are working to keep your supper down? Christ hasn’t violated His word when your desires aren’t met, but it’s tough to be grateful when the next guy’s are.

The story is told of a benevolent millionaire who appeared on his neighbor’s doorstep and handed him a thousand dollar bill. For thirty days he gifted him that same amount, unsolicited. But the next month, the millionaire went to a different neighbor and gave him the thousand dollars. When the first neighbor saw that he was being skipped, he angrily accosted the benefactor: “Hey buster, where’s my thousand bucks?” You and I become ungrateful like that neighbor when we forget all that God has done for us and complain about what He has done for others. We are like the prodigal son’s elder brother who, though he had the use of his entire father’s wealth, begrudged the feast his father spread for his repentant brother. Comparing induces us to indulge in the ugliness of ungratefulness, which is especially unseemly here in the Valley. If anything is worse than the physical misery we experience in this place, it is ungrateful misery.

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But most seriously, comparing damages our relationship with God. The vineyard owner's words to the disgruntled workers have an ominous ring of finality. "Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you" (Matthew 20:14). These workers' displeasure with what he had paid caused them to lose faith in him, and they probably never saw him again. He had paid them fairly, but they left him in a huff because he didn't follow the rules of their comparison game. How many believers have become similarly estranged from God by interpreting His blessings to others as slights to them?

Legend has it that the Devil came upon a group of demons who were tempting a holy hermit. They enticed him with seductions of the flesh and sowed his mind with doubt and fear. But all to no avail. The holy man seemed impervious to temptation or discouragement. Then the Devil said, "You're going about this all wrong. Watch the master at work". With that, he approached the hermit and said, "Have you heard the big news?" "No", answered the holy man, "what news?" The Devil replied, "Your brother-in-law has just been made Pope". At that, the placid face of the holy man clouded with jealous rage. He stormed away from the Devil in an envious rage and resigned his post. In the same way, comparing will dissolve your faith in the goodness of God and play right into Satan's hand.

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WHY NOT ME?

So if the “why me?” question is already answered and the underlying “why me and not them?” question is off-base, is there a legitimate question that we should ask upon entering the Valley that has not yet been answered and that produces gratitude and not resentment? It’s perceptive of you to ask, my friend, and I’m excited to share the answer. Yes there is a question that we Valley dwellers are wise to ask often and with enthusiasm, and that is “Why *Not* Me?”

This question arises from faith, not fear. It also arises from knowledge, not ignorance. “Why me?” ignorantly assumes that God was too weak to protect me from the assaults of Satan, and “Why me and not them?” ignorantly assumes that God was too distracted to treat me with equanimity. The fact is that God is neither weak nor distracted, but both sovereign and good, powerful and just. King David expressed as much in his Old Testament declaration: “*The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you*” (Psalm 116:5–7).

That means that even though we do have a virulent enemy, Satan, who seeks to destroy us, we have a Heavenly Father who is even more powerful who seeks to protect us. It means that even though our Adversary wants to wreck our lives and

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render us hopeless, we have a Heavenly Father who plans to make something beautiful of our lives in this Valley and give us a future for His glory. He is sovereign and therefore ultimately in control of all things, able to make even the wrath of man and the assaults of the Adversary to praise him. As the children's song so poignantly expresses it, "He holds the whole world in His hands". . . That is endlessly reassuring to people of faith given God's stated intent for their lives: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11). This has always been His blueprint for His people. As the prophet proclaimed and Jesus reiterated 800 years later:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; 3 To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified" (Isaiah 61:1–3).

The unique hope that we followers of Christ have upon entering Cancerland is that God is not only able to make this a beautiful journey for us, but that He plans to

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make it so. All we have to do is to stop fearing and start trusting, stop comparing and start anticipating. Because we know that our sovereign Heavenly Father and not Satan calls the shots for his children, we can predict that something beautiful is going to come of this journey because of the One who makes “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). As the great church father St. Augustine observed:

*“Great is the work of God, exquisite in all he wills! so that, in a manner wondrous and ineffable, that is not done without his will which is done contrary to it, because it could not be done if he did not permit; nor does he permit it unwillingly, but willingly; nor would He who is good permit evil to be done, were he not omnipotent to bring good out of evil”.*⁴

In this vein, Jesus’ parable suggests that there is a superior alternative to seeing what others are getting (or not getting, i.e., cancer) and demanding the same for ourselves. That is to trust our God to do the right thing, the best thing, and the good thing in our lives, not in spite of our cancer, but *through* it. Did you notice that the later groups of workers in Jesus’ parable had no agreement for pay? They labored on the basis of trust in the owner’s simple promise in verse 4: “He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them a fair wage”. These workers didn’t stipulate demands for wage rates, or unionize, or negotiate a contract. They simply

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placed themselves in the Master's hands, believing He would do right by them. God calls us to trust Him here in the Valley in the same way.

Such trust may be tough, but it makes sense to people in The Valley. Here are two reasons why. First, I am impressed that the vineyard owner who represents God in Jesus' parable would go back time and again to hire workers, even at the eleventh hour. Why hire guys to work only one hour? Could he really hope to gain that much from their limited labor? No. He hired those men because he cared for them. He'd seen them standing faithfully, waiting all day for work. He knew that if no one hired them, they and their families would go hungry. He hired them, not because He needed them, but because they needed him. That's why he gave them big pay for little work.

In the same way, God cares for you. The comparison game will make you wonder if God cares for you when your life doesn't go well. You question His love if others seem more blessed than you. You doubt His heart if you get cancer. But you don't know what God may be doing in the lives of others through His generosity, and you don't know what He may be doing in your life through testing. The Lord is about the business of grafting godliness into the character of His people. It's a vast oversimplification of His ways to expect that He must treat everyone equally. But comparative Christianity doesn't recognize such distinctions. Ungratefulness to

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God, distrust of His motives, bitter envy of others and deep insecurity are the inevitable results. You need to trust that God's dealing with others isn't better than His dealing with you--just different. He cares alike for all His children.

Second, in Jesus' parable those who demanded a particular wage got exactly what they requested and not a mite more. But those who trusted the Master got far more than they could have imagined. That is what Jesus meant when He said, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last". Those who aggressively demand from God will someday be surprised to find themselves behind those who simply trusted Him. As the old saying goes, God gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him. When that happens, we can fully appreciate the marvelous mosaic His grace is creating in our lives. We will stop existing to keep up with the Jones's and start living out the unique story of salvation God is spinning in our own experience, even our experience in this Valley of the Shadow of Death.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Horse and His Boy*, a young boy named Shasta represents all who have wondered why God doesn't treat all people the same. He feels greatly put upon by the misfortunes he has suffered in life, particularly since others seem immune to them. Then Shasta has what he believes is his first encounter with Aslan the Lion, the Christ figure in Lewis' Narnia tales. He is terrified by Aslan's powerful presence, but then intrigued by the Lion's tender invitation to share his sorrows.

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“Shasta. . .told how he had never known his real father or mother and had been brought up sternly by the fisherman. And then he told the story of his escape and how they were chased by lions and forced to swim for their lives; and of all their dangers in Tashbaan and about his night among the Tombs and how the beasts howled at him out of the desert. And he told about the heat and thirst of their desert journey and how they were almost at their goal when another lion chased them and wounded Aravis.⁵

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Shasta was perturbed at Aslan’s matter-of-fact response to his complaint about being chased all around Tashbaan by multiple lions. No, there had been only one big cat all along, and it had been none other than Aslan Himself:

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I was the lion who forced you to join with Aravis. I was the cat who comforted you among the houses of the dead. I was the lion who drove the jackals from you while you slept. I was the lion who gave the horses the new strength of fear for the last mile so that you should reach King Lune in time. And I was the Lion you do not remember who pushed the boat in which you lay, a child near death, so that it came to shore where a man sat, wakeful at midnight, to receive you”.

“Then it was you who wounded Aravis?” “It was I”. “But what for?”
“Child,” said the Voice, very deep and low so that the earth shook, “I am telling you your story, not hers. I tell no one any story but his own”.

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To Shasta’s amazement, he learned that Aslan had been by his side all along. In the bad times, Aslan had strengthened him. In the dangerous times, Aslan had protected him. All of the time, Aslan had loved him. But had Shasta perceived the gracious power of the Great Lion in his life? No. He had been too distracted by his mistaken conviction that “everything goes right for everyone except me. . .”. Comparing himself to others had blinded him to the miracle of his own experience.

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So Aslan refocused Shasta's vision with a gentle rebuke of his curiosity about Aravis. "I tell no one any story but his own". He wanted the boy to see past his sorrow to the Storyteller, and thereby regain faith in the story.

Do you have faith in the story? When you come to this Valley, you will want to have faith in this story! Do you believe that Christ is with you now and always, guiding your steps in The Valley and straightening your way through The Shadow? He is. He is the Master of the vineyard who responds to trust, not demand. He is the Lion of the Tribe of Judah who gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him. He is the Author of our salvation who delights in weaving an utterly unique and beautiful story in each believer's life.

But to comprehend His work, we must be willing to reject all comparisons. Evidently, this was a difficult challenge for Peter. It was his self-absorbed "what's in it for me" question that elicited Jesus' parable, but unfortunately Peter didn't grasp Jesus' full meaning in it. Not long after, he was still comparing his life with others in deciding if God was fair. We see this in his last conversation with Christ who said to him:

"I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said

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this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, 'Follow me!' Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is going to betray you?') When Peter saw him, he asked, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus answered, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me'' (John 21:18–22).

I can understand Peter's curiosity. He's just been told how he will die. Can we blame him for wondering if his friends faced a similar fate? But when he asked about John, Jesus' reply is blunt: "None of your business, Peter! I tell no one any story but his own". This time, Peter understood. The Lord doesn't issue cookie-cutter callings. When Peter got his eyes off others and accepted God's unique work in his own life, the greatest chapters of his story unfolded.

God is writing a bestseller, and you are His co-author. Your history is the plot-line, your experiences the setting, your faith responses the dramatic tension. Insisting that He craft your story to mirror others is a demand for boring sameness. God is the Maker, the Master of new things, the Singer of new songs. Don't insult His creativity by asking Him to plagiarize old stories. In your experience in this Valley, God is creating something special. Trust Him to do a good job. So when He introduces a dramatic element into your story that consists of cancer, just ask enthusiastically the

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rhetorical question, “Why *not* me?” No matter how bleak your prospects, no matter how blessed your peers, be assured that if Christ is your King, every heartache is but a new chapter in your story. Never forget: in a masterpiece, every chapter is not only elegant, but essential. Let the Almighty Author finish!

I’m so glad that Joseph did. He didn’t bail out on God during his stints in the pit and the prison. Moses endured the desert, Paul the dungeon, and Daniel the den of lions. Jacob did twenty hard years in Haran and John was imprisoned on Patmos. These adversities were necessary interludes in the great stories God created around these heroes in His Faith Hall of Fame. Joseph transcended prison to become a Prime Minister. Daniel in the lion’s den slept peacefully with his feline friends. Jacob traded the moniker “manipulator of men” for “Prince of God”. Moses took up a rod and released the Hebrew slaves. In solitary silence, John received The Revelation. During legendary journeys, Paul mediated God’s revelation. The writer of Hebrews goes on to describe these heroes of the faith:

And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions. Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned

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to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection. . .(Hebrews 11:32–35).

Each of these in their own valleys allowed the Divine Writer to finish His story in their lives even if, for some of them, it meant not receiving earthly deliverance. Each received God's best because they left the choice with Him. Each trusted until every sentence was crafted, every paragraph polished, every chapter completed “. . .that they might obtain a better resurrection”. Won't you do the same? The result will be yet another masterpiece. It's always too soon to quit if God is in the picture. As Paul reminds us in 1Corinthians 2:9, “However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.’” I have become fond of quoting that promise to myself every time I sit down in the chemo lab. My endurance is bolstered by knowing that each drip from that poisonous IV is just a new sentence in a pretty darn good tale that my Heavenly Father is spinning about my life.

If you're still skeptical, listen to words Ronnie Stanley wrote to a Dallas sportswriter 20 years after his humiliating demise in the Gotham Bowl:

Begin textbox

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“That fractured tibia was one of the best things that ever happened to me. Placing a cast on our leg is not supposed to help your eyesight, but my vision cleared remarkably with a cast, some pain and some time. . .

“While recovering from the broken leg, my eyesight now saw a wonderful mother and dad and sisters. It also helped me see the real worth of the girl I was dating. You know, when you engage in football for eight to nine years in a row, it’s like heroin. It’s difficult to separate yourself from it. You are fearful that there won’t be any ‘me’ left, after he athlete has been removed. The broken leg served as a cleavage plane and I broke free, much to my benefit.

“I married that girl and I still love her. She’s gotten more attractive to me. I have three fine sons and a beautiful daughter. . . I guess we all should be more grateful and thankful for everything in our lives, yes, for the bad, also. Sometimes bad is not bad, it’s good. I’ve been here now since 1970 and my leg carries me for a three mile jog every other day along a sandy road in Hopkins County and I sometimes think of the Polo Grounds, the band with the funny uniforms and the trip I missed to the Peppermint Lounge”.

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End textbox

That letter was written on stationary from the Sulphur Springs Medical-Surgical Clinic and signed: “Ronald T. Stanley, M.D”.

“Sometimes bad is not bad, it’s good”. How true, especially since the bad is frequently instrumental in bringing the good. For a trusting believer, it always is, and that justifies quoting Paul’s amazing statement one more time: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

Jesus tells no one anyone’s story but their own. Those latecomer workers in the vineyard listened. Peter and all those biblical heroes listened. Shasta listened. Ronnie Stanley listened. I’m listening. And I pray you will listen, too. And the proof for all of us that we are indeed listening as Jesus tells us each our own story will be our often asking of a similar-sounding but actually quite different new question. . .

Your “Why NOT me?” Travel Writer,

Pastor Andy

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Chapter One: Story

1. Christopher Hitchens, "Topic of Cancer," Vanity Fair (September 2010)
2. 1 Corinthians 6:3
3. Tim Keller, King's Cross, p. 16-17
4. Calvin quoting Augustine, book 1, ch 18
5. C.S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*, pp