



When God Doesn't

MAKE SENSE



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This booklet has been printed in response to the horrific Victorian fires, the North Queensland floods, the communities being afflicted by the ongoing drought, and those who have endured personal trauma. Our hearts and prayers go out to all those who have suffered loss. After such devastating experiences, the road back to healing and hope can be very long and difficult. We hope this resource will serve as a road map to support you and your family on that journey.

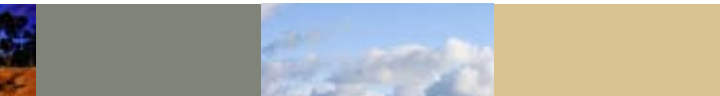
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Chapter 1

When God Doesn't Make Sense

Chuck Frye was a bright young man of 17, academically gifted and highly motivated. After graduating near the top of his class in high school, he went on to college, where he continued to excel in his studies. Upon completion of his B.S. degree, he applied for admittance to several medical schools. The competition for acceptance was, and is, fierce. At the time, I was a professor at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, where only 106 students were admitted each year out of 6,000 applicants. That was typical of accredited medical programs in that era. Despite these long odds, Chuck was accepted at the University of Arizona School of Medicine and began his formal training in September.

2 During that first term, Chuck was thinking about the call of God on his life. He began to feel that he should forgo high-tech medicine in some lucrative setting in favor of service on a foreign field. This eventually became his definite plan for the future. Toward the end of that first year of training, however, Chuck was not feeling well. He began experiencing a strange and persistent fatigue. He made an appointment for an examination in May and was soon diagnosed with acute leukemia. Chuck Frye was dead by November.

How could Chuck's heartsick parents then, and how can we now, make sense of this incomprehensible act of God? Why was he taken in his prime despite many agonized prayers for his healing by godly family members and faithful friends?

If permitted to live, Chuck could have treated thousands of poor and needy people who would otherwise suffer and die in utter hopelessness. Why would Divine Providence deny them his dedicated service?

There is another dimension to the Frye story that completes the picture. Chuck

became engaged to be married in March of that first year in medical school. His fiancée was named Karen Ernst. She learned of Chuck's terminal illness six weeks after their engagement, but she chose to go through with their wedding plans. They became husband and wife in July, less than four months before his tragic death. Karen then enrolled in medical school at the University of Arizona, and after graduation she became a medical missionary in Swaziland in southern Africa. Dr. Frye served there in a church-sponsored hospital until 1992. I'm sure she wonders-amidst so much suffering-why her brilliant young husband was not allowed to fulfill his mission as her medical colleague. And, yes, I wonder too.

The great theologians of the world can contemplate the dilemma posed by Chuck Frye's death for the next 50 years, but they are not likely to produce a satisfying explanation. God's purpose in this young man's demise is a mystery, and there it must remain. Why, after much prayer, was Chuck granted admittance to medical school if he could not live to complete his training? From whence came the missions call to which he responded? Why was so much talent invested in a young man who would not be able to use it? And why was life abbreviated in such a mature and promising student, whereas many drug addicts, alcoholics, and evildoers survive into old age as burdens on society? These troubling questions are much easier to pose than to answer. And there are many others.

Further examples of inexplicable sorrows and difficulties could fill the shelves of the world's largest library, and every person on earth could contribute illustrations of his or her own. Wars, famines, diseases, natural disasters, and untimely deaths are never easy to rationalize. But large-scale miseries of this nature are sometimes less troubling to the individual than the circumstances that confront each of us personally. Cancer, kidney failure, heart disease, sudden infant death syndrome, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, divorce, rape, loneliness, rejection, failure, infertility, widowhood! These and a million other sources of human suffering produce inevitable questions that trouble the soul. "Why would God permit this to happen to me?"

If you believe God is obligated to explain Himself to us, you ought to examine the following Scriptures. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 25:2, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter." Isaiah 45:15 states, "Truly you are a God who hides himself." Deuteronomy 29:29 reads, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God." Ecclesiastes 11:5 proclaims, "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things." Isaiah 55:8-9 teaches, "For my thoughts are not your

thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"



Clearly, the Scripture tells us that we lack the capacity to grasp God's infinite mind or the way He intervenes in our lives. How arrogant of us to think otherwise! Trying to analyze His omnipotence is like an amoeba attempting to comprehend the behavior of man. Romans 11:33 (KJV) indicates that God's judgments are "unsearchable" and his ways "past finding out." Similar language is found in 1 Corinthians 2:16: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" Clearly, unless the Lord chooses to explain Himself to us, which often He does not, His motivation and purposes are beyond the reach of mortal man. What this means in practical terms is that many of our questions—especially those that begin with the word why—will have to remain unanswered for the time being.

Unfortunately, many believers do not know that there will be times in every person's life when circumstances don't add up—when God doesn't appear to make sense. It is certainly true that God loves us and offers a wonderful plan for our lives, yet we may not always comprehend the "wonderful plan" nor approve of it.

For some people, such as Joni Eareckson Tada, the "wonderful plan" means life in a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. For others it means early death, poverty, or the scorn of society. For the prophet Jeremiah, it meant being cast into a dark dungeon. For other Bible characters it meant execution. Even in the most terrible of circumstances, however, God's plan is wonderful because anything in harmony with His will ultimately "works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

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Every description given to us in Scripture depicts God as infinitely loving and kind, tenderly watching over His earthly children and guiding the steps of the faithful. He speaks of us as "the people of his pasture, the flock under his care" (Psalm 95:7). This great love led Him to send His only begotten Son as a sacrifice for our sin, that we might escape the punishment we deserve. He did this because He "so loved" the world (John 3:16). Isaiah conveyed this message to us directly from the heart of the Father: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my

righteous right hand" (Isaiah 41:10). No, the problem here is not with the love and mercy of God. Nevertheless, the questions persist.

My chief concern at this point, and the reason I have chosen to write this booklet, is for those who are struggling with circumstances that don't make sense. In my work with families who are going through various hardships, from sickness and death to marital conflict and adolescent rebellion, I have found it common for those in crisis to feel great frustration with God. This is particularly true when things happen that seem illogical and inconsistent with what had been taught or understood. Then if God does not rescue them from the circumstances in which they are embroiled, their frustration quickly deteriorates into anger and a sense of abandonment. Finally, disillusionment sets in and the spirit begins to wither.

In fact, the majority of us will someday feel alienated from God. Why? Because those who live long enough will eventually be confronted by happenings they will not understand. That is the human condition. Let me say it again: It is an incorrect view of Scripture to say that we will always comprehend what God is doing and how our suffering and disappointment fit into His plan. Sooner or later, most of us will come to a point where it appears that God has lost control—or interest—in the affairs of people. It is only an illusion, but one with dangerous implications for spiritual and mental health. Interestingly enough, pain and suffering do not cause the greatest damage. Confusion is the factor that shreds one's faith.

The human spirit is capable of withstanding enormous discomfort, including the prospect of death, if the circumstances make sense. Many martyrs, political prisoners, and war heroes have gone to their graves willingly and confidently. They understood the sacrifice they were making and accepted its meaning in their lives.

5 By contrast, believers who become confused and disillusioned with God have no such consolation. It is the absence of meaning that makes their situation so intolerable. As such, their depression over a sudden illness or the tragic death of a loved one can actually be more severe than that experienced by the nonbeliever who expected and received nothing. It is not uncommon to hear a confused believer express great agitation, anger, or even blasphemy. This confused individual is like a little girl being told by her divorced father that he will come to see her. When Daddy fails to show up, she suffers far more than if he had never offered to come.

The key word here is expectations. They set us up for disillusionment. There is no greater distress in human experience than to build one's entire way of life

on a certain theological understanding, and then have it collapse at a time of unusual stress and pain. A person in this situation faces the crisis that rattled his foundation. Then, he must also deal with the anguish of rejection. The God whom he has loved, worshiped, and served turns out to appear silent, distant, and uncaring in the moment of greatest need. Do such times come even to the faithful? Yes, they do.

Wasn't that precisely what happened to Job? This God-fearing man of antiquity had done no wrong, yet he suffered a series of staggering losses in a matter of hours. I have heard many sermons based on the life of this remarkable Old Testament character, but the source of Job's most intense frustration (his inability to find God) has often been overlooked. That is a vital point in the story. Job lost everything—his children, his wealth, his servants, his reputation, and his friends. But those tragedies, as terrible as they were, did not create the greatest agitation for him. Instead, Job fell to the ground in worship and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:20-21).

Then God permitted Satan to afflict Job physically. He was stricken "with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (Job 2:7). His wife became irritated and goaded her husband to curse God and die. Job replied, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" The Scripture then says, "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (2:10). What an incredible man of faith! Not even death could shake his confidence, as he proclaimed, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15).

6 Eventually, however, Job reached a point of despair. This man of towering strength who had coped with sickness, death, and catastrophic loss soon faced a circumstance that threatened to overwhelm him. It emanated, strangely enough, from his inability to find God. He went through a time when the presence of the Almighty was hidden from view.

Are we to assume that this inability to find and communicate with God in certain times of personal crisis was unique to Job? No, I believe it occurs in many other cases, perhaps to the majority of us at some point in life. King David must have felt like Job when he asked the Lord with great passion, "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1). Then in Psalm 77, David again expressed the anguish of his soul: "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished

forever?" (vv. 7-8). We're told in 2 Chronicles 32:31 that "God left [Hezekiah] to test him and to know everything that was in his heart." Even Jesus asked why he had been abandoned by God in His final hours on the cross, which ultimately illustrates the experience I am describing. I am convinced that these and other biblical examples were provided to help us understand a critically important spiritual phenomenon. Apparently, most believers are permitted to go through emotional and spiritual valleys that are designed to test their faith in the crucible of fire. Why? Because faith ranks at the top of God's system of priorities. Without it, He said, it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6). And what is faith? It is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, KJV). This determination to believe when the proof is not provided and when the questions are not answered is central to our relationship with the Lord. He will never do anything to destroy the need for faith. In fact, He guides us through times of testing specifically to cultivate that belief and dependence on Him (Hebrews 11:6-7).

Still, a theological answer of that nature doesn't take away the pain and frustration we experience when we journey through spiritual no-man's-land. And most of us don't handle our difficulties as well as Job or David. When the heat is on and confusion mounts, some believers go through a horrendous spiritual crisis. They "lose God." Doubt rises up to obscure His presence and disillusionment settles into despair. The greatest frustration is knowing that He created the entire universe by simply speaking it into existence, and He has all power and all understanding. He could rescue. He could heal. He could save. But why won't He do it? Satan then drops by for a little visit and whispers, "He is not there! You are alone!"

If you are among those people who have been separated from God because of disillusionment or confusion, I have written with you in mind. I know you are hurting. I understand the pain that engulfed you when your child died or your husband betrayed you or your beloved wife passed away. You could not explain the devastating flood, earthquake, or the fire, or the terrible hurricane, or the unseasonable rainstorm that ruined your crops. The examples are endless.

The great danger for people who have experienced these kinds of tragedies is that



Satan will use their pain to make them feel victimized by God. What a deadly trap that is! When a person begins to conclude that he or she is disliked or hated by the Almighty, demoralization is not far behind.

For the heartsick, bleeding soul out there today who is desperate for a word of encouragement, let me assure you that you can trust this Lord of heaven and earth. There is security and rest in the wisdom of the eternal Scriptures. We will discuss those comforting passages in subsequent chapters, and I believe you will see that the Lord can be trusted—even when He can't be tracked. Of this you can be certain: Jehovah, King of kings and Lord of lords, is not pacing the corridors of heaven in confusion over the problems in your life! He hung the worlds in space. He can handle the burdens that have weighed you down, and he cares about you deeply. For a point of beginning He says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).

Chapter 2

The Betrayal Factor

8 I heard a story many years ago about a man who was driving his truck on a narrow mountain road. To his right was a cliff that dropped precipitously nearly 500 feet to a canyon below. As the driver rounded a curve, he suddenly lost control of the vehicle. It plunged over the side and bounced down the mountain, bursting into flames at the bottom. Although the terrified man was ejected as his truck went over the edge, he managed to grab a bush that grew near the top. There he was, frantically holding the small limb and dangling precariously over the abyss. After trying to pull himself up for several minutes, he called out in desperation, "Is anybody there?"

In a few seconds, the thundering voice of the Lord echoed across the mountain. "Yes, I am here," He said. "What do you want?"

The man pleaded, "Please save me! I can't hold on much longer!"

After another agonizing pause, the voice said, "All right. I will save you. But first

you must turn loose of the limb and trust Me to catch you. Just release your grip now. My hands will be under you.”

The dangling man looked over his shoulder at the burning truck in the valley below, and then he called out, “Is anybody else there?”

Have you ever found yourself in a similar fix? Have you ever pleaded for God’s help in a distressful situation and had Him ask you to trust Him with your life? Have you ever weighed His reply and then wanted to ask, “Is anybody else there?” We think we know what we need in a moment of crisis, but God often has other ideas.

The Lord may choose not to grant a request we think is vitally important. In a matter of moments, the world can fall off its axis. Panic stalks the soul as life and death hang in the balance. A pounding heart betrays the anxiety within. “But where is God? Does He know what is happening? Is He concerned? Why have the heavens grown dark and silent? What have I done to deserve this abandonment? Haven’t I served Him with a willing heart? What must I do to regain His favor?” Then, as frustration and fear accumulate, the human spirit recoils in distrust and confusion.

I wish I had the words to explain the full measure of this experience. Indeed, from my 26 years of professional counseling, I have seen few other circumstances in living that equal the agony of a shattered faith. It is a crisis brewed in the pit of hell. Dr. R. T. Kendall, the gifted senior minister of Westminster Chapel in London, said it leads directly to what he calls “the betrayal barrier.” In his opinion, 100 percent of believers eventually go through a period when God seems to let them down. The person loses his job, or his child becomes ill, or business reverses occur. Or maybe after serving Him faithfully for many years, life suddenly starts to unravel. It makes no sense. It seems so unfair. The natural reaction is to say, “Lord, is this the way You treat Your own? I thought You cared for me, but I was wrong. I can’t love a God like that.” It is a tragic misunderstanding.

9

We bail out before the pieces start fitting together. Forever after, we’re disillusioned and hurt. Dr. Kendall said more than 90 percent of us fail to break through this betrayal barrier after feeling abandoned by God. Our faith is then hindered by a bitter experience that we can’t forget.

For the benefit of those of you who are enduring that withering attack on your faith, I want to share some similar experiences in the lives of other believers. As indicated, it is important to recognize that you are not alone. Your pain and discouragement, which might lead you to ask “Why me?” are not unique. You have

not been singled out for sorrow. Most of us are destined, it seems, to bump our heads on the same old rock. From ancient times, men and women have grieved over stressful circumstances that did not fit any pattern of logic or symmetry. It happens to us all sooner or later.

Consider, for example, the life and death of Dr. Paul Carlson. In 1961, he had joined a relief agency to serve as a medical missionary in the Belgian Congo. It was only a six-month commitment, but what he saw there changed his life. He could not forget the hopeless people when he returned to his thriving medical practice in Redondo Beach, California. He told a colleague, "If you could only see [the need], you wouldn't be able to swallow your sandwich." Soon, Dr. Carlson moved his family to Africa and set up a makeshift clinic, operating at times by flashlight and making house calls on his motorbike.

Two years later, however, Dr. Carlson became a pawn in a bloody confrontation between rival revolutionary factions in the Belgian Congo. He was among a small band of people who were held captive near the battle zone. They had one fleeting opportunity to escape by scaling a wall and dropping to safety on the other side. Dr. Carlson reached the top of the barrier and was a split second from freedom when a burst of bullets tore through his body. He fell back into the courtyard and died. It was a senseless killing by rebels who had nothing to gain by his murder.

Time magazine, in its report of the killing, said this about the physician:

Dr. Carlson's murder, along with the massacre of perhaps another hundred whites and thousands of blacks, had a special, tragic meaning. [He] symbolized all the white men-and there are many-who want nothing from Africa but a chance to help. He was no saint and no deliberate martyr. He was a highly skilled physician who, out of a strong Christian faith and a sense of common humanity, had gone to the Congo to treat the sick.

That humanitarian commitment cost Dr. Paul Earle Carlson his life.

And we are left to ask, "Why, Lord? Why couldn't You have distracted the gunman for another instant?" Even a butterfly in front of his nose or some sweat in his eyes could have changed the tragic outcome. No such distraction occurred. And so ended the earthly days of a good man who left a loving wife and two children behind.

How about the experience of my friends Daryl and Clarita Gustafson? They were

infertile for many years, despite exhaustive medical tests and procedures. They prayed consistently for God to grant them the privilege of bringing a child into the world, but the heavens were silent and the womb remained barren. The ticking of Clarita's biological clock was deafening as the months slid into history. Then one day it happened. Clarita discovered that she was gloriously pregnant. God had spoken at last. A healthy baby boy was born seven months later, and he was named Aaron, after Moses' brother. This child was their pride and joy.

When Aaron was three years old, however, he was diagnosed as having a very virulent form of cancer. What followed were 10 months of painful chemotherapy and radiation treatment. Despite all efforts to arrest the disease, Aaron's little body continued to deteriorate. His mother and father vacillated between hope and despair, as only the parents of dying children can fully comprehend. Despite many prayers and countless tears, Aaron went to be with the Lord in 1992, at four years of age. Thus, the miracle child, was taken from them. The faith of this remarkable family has remained strong, although their questions still have not been answered.

These examples of heartache illustrate the fact that godly people-praying people-sometimes face the same hardships that nonbelievers experience. If we deny that fact, we create even greater pain and disillusionment for those who are unprepared to handle it. That is why we must overcome our reluctance to admit these unpleasant realities. We must brace our brothers and sisters against the betrayal barrier. We must teach them not to depend too heavily on their own ability to comprehend the inexplicable circumstances in our lives.

11 Remember that the Scripture warns us to "lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5). Note that we are not prohibited from trying to understand. I've spent a lifetime attempting to get a handle on some of the imponderables of life, which has led to the writing of this book. But we are specifically told not to lean on our ability to make the pieces fit. "Leaning" refers to the panicky demand for answers-throwing faith to the wind if a satisfactory response cannot be produced. It is pressing God to explain Himself-or else! That is where everything starts to unravel.

Admittedly, I do not have tidy answers that will satisfy Aaron's parents, or Mrs. Carlson, or Dr. Karen Frye. In fact, I find it irritating when amateur theologians throw around simplistic platitudes, such as "God must have wanted the little flower named Aaron for His heavenly garden." Nonsense! A loving Father does not tear the heart out of a family for selfish purposes! No, it is better to acknowledge that we

have been given too few facts to explain all the heartache in an imperfect, fallen world. That understanding will have to await the coming of the sovereign Lord who promises to set straight all accounts and end all injustice.

If you have begun to slide into despondency, it is extremely important to take a new look at Scripture and recognize that trials and suffering are part of the human condition. All of the biblical writers, including the giants of the faith, went through similar hardships. Look at the experience of Joseph, one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament. His entire life was in shambles until the triumphal reunion with his family many years later. He was hated by his brothers, who considered killing him before selling him as a slave. While in Egypt, he was imprisoned, falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar's wife, and threatened with execution. There is no indication that God explained to Joseph what He was doing through those many years of heartache, or how the pieces would eventually fit together. He was expected, like you and me, to live out his days one at a time in something less than complete understanding. What pleased God was Joseph's faithfulness when nothing made sense.

Let's examine the New Testament and look at the disciples and other early Christian leaders. Look at the martyrdom of Stephen, who was stoned to death for proclaiming the name of Christ. And the disciple James, to whom Acts 12 devotes only one verse: King Herod Agrippa "had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword" (Acts 12:2). Tradition tells us that 10 of the 12 disciples were eventually executed (excluding Judas, who committed suicide, and John, who was exiled). We also believe that Paul, who was persecuted, stoned, and flogged, was later beheaded in a Roman prison. The second half of Hebrews chapter 11 describes some of those who suffered for the name of Christ:

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. (Hebrews 11:35-39)

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Read that last verse again. Note that these saints lived in anticipation of a promise

that had not been fulfilled by the time of their deaths. A full explanation never came. They had only their faith to hold them steady in their time of persecution. Jesus told His disciples that they should anticipate suffering. He said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Paul wrote, "In all our troubles my joy knows no bounds. For when we came into Macedonia, this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn—conflicts on the outside, fears within" (2 Corinthians 7:4-5). Peter left no doubt about difficulties in this life when he wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed" (1 Peter 4:12-13). Note in each of these references the coexistence of both joy and pain.

This is the consistent, unequivocal "expectation" that we have been given by the biblical writers, and yet we seem determined to rewrite the text. That makes us sitting ducks for satanic mischief.

My concern is that many believers apparently feel God owes them a life free of problems or at least a full explanation (and perhaps an apology) for the hardships they encounter. We must never forget that He, after all, is God. He is majestic and holy and sovereign. He is accountable to no one. He is not an errand boy who chases the assignments we dole out. He is not a genie who pops out of the bottle to satisfy our whims. He is not our servant—we are His. And our reason for existence is to glorify and honor Him. Even so, sometimes He performs mighty miracles on our behalf. Sometimes He chooses to explain His action in our lives. Sometimes His presence is as real as if we had encountered Him face to face. But at other times when nothing makes sense—when what we are going through is "not fair," when we feel all alone in God's waiting room—He simply says, "Trust Me!"

Does this mean that we are destined to be depressed and victimized by the circumstances of our lives? Certainly not. Paul said we are "more than conquerors." He wrote in Philippians 4:4-7:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Clearly, what we have in Scripture is a paradox. On the one hand, we are told to expect suffering and hardship that could even cost us our lives. On the other hand, we are encouraged to be joyful, thankful, and “of good cheer.” How do those contradictory ideas link together? How can we be triumphant and under intense pressure at the same time? How can we be secure when surrounded by insecurity? That is a mystery which, according to Paul, “transcends all understanding.”

In the next chapter, we’ll discuss the principles that lead to this uncanny peace of mind in the midst of the storm. It is available in your life too.

Chapter 3

God Makes Sense Even When He Doesn't Make Sense

14

I have been thinking for many years about those occasions when God doesn't make sense. I was in my late teens when the first “awesome why” came rocketing through my brain. I don't remember today what precipitated that troublesome thought, but I knew I had hit an issue that required more horsepower than I possessed. I've now had a little more time—well, maybe more than a little—to study the Word and sort out my frame of reference. Some 60 years have come and gone since I gave my heart to Jesus Christ as a three-year-old child. I am still committed to this Master with every fiber of my being, and that conviction is deeper and stronger today than it has ever been.

Furthermore, this passage of time and the counsel of some biblical scholars have helped me come to terms with what I believe is the correct understanding of those periods when faith is severely challenged. I believe I have gotten a better idea of who God is and how He interacts with us—especially in four specific areas.

1. God is present and involved in our lives even when He seems deaf or on an extended leave of absence.

Human perception sometimes poses questions the mind is incapable of

answering. But valid answers always exist. For those of us who are Jesus Christ, it just makes good sense not to depend too heavily on our ability to make the pieces fit-especially when we're trying to figure out the Almighty!

Not only is human perception a highly flawed and imprecise instrument, but our emotions are even less reliable. We can't depend on our feelings and passions to govern our lives or assess the world around us. Emotions are unreliable-biased-whimsical. They lie as often as they tell the truth. They are manipulated by hormones-especially in the teen years-and they wobble dramatically from early morning, when we're rested, to the evening, when we're tired. One of the evidences of emotional maturity is the ability (and the willingness) to overrule ephemeral feelings and govern our behavior with the intellect and the will.

If perceptions or emotions are suspect at best, then we must be extremely wary in accepting what they tell us about God. Unfortunately, many believers seem unaware of this source of confusion and disillusionment. It is typical for vulnerable people to accept what they "feel" about the Lord at face value. But what they feel may reflect nothing more than a momentary frame of mind. Furthermore, the mind, the body, and the spirit are very close neighbors. One usually catches the ills of the next. If a person is depressed, for example, it affects not only his emotional and physical well-being; his spiritual life suffers too. He may conclude, "God doesn't love me. I just don't feel His approval." Likewise, the first thing an individual is likely to say when diagnosed with a threatening physical illness is, "Why would God do this to me?" These three faculties are inextricably linked, and they weaken the objectivity of our perception.

This understanding becomes extremely important when it comes to evaluating our relationship with God. Even when He seems 1,000 miles away and uninterested in our affairs, He is close enough to touch.

If you find the circumstances in your life have left you confused and depressed, I have a word of counsel for you. Never assume God's silence or apparent inactivity is evidence of His disinterest. Let me say it again. Feelings about His inaccessibility mean nothing! Absolutely nothing! His Word is infinitely more reliable than our spooky emotions. The Lord is at work in His own unique way even when our prayers



seem to echo back from an empty universe.

Establish your foundation not on ephemeral emotions but on the authority of the written Word. He promised never to leave us (Matthew 28:20). He said, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Matthew 18:20). He is "a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 18:24). We're assured that "the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer" (1 Peter 3:12).

These promises and proclamations remain true even if we have no spiritual feelings whatsoever. Cling to that truth with the tenacity of a bulldog! For, as Kierkegaard said, "Faith is holding onto uncertainties with passionate conviction."

2. God's timing is perfect, even when He appears catastrophically late.

One of the greatest destroyers of faith is timing that doesn't fit our preconceived notions. We live in a fast-paced world where we have come to expect instant responses to every desire and need. But God doesn't operate that way. He is never in a hurry. And sometimes, He can be agonizingly slow in solving the problems we bring to His attention. It's almost enough to make an impatient believer give up and try something else.

Before bailing out, however, we should take another look at the story of Mary, Martha, and their brother, Lazarus, as told in John 11. The members of this little family were among Jesus' closest friends during the time of His earthly ministry. Verse 5 says, "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus." It was reasonable, given this affection, for them to expect certain favors from Jesus—especially if life-threatening emergencies ever occurred. Indeed, they were soon confronted by precisely that situation when Lazarus became desperately ill. His sisters did the logical thing—they sent an urgent note to Jesus, saying, "Lord, the one you love is sick" (v. 3). They had every reason to believe He would respond.

Mary and Martha waited and watched the road for Jesus' appearance, but He did not come. Hours dragged into anxious days with no sign of the Master. Meanwhile, Lazarus was steadily losing ground. He was obviously dying. But where was Jesus? Did He get the message? Didn't He know the seriousness of the illness? Didn't He care? As the sisters sat vigilantly at his bedside, Lazarus soon closed his eyes in death.

The sisters were grief stricken. Also, they must have been extremely frustrated

with Jesus. He was out there somewhere performing miracles for total strangers, opening blind eyes and healing the lame. Yet here they were in critical need of His care, and He was too busy to come. I can imagine Mary and Martha saying quietly to each other, "I just don't understand. I thought He loved us. Why would He abandon us like this?" They wrapped Lazarus in graveclothes and conducted a sad little funeral. Jesus did not attend. Then they said good-bye to their brother and lovingly placed his body in a tomb.

Mary and Martha loved Jesus with all their hearts, but it would have been reasonable for them to have been annoyed when He showed up four days later. They may have been tempted to say, "Where have You been, Sir? We tried to tell You that Your friend was dying, but we couldn't get Your attention. Well, You're too late now. You could have saved Him, but apparently there were more important things on Your mind." Mary's actual words were much more respectful, of course. What she said was, "Lord, . . . if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). She wept as she spoke and the Lord was "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" (v. 33).

Jesus then performed one of His most dramatic miracles as He called Lazarus out of the tomb. You see, the Master was not really late at all. He only appeared to be overdue. He arrived at the precise moment necessary to fulfill the purposes of God—just as He always does.

With no disrespect intended, let me say that what happened there in Bethany is characteristic of life. Haven't you noticed that Jesus usually shows up about four days late? He often arrives after we have wept and worried and paced the floor—after we have sweated out the medical examination or fretted our way through business reverses. If He had arrived on time we could have avoided much of the stress that occurred in His absence. Yet it is extremely important to recognize that He is never actually late. His timetable for action is simply different from ours. And it is usually slower!

From my study of the Scriptures and from personal experiences, I have drawn the conclusion that God's economy of time and energy is very different from ours. Most of us are motivated to use every second of our existence for some gainful purpose. But the Lord sometimes permits our years to be "squandered," or so it would seem, without a backward glance.

Obviously, there is no "tyranny of the urgent" in God's scheme of things. He acts according to His own ordered schedule. Even Jesus, who lived 33 years on earth,

spent only three in active ministry! Think of how many more people He could have healed—and how many more divine truths He could have imparted—in another decade or two.

Look at the human talent that has been “wasted” by early death or disability over the centuries. Wolfgang Mozart, for example, may have had the greatest musical mind in the history of the world. He composed his first symphony at five years of age and turned out a remarkable volume of brilliant work. But he died penniless at 35, being unable to attract any interest in his compositions. His most valuable possession at the time of his death was a violin worth about two dollars. He was buried in an unmarked pauper’s grave, and no one attended his funeral. Who was it that said life is fair?

Although I’m aware of no evidence that Mozart was a believer, I still find it interesting to contemplate the Lord’s role in his early demise. Just imagine the music Mozart could have written if permitted to live another 20 or 30 years. Wouldn’t you enjoy

hearing the “best of the never written symphonies” that might have come from this maturing genius? How about Ludwig van Beethoven, who began losing his hearing before he was 30 years of age? Why would God invest such extraordinary ability in those whose lives would be abbreviated by death? I don’t know.

On the other side of that question stand the individuals who were afforded long life despite their defiance of God. In 2 Kings 21, for example, we read of one such man. His name was Manasseh, son of the godly King Hezekiah. He was perhaps the most wicked despot ever to rule in Jerusalem. Manasseh came to power at 12 years of age, and “did evil in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 2) all the days of his life. He burned to death his own son, practiced witchcraft, consulted spiritists and mediums, and “did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, provoking him to anger” (v. 6). Because of this great wickedness, the judgment of God fell on subsequent generations—but not on Manasseh. He reigned 55 years and “rested with his fathers, and was buried in his palace garden, the garden of Uzza.” End of story.

I have no doubt that terrible justice will be meted out to Manasseh on Judgment Day, but it does seem strange that he was permitted for 55 years to murder innocent people, sacrifice his children, and blaspheme the name of God. Uzzah, on the other hand, was killed instantly by God for a single misdeed—reaching out to steady the ark of the covenant lest it fall (2 Samuel 6:6-7). Something doesn’t



appear to add up here.

What conclusions can we draw from these seeming contradictions, except to “Let God be God”? He does not explain Himself to man. We can say with confidence that while His purposes and plans are very different from ours, He is infinitely just and His timing is always perfect. He intervenes at just the right moment for our ultimate good. Until we hear from Him, then, we would be wise not to get in a lather.

3. For reasons that are impossible to explain, we human beings are incredibly precious to God.

One of the most breathtaking concepts in all of Scripture is the revelation that God knows each of us personally and that we are in His mind both day and night. There is simply no way to comprehend the full implications of this love by the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is all-powerful and all-knowing, majestic and holy, from everlasting to everlasting. Why would He care about us—about our needs, our welfare, our fears? We have been discussing situations in which God doesn’t make sense. His concern for us mere mortals is the most inexplicable of all.

David contemplated the same question when he wrote, “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” (Psalm 8:4).

Not only is the Lord “mindful” of each one of us, but He describes Himself throughout Scripture as our Father. In Luke 11:13 we read, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” Psalm 103:13 says, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.”

Being a parent of two children, both now grown, I can identify with these parental analogies. They help me begin to comprehend how God feels about us. Shirley and I would give our lives for Danae and Ryan in a heartbeat if necessary. We pray for them every day, and they are never very far from our thoughts. And how vulnerable we are to their pain! Can it be that God actually loves His human family infinitely more than we, “being evil,” can express to our own flesh and blood? That’s what the Word teaches.

There must be times when God also feels our intense pain and suffers along with us. Wouldn’t that be characteristic of a Father whose love was infinite? How He

must hurt when we say in confusion, “How could You do this terrible thing, Lord? Why me? I thought I could trust You! I thought You were my friend!” How can He explain within our human limitations that our agony is necessary, that it does have a purpose, that there are answers to the tragedies of life? I wonder if He anticipates the day when He can make us understand what was occurring in our time of trial. I wonder if He broods over our sorrows.

Some readers might doubt that an omnipotent God with no weaknesses and no needs is vulnerable to this kind of vicarious suffering. No one can be certain. We do know that Jesus experienced the broad range of human emotions, and then He told Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Remember that Jesus was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled” when Mary wept over Lazarus. It seems logical to assume, therefore, that God, the Father, is passionately concerned about His human “family” and shares our grief in those unspeakable moments of sorrow.

4. Your arms are too short to fight with God. Don't try it!

Several years ago, there was a Broadway theatrical performance called, “Your Arm's Too Short to Fight with God.” I didn't see it, but I agree with the premise behind the title. The human intellectual apparatus is pitifully ill-equipped to argue with the Creator. New Age followers don't agree. They say each of us can become gods in our own right by zoning in on a crystal and sitting cross-legged until our toes go to sleep. How presumptuous!

20

No, we human beings hardly qualify as gods—even piddly ones. Despite our intense efforts to understand ourselves, we have learned very little about living together harmoniously or even what makes us tick. The best trained and most respected secular psychologists and psychiatrists still believe that man is basically good—that he only learns to do evil from society. If that were true, surely there would be at least one culture somewhere in the world where selfishness, dishonesty, and violence have not shown up. Instead, the history of human experience down through the millennia is the history of warfare—and murder and greed and exploitation. “Peace” is what we call that brief moment between wars when people stop to reload. And Plato said, “Only dead men have seen an end to war.” He has been proved correct down across some 2,500 years.

You might also take a good look at your children. How can anyone who has raised a toddler fail to recognize that rebellion, selfishness and aggression do not have

to be cultivated. Kids come by it quite naturally. Thus, this most basic characteristic of human nature has been overlooked by those specifically trained to observe it.

This is the point made earlier: If human intelligence and perception are undependable in assessing everyday reality, which can be seen, touched, heard, tasted, and smelled, how much less capable is it of evaluating the unfathomable God of the universe? Our efforts to encapsulate and comprehend Him are equally as futile. The arrogance of mankind in ignoring or challenging the wisdom of the Almighty is shocking at times.

Job tried to question God and was given a rather pointed history lesson in response. Note especially the first sentence from the mouth of the Lord.

Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone-while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? (Job 38:2-7)

God continued that discourse until Job got his mind straight, and then the Lord added these words, "Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!" (Job 40:2). Job got the message. He replied, "I am unworthy-how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer-twice, but I will say no more" (Job 40:4-5).

21

There have been a few times in my life when I've made the same mistake as Job, demanding answers from God. One such occasion is a source of embarrassment to me today. It is too personal to relate in detail, except to say there was something I wanted the Lord to do for me that I thought I needed very badly. It seemed in keeping with His Word, and I set out to assure that my prayer was answered. I prayed every day for weeks, begging God to grant this request that seemed to be so significant. I was literally on my face before Him during this time of petition. Nevertheless, He clearly said no! He didn't explain or apologize. He simply shut the door. At first I was hurt, and then I became angry. I knew better, but I was tempted to say with sarcasm, "Would it have been too troublesome for You to have taken a moment from Your busy day to hear the cry of your servant?" I did not utter these words, but I couldn't help what I felt. And I felt abandoned.

Well, two years went by and my circumstances changed radically. The matter that I had prayed about began to look very different. Ultimately I realized that it would have been most unfortunate if the Lord had granted my request in that instance. He loved me enough to turn me down, even when I was demanding my own way. Admittedly, most of our spiritual frustrations do not end with an enlightened, "Oh, now I see what You were doing, Lord!" We just have to file them under the heading, "Things I Don't Understand," and leave it there. In those instances, we should be thankful that He does what is best for us whether or not it contradicts our wishes. Even a reasonably good parent sometimes says "no" to a child's demands.

I've been trying to say with this discussion that our view of God is too small-that His power and His wisdom cannot even be imagined by us mortals. He is not just some kind of Wizard who will do a dance for those who make the right noises. We dare not trivialize the One about whom it is written,

Praise be to you, O Lord, God of our father Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; you are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from you; you are the ruler of all things. In your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise your glorious name. (1 Chronicles 29:10-13)

22 If we truly understood the majesty of this Lord and the depth of His love for us, we would certainly accept those times when He defies human logic and sensibilities. Indeed, that is what we must do. Expect confusing experiences to occur along the way. Welcome them as friends-as opportunities for your faith to grow. Hold fast to your faith, without which it is impossible to please Him. Never let yourself succumb to the "betrayal barrier," which is Satan's most effective tool against us. Instead, store away your questions for a lengthy conversation on the other side, and then press on toward the mark. Any other approach is foolhardy-because your arms are too short to box with God.

Chapter 4

“He Will Deliver Us, But If Not...”

We must hasten now to deal with a series of questions that are critical to everything we have discussed to this point: What is God's role in situations that confuse and sometimes disillusion His followers?

What do you believe about the meaning of prayer? Is it true, as James 5:16 says, that “the prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective”? Was Jesus speaking to us when He said, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7)?

Speaking personally, I have staked my life on the validity of those promises. They were “God-breathed” and then dutifully recorded by the inspired writers of the Word. Our foundation as believers is rooted in the Scriptures, where the message is unmistakable. Consider these verses:

Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. (1 Chronicles 16:11)

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. (Luke 18:1)

23

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)

Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 5:17-18)

It is obvious not only that prayer is honored by the Lord, but that we are commanded to enter into this personal communication with Him. And what a privilege it is! Have you considered the nature of this gift we have been granted by the Almighty? We need not make an appointment to get His attention. He never puts us off to a later date when His schedule is less congested.

Instead, we are invited to walk boldly into His presence at any moment, day or night. He hears the faintest cry of the sick, the lonely, the despised of the world. Every one of us is known and loved by Him, despite our imperfection and failures. Truly, the invitation to prayer is a precious expression of the Creator's incomparable love and compassion for humanity. That understanding has been woven into the fabric of my life and family from earliest childhood.

The year was 1957, and I was a senior in college. An ominous telephone call came one afternoon from my parents, who sounded anxious and upset. Mom quickly told me that my dad had developed an angry-looking sore on his right hand. They had watched it for some time and realized it was not healing. Finally they went to see a dermatologist and had just returned from his office. My father, age 46, was diagnosed as having carcinoma, squamous cell—a type of skin cancer that is curable in the early stages but dangerous if not treated. The doctor seemed concerned. He told them that a microscopic examination of tissue revealed a “very mature” cell. He couldn't tell whether or not it had metastasized (spread to other parts of the body), but he could not rule out that possibility.

It was decided to treat the cancer with radiation over a period of six weeks. At the end of that time, the healing process should begin. If the lesion was controllable locally, it would disappear entirely in about five more weeks. But if it did not heal, more serious problems were ahead. The specter of amputation was raised. My father was an artist, and the thought of losing his right arm (or his life) alarmed the entire family. We began praying for him.

24 Four weeks after completing the radiation treatments, the sore was still much the same. No sign of healing had occurred. Tension mounted as we continued to get discouraging medical reports. (I'm sure the disease would be less challenging today than in the fifties, but the episode was extremely distressing at that time.) My father's physician began contemplating the next step.

It was time to do some more intensive praying. Dad went to our denominational leaders and requested that they anoint him with oil and specifically ask the Lord to heal the cancer. That brief service occurred two days before the end of the fifth week, at which point the dermatologist had indicated a further decision would have to be made. Exactly two days later, the sore healed over. It never returned.

This is but one example of dramatic answers to prayer that I witnessed during my childhood and youth. Illustrations from that era could fill this book, quite literally, because we were a family that believed in prayer. So many stories come to mind.

I remember an occasion when my father had given his entire paycheck to a pastor whose children needed shoes and warm clothes. Dad was a soft touch for anyone with a financial problem. Inevitably, we ran out of money a few days later—and went straight to our knees. I can still hear my father praying after he had gathered his little family around.

He said, “Now Lord, You said if we would honor You in our good times that You would be faithful to us in times of need. And as You know, we could use a little help to get us through.”

I tell you honestly that a check for \$1,200 came in the mail the day following that prayer. My faith grew by leaps and bounds during those formative years, because I saw God responding to a family that depended upon Him.

Now let me wade into deeper water. Although hundreds of Scriptures tell us that God hears and answers prayer, it is important to acknowledge what most of us have already observed—that He does not do everything we ask in the manner that we would desire. Years may pass before we see the fulfillment of His purposes. There are other occasions when He says “no,” or “wait.” And let’s be honest, there are times when He says nothing at all. As we have indicated, many believers become confused and wounded in those instances, and their faith begins to wobble.

Consider for a moment the kind of world it would be if God did exactly what we demanded in every instance. First, believers would outlive nonbelievers by centuries. The rest of the human family would be trapped in decaying bodies, but Christians and their children would live in an idyllic world set apart. They would never have toothaches or kidney stones or myopic vision. All of their businesses would succeed and their homes would be beautiful, etc. The entire basis for the God-man relationship would be undermined. People would seek a friendship with Him in order to gain the fringe benefits, rather than responding with a heart of repentance and love. Indeed, the most greedy among us would be the first to be drawn to the benefits of the Christian life. Most importantly, these evidences of God’s awesome power would eliminate the need for faith. As Paul wrote in Romans 8:24, “Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has?”

Our faith, then, is anchored not in signs and wonders but in the sovereign God of the universe. He will not “perform” on cue to impress us. Jesus condemned those who wanted Him to put His miracles on display, saying, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it” (Matthew 12:39). He wants us to accept Him in the absence of proof. Jesus told Thomas, “Blessed

are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (John 20:29). We serve this Lord not because He dances to our tune, but because we trust His preeminence in our lives. Ultimately, He must be—He will be—the determiner of what is in our best interest. We can't see the future. We don't know His plan. We perceive only the small picture, and not even that very clearly. Given this limitation, it seems incredibly arrogant to tell God what to do—rather than making our needs known and then yielding to His divine purposes.

Jesus Himself modeled that attitude of submission for us. He asked His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane that the "cup" of humiliation and death be removed from Him. He knew fully what the crucifixion meant. The emotional pressure was so intense that great drops of blood penetrated His skin. Medically speaking, that phenomenon is called hematidrosis, and it occurs only in persons undergoing the most severe distress. Yet even in the midst of that agony, Jesus prayed, "Yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

There are many other biblical examples of this yielding to divine authority. The Apostle Paul asked the Lord on three separate occasions to remove the irritant he called "a thorn in the flesh." Three times the answer was no. Instead, he was told, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Each of us is riddled with flaws and shortcomings that the Lord could overcome with a whisper. Instead, He often lets us struggle with our weaknesses to reveal His own power. That understanding comes straight out of Scripture: Paul wrote, "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels [clay pots], that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us" (2 Corinthians 4:7, KJV).

It seems to me that every believer has at least one problem with his "clay pot" that is especially troublesome—a nagging irritant or disease—that the Lord steadfastly refuses to remove. I call them "if onlys."

If only . . . if only God would clear up this one difficulty for me. Yet the problems persist. Regarding those difficulties, the Lord quietly repeats what He said to Paul nearly 2,000 years ago, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9).

If I may paraphrase my understanding of that Scripture, He says to us, "Everyone is asked to endure some things that bring discomfort, pain, or sorrow. This is yours. Accept it. Carry it. I will give you the grace to endure it." Thus, life goes on in a state of relative imperfection.

Poise under pressure can be learned to some degree. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:12, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." It is an acquired serenity.

Perhaps you have noticed that life seems blatantly unfair. It pampers some of us and devastates others. How can we explain such an apparent injustice? How can an infinitely loving and just God permit some people to experience lifelong tragedy while others seem to enjoy every good and perfect gift? And what can we conclude when the unfortunate individual is a child? Well, I know the answer offered by theologians—that sickness and death came into the world as a result of sin, and we are all under sentence of death. It comes to some sooner than others. I understand and accept that explanation, even though it leaves us with a troubled spirit.

Admittedly, this explanation of suffering is not very satisfying as we look into the face of a child in pain. It is, however, the best we can do. I've indicated that we can explore the mind of God only so far, and then, inevitably, we run out of brain power. His thoughts are not only unknown to us—they are largely unknowable. He has never made Himself accountable to man, nor will He ever. He will not be crossexamined or interrogated. Nowhere in the Bible does God speak defensively or seek our approval on His actions. He simply says, "Trust me." In His lengthy interchange with Job, not once did Jehovah apologize or attempt to explain the hardship that befell His servant. Still, we are told specifically that God is loving, kind, merciful, long-suffering, gracious, fatherly, patient, etc. So what are we going to do with the discomfort of unanswered questions?

Either we continue to believe in God's goodness and postpone our questions until we see Him face to face—or we will descend into bitterness and anger for the suffering around us. There are no other alternatives. Inevitably, you see, we circle back to the necessity of faith.

Well, let me end with this: You'll remember the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego reported in the third chapter of Daniel. They incurred the wrath of Nebuchadnezzar by refusing to fall down and worship the idol he had set up. He made it clear that if they again refused to obey his command, they would be thrown into a "burning fiery furnace." Their response to that murderous threat is one of the most inspiring passages in Scripture:



The God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. (Daniel 3:17-18)

What courage these men showed in the very face of death! What conviction! What faith! "God can save us," they said, "but if not, we'll serve Him anyway." That is the biblical prescription in its simplest terms. He can heal the disease that grips my body-but if not, my faith will survive. He can correct my child's handicap, or save my bankrupt business, or bring my son home safely from the war.

But if not, I will continue trusting in Him. That's what Job meant when he said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (13:15, NKJV). It is what Paul meant when he said, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5, NKJV). In verse 8 Paul describes that mind-set: "He humbled himself and became obedient to death-even death on a cross." That utter abandonment to the sovereign will of the Lord is what He wants of His people, even when circumstances seem to swirl out of control. He can rescue-but if not . . . !

To the reader out there who has been diagnosed with a terminal illness, or the parent whose child is in danger, or the recently widowed woman who faces life alone-let me offer a final word of encouragement. Remember when Nebuchadnezzar looked into the blazing furnace and saw four men instead of three, and the fourth looked like the "Son of God"? It is comforting to note that only Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego came out of the fire. That other Man, whom we believe to have been the Christ, remained there to comfort and protect you and me when we go through our fiery trials.

He will never abandon you-but He won't let you escape difficulties, either!

Chapter 5

The Adversity Principle

Let me turn a corner, now, and approach this important topic of “faith under fire” from another direction.

A person faced with extreme hardship must press himself to get tougher. Whining and self-pity, as logical as they seem, are deadly indulgences. An individual in crisis will either grow stronger or become demoralized. Within certain limits, of course, adversity can have a positive effect on people by helping to build character. For believers, Scripture says it develops and enhances that precious characteristic called faith (James 1:2-4).

Biologists have long recognized this concept, which we’ll call the adversity principle, at work in the world of plants and animals. As strange as it seems, habitual well-being is not advantageous to a species. An existence without challenge takes its toll on virtually every living thing. Just look at the flabby animals in a zoo, for example. Food is delivered to them every day, and they need do nothing but lie around and yawn. Or consider a tree planted in a rain forest. Because water is readily available, it does not have to extend its root system more than a few feet below the surface. Consequently, it is often poorly anchored and can be toppled by a minor windstorm. But a mesquite tree planted in a hostile and arid land must send its roots down 30 feet or more in search of water. Not even a gale can blow it over. Its unfriendly habitat actually contributes to stability and vigor.

29

It is also relevant to the human family. Some of the most noble examples of courage have occurred in countries undergoing severe pressure. The shattered nations of Europe in the 1940s come to mind in this context. All wars are horrible, and I’m certainly not minimizing the suffering they cause. World War II claimed 50 million lives and virtually destroyed a continent before it was over. Still, those who survived the ordeal were forced to adapt in order to endure their season in hell. Look at the effect of that adaptation.

The Germans were subjected to terrible devastation near the end of the war, just as they had inflicted it on others. Some of their larger cities were bombed around

the clock-by the Americans throughout the day and by the British at night. Death and destruction were everywhere. Food was extremely scarce, as were all the essentials to life. By the end of the war, 80 percent of the men born in 1922 were dead, spreading grief and heartache throughout the land. These tragedies resulted from Nazi aggression, of course, but the suffering by individual German families was no less real. What is remarkable from today's perspective is the degree to which they hung tough. They did not crack! Even in the winter of 1945, when factories had been bombed, trains were destroyed and bridges shattered, the productivity of the nation was still nearly 80 percent of prewar capacity. Morale remained high. They continued to exhibit a national resolve—a collective commitment to the war effort—even when Allied armies were tightening the noose around Berlin.

No less impressive was Britain's record during the war. Churchill rallied the people to personal heroism. He began by addressing their expectations, offering them nothing "but blood, toil, sweat and tears." That helped steel them against hardship. In the darkest days of the blitz when their beloved homeland was in imminent danger of invasion, the Brits dug in.

This same indomitable spirit was evident in many of the other war-torn countries during that time. It reached a culmination in the city of Leningrad (now called St. Petersburg), where the Russian people endured horrible deprivation during an 872-day siege by German and Finnish armies. More than 650,000 Leningraders died in 1942 alone, mostly from starvation, disease, and shelling by distant guns. But the survivors refused to surrender to tyranny. Their response to unimaginable horror stands as one of the world's most striking examples of raw human courage. St. Petersburg is called the "Hero City" today.

If it is accurate to say that hard times often lead to emotional and physical toughness, then the opposite must also be valid. And, indeed, it is. Easy living and abundance often produce a certain underlying weakness.

Could it be that our heavenly Father permits His children to struggle in order to keep us strong? I firmly believe that to be true. That is precisely what James told the Jewish-Christians in the first century: "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2-3). Paul echoed that theme in his letter to the Romans: "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans

5:3-4).

Jesus said it even more plainly, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). He also said, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it" (v. 25). Those words leave little room for doubt. Jesus wants us to be committed and disciplined and tough. He also warned about the dangers of the soft life. A person who grows accustomed to life's good things may not be drawn naturally to the sacrificial way of the Cross.

So life is a challenge. It was obviously designed to be that way. Look at how Jesus related to His disciples throughout His ministry on earth. He could hardly be accused of pampering these rugged men. Picture them in a small boat late one evening. Jesus went to sleep on a cushion, and while He slept a "furious squall" came up. Remember that several of the disciples were professional fishermen and they knew very well what a storm can do to a small craft and its occupants. They were frightened—as you or I would have been. But there was the Master, unconcerned and uninvolved, sound asleep near the stern. Waves were crashing over the bow and threatening to sink the boat. The panic-stricken men could stand it no longer. They awakened Jesus and said, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" Before quieting the storm, He said to his disciples, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" (Matthew 8:23-26).

If I didn't know better, my sympathies would be with the disciples in this instance. Who could blame them for quaking in the path of the storm? There was no helicopter to pluck them out of the churning sea. If they ever fell overboard in this "furious squall" it would be curtains. Still, Jesus was disappointed by their panic. Why? Because fear and faith do not ride in the same boat. And because He wanted them to trust Him even when facing death. They would need that confidence in a few months!

Let's revisit Jesus and the disciples in yet another episode on the sea. According to Mark (6:45-50), He had instructed them to get in their boat and go on ahead of him to the city of Bethsaida. Then He went to a nearby mountainside to pray. Apparently, Jesus could see the entire lake from where He sat, and He observed that His disciples were "straining at the oars, because the wind was against them." The biblical account tells us, "About the fourth watch of the night he went out to them, walking on the lake" (v. 48). From the early evening to the fourth watch is a seven-hour passage of time. For seven hours, Jesus watched the disciples do battle

with a severe head wind before He came to assist them. Yet they were in His vision and under His care throughout the night. Obviously, He permitted them to experience their need before coming to their rescue.

Sometimes He also lets you and me “struggle with the oars” until we recognize our dependence on Him. In so doing, He gives our faith an opportunity to grow and mature. But one thing is certain: We are ever in His vision. When His purposes are fulfilled and the time is right, He will calm the stormy sea and lead us to safety on the distant shore.

Let’s look at another example of Jesus’ relationship with his not-so-tough disciples. It occurred on the night before He was to be crucified. Peter, James, and John were with Him in the Garden of Gethsemane. As the night wore on, Jesus became overwhelmed with sorrow for what He was facing. He asked the three men to stay behind and keep watch while He went by Himself to pray. Three times during that hour He came back and found them asleep because “their eyes were heavy” (Matthew 26:43). As before, He expressed displeasure in their weakness.

We must remember that these men had also been under considerable stress in recent days. They understood they might be executed for their proximity to Jesus. That kind of danger causes fatigue—especially after being awake until the early morning hours. It was reasonable that the disciples would find it difficult to sit staring out into the night without lapsing into slumber. Yet Jesus expected them to stay awake, saying, “Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41). There it is again. Jesus was urging His disciples to toughen up—to strive for greater control over their impulses. Why? Because weak flesh is more vulnerable to temptation.

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Let’s summarize: We now know that faith must be tough, but why? Is there a logical reason why the Lord asks us to strengthen our resolve and meet our difficulties head-on? I believe it is because of the close interrelationship between mind, body, and spirit mentioned earlier. We cannot be spiritually stable and emotionally unstable at the same time. We are in a spiritual war with a deadly foe tracking us every hour of the day. We need to be in the best shape possible to cope with the darts and arrows he hurls our way. Thus, the Lord puts us on a spiritual treadmill every now and then to keep us in good fighting condition.

It’s the “adversity principle,” and all of us are affected by it one way or the other.

Chapter 6

The Wages of Sin

We have been discussing those occasions when hardship and difficulty come sweeping into our lives for no apparent reason. Accidents, death, sickness, earthquakes, fires, violence, etc., naturally lead the survivors to ask, “What did we do to deserve this?” Their inability to link these inexplicable “acts of God” with their own misbehavior often creates a sense of betrayal and victimization. It just doesn’t seem fair.

There is another source of pain and suffering in our lives, however, that must be considered. It was described by Dr. Karl Menninger in his book *Whatever Became of Sin?* He wrote about the almost-forgotten concept of disobedience to God and how it undermines our well-being. Indeed, much of the heartache for which God is often blamed results from old-fashioned sin. I’m referring not to the curse of Adam’s sin, but to specific sinful behavior that wreaks havoc in the human family.

Scripture makes it clear that there is a direct link between disobedience to God and the consequence of death. James describes the connection this way: “Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:14-15).

33 All sin bears that deadly characteristic. It’s not that God sits in His heaven and determines to abuse those who make mistakes. But He forbade certain behavior because He knew it would ultimately destroy its victims. It is not God who leads to death, but sin. And sin becomes a cancer that consumes those who embrace it.

I believe many of the trials and tribulations that come our way are of our own making. Some are the direct consequence of sin. In other cases, the pain we experience is a result of unwise decisions. We make such a mess of our lives by foolishness and irresponsibility.

We drink too much or gamble compulsively or allow pornography to possess our minds. We drive too fast and work like there’s no tomorrow. We challenge the boss disrespectfully and then blow up when he strikes back. We spend money we don’t have and can’t possibly repay. We fuss and fight at home and create misery

for ourselves and our families. We not only borrow trouble—we go looking for it. We toy with the dragon of infidelity. We break the laws of God and then honestly believe we have beaten the odds. Then when the “wages” of those sins and foolishness come due, we turn our shocked faces up to heaven and cry, “Why me, Lord?” In truth, we are suffering the natural consequences of dangerous behavior that is guaranteed to produce pain.

I would not imply that every physical illness or heartache is the result of sin, of course. There are situations, however, where the connection is undeniable. I think of sickness that emanates from abuse of one’s body, such as lung cancer resulting from cigarette smoke, or cirrhosis caused by alcoholism, or mental illness precipitated by narcotics usage. These are self-inflicted wounds.

A more relevant example today is the HIV phenomenon. The question is often raised, Has God sent the AIDS epidemic as a punishment for homosexual behavior? I believe emphatically that the correct answer is no! Many innocent victims, including newborn babies, are suffering and dying from the disease. A curse from God would be more specific to the perpetrator. However, the HIV infection is spread by sodomy, drug usage, and promiscuity, so sinful behavior has helped to create the epidemic that now threatens the human family.

Perhaps a concluding story will help illustrate where I believe we are headed in the struggle between good and evil.

I heard about a missionary in Africa who returned to his hut late one afternoon. As he entered the front door he was confronted by a huge python on the floor. He ran back to his truck and retrieved a .45-caliber pistol. Unfortunately, he had only one bullet in the chamber and no extra ammunition. Taking careful aim, the missionary sent that single shot into the head of the reptile. The snake was mortally wounded, but it did not die quickly. It began frantically thrashing and writhing on the floor. Retreating to the front yard, the missionary could hear furniture breaking and lamps crashing. Finally, all was quiet, and the man cautiously reentered his house. He found the snake dead, but the entire interior of the hut was shattered. In its dying moments, the python had unleashed all its mighty power and wrath on everything in sight.

Later, the missionary drew an analogy between the python and the great serpent named Satan. Our adversary has already been mortally wounded by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. (In Genesis 3:15 the Lord said to the serpent, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and

hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”) Thus, the serpent’s days are numbered and he knows it. In a final desperate effort to thwart the will of God and deceive His people, Satan has unleashed all his fury. He is fostering hate and deceit and aggression wherever human interests collide. He especially despises the institution of the family, which is symbolic of the relationship between Jesus Christ and His church.

How can we survive in such a dangerous environment? How can we cope with the fury of Satan in his final days? Admittedly, we would stand no chance in our own strength. But listen to what Jesus said about His followers: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all” (John 10:27-29).

Because of the Redeemer, we need not fear the great deceiver—the father of lies. We are promised throughout Scripture that we are never left to fight our battles alone. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, penned these words of encouragement after a lifetime of service to his Master: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:1-2).

The Apostle Paul confirmed that sin need not hold power over us. He wrote:

So now, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith in his promises, we can have real peace with him because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. For because of our faith, he has brought us into this place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to actually becoming all that God has in mind for us to be. (Romans 5:1-2, TLB)

That is great news for all who are weary and burdened by the stresses of living. It all comes down to this simple concept: God is not against us for our sins. He is for us against our sins.

That makes all the difference.

Chapter 7

Beyond The Betrayal Barrier

We come now to our final comments regarding this vitally important topic: when God doesn't make sense. Our message boils down to this very simple understanding: there is nothing the Lord wants of us more than the exercise of our faith. He will do nothing to undermine it, and we cannot please him without it. To define the term again, faith is believing that which has no absolute proof (Hebrews 11:1). It is hanging tough when the evidence would have us bail out. It is determining to trust him when he has not answered all the questions or even assured a pain-free passage.

There is no better illustration of this faithfulness than is seen in the second half of Hebrews chapter 11. This Scripture, to which we referred earlier, has been called the "heroes' hall of fame," and it bears great relevance to our discussion. Described therein are the men and women who persevered in their faith under the most extreme circumstances. They were subjected to every kind of hardship and danger for the sake of the Cross. Some were tortured, imprisoned, flogged, stoned, sawed in two, and put to death by the sword. They were destitute, mistreated, persecuted, and inadequately clothed. They wandered in the deserts, in mountains, in caves, and in holes in the ground. Most important for our topic, they died not receiving what had been promised. In other words, they held onto their faith to the point of death, even though God had not explained what he was doing (Hebrews 11:35-40).

Without detracting from the sacredness of that Scripture, I would like to submit for your inspiration my own modern day "heroes' hall of fame." Listed among these giants of the faith are some incredible human beings who must hold a special place in the great heart of God.

At the top of my list would have to be some of the boys and girls I knew during my 14 years on the Attending Staff at Children's Hospital, Los Angeles. Most of these kids suffered from terminal illnesses, although others endured chronic disorders that disrupted and warped their childhoods. Some of them were under 10 years of age, and yet their faith in Jesus Christ was unshakable. They died with a testimony

on their lips, witnessing to the goodness of God while their little bodies withered away. What a reception they must have received when they met him who said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me" (Mark 10:14, KJV).

One five-year-old African-American boy will never be forgotten by those who knew him. A nurse with whom I worked, Gracie Schaeffler, had taken care of this lad during the latter days of his life. He was dying of lung cancer, which is a terrifying disease in its final stages. The lungs fill with fluid, and the patient is unable to breathe. It is terribly claustrophobic, especially for a small child.

This little boy had a Christian mother who loved him and stayed by his side through the long ordeal. She cradled him on her lap and talked softly about the Lord. Instinctively, the woman was preparing her son for the final hours to come. Gracie told me that she entered his room one day as death approached, and she heard this lad talking about hearing bells ring.

"The bells are ringing, Mommie," he said. "I can hear them."

Gracie thought he was hallucinating because he was already slipping away. She left and returned a few minutes later and again heard him talking about hearing bells ring.

The nurse said to his mother, "I'm sure you know your baby is hearing things that aren't there. He is hallucinating because of the sickness."

The mother pulled her son closer to her chest, smiled, and said, "No, Miss Schaeffler. He is not hallucinating. I told him when he was frightened-when he couldn't breathe-if he would listen carefully, he could hear the bells of heaven ringing for him. That is what he's been talking about all day."

That precious child died on his mother's lap later that evening, and he was still talking about the bells of heaven when the angels came to take him. What a brave little trooper he was. His courage was not reported in the newspapers the next day. Yet he and his mother belong forever in our "heroes' hall of fame."

My next candidate for faithful immortality is a man I never met, although he touched my life while he was losing his. I learned about him from a docudrama



on television that I saw many years ago. The producer had obtained permission from a cancer specialist to place cameras in his clinic. Then with approval from three patients, two men and a woman, he captured on film the moment each of them learned they were afflicted with a malignancy in its later stages. Their initial shock, disbelief, fear, and anger were recorded in graphic detail. Afterwards, the documentary team followed these three families through the treatment process with its ups and downs, hopes and disappointments, pain and terror. I sat riveted as the drama of life and death unfolded on the screen. Eventually, all three patients died, and the program ended without comment or editorial.

There was so much that should have been said. What struck me were the different ways these people dealt with their frightening circumstances. The two who apparently had no faith reacted with anger and bitterness. They not only fought their disease, but they seemed to be at war with everyone else. Their personal relationships and even their marriages were shaken, especially as the end drew near. I'm not being critical, mind you. Most of us would respond in much the same manner if faced with imminent death. But that's what made the third individual so inspiring to me.

He was a humble black pastor of a small inner-city church. He was in his late sixties and had been a minister throughout his adult life. His love for the Lord was so profound that it was reflected in everything he said. When he and his wife were told he had only a few months to live, they revealed no panic. They quietly asked the doctor what it all meant. When he had explained the treatment program and what they could anticipate, they politely thanked him for his concern and departed. The cameras followed this little couple to their old car and eavesdropped as they bowed their heads and recommitted themselves to the Lord.

In the months that followed, the pastor never lost his poise. Nor was he glib about his illness. He was not in denial. He simply had come to terms with the cancer and its probable outcome. He knew the Lord was in control, and he refused to be shaken in his faith.

The cameras were present on his final Sunday in his church. He actually preached the sermon that morning and talked openly about his impending death. To the best of my recollection, this is what he said:

"Some of you have asked me if I'm mad at God for this disease that has taken over my body. I'll tell you honestly that I have nothing but love in my heart for my

Lord. He didn't do this to me. We live in a sinful world where sickness and death are the curse man has brought on himself. And I'm going to a better place where there will be no more tears, no suffering, and no heartache. So don't feel bad for me.

"Besides," he continued, "our Lord suffered and died for our sins. Why should I not share in his suffering?" Then he began to sing, without accompaniment, in an old, broken voice:

Must Jesus bear the cross alone,
And all the world go free?
No, there's a cross for everyone,
And there's a cross for me.

How happy are the saints above,
Who once went sorr'wing here;
But now they taste unmingled love,
And joy without a tear.

The consecrated cross I'll bear,
Till death shall set me free,
And then go home my crown to wear,
For there's a crown for me.

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I wept as this gentle man sang of his love for Jesus. He sounded very weak, and his face was drawn from the ravages of the disease. But his comments were as powerful as any I've ever heard. His words that morning were his last from the pulpit, as far as I know. He slipped into eternity a few days later, where he met the Lord he had served for a lifetime. This unnamed pastor and his wife have a prominent place among my spiritual heroes.

There are more heroes in my catalog than I could describe in many volumes this size, but I will resist the inclination to name them. Our purpose, as you know, has been to help those who are not so well grounded in their beliefs. If everyone was gifted with the tenacity of a bulldog and the faith of Father Abraham, there would be no need for a discussion of this nature. But most of us are not spiritual superstars. That's why these thoughts have been dedicated affectionately to individuals who have been wounded in spirit by experiences they could not understand. The pieces to life's puzzle simply have not fit together, leaving them

confused, angry, and disillusioned.

Perhaps you are among those who have struggled to comprehend a particular heartache and God's reason for allowing it. A thousand unanswered questions have been recycling in your mind—most of them beginning with “Why . . . ?” You want desperately to trust the Father and believe in His grace and goodness. But deep inside, you're held captive by a sense of betrayal and abandonment. The Lord obviously permitted your difficulties to occur. Why didn't He prevent them—and why has He not attempted to explain or apologize for them? The inability to answer those fundamental questions has become a spiritual barrier a mile high, and you can't seem to find a way around or over it.

To those who have struggled to understand God's providence—I bring hope to you today! No, I can't provide tidy little solutions to all of life's annoying inconsistencies. That will not occur until we see the Lord face-to-face. But his heart is especially tender toward the downtrodden and the defeated. He knows your name and he has seen every tear you have shed. He was there on each occasion when life took a wrong turn. And what appears to be divine disinterest or cruelty is a misunderstanding at best and a satanic lie at worst.

How do I know this to be true? Because the Scriptures emphatically tell us so. For starters, David wrote, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). Isn't that a beautiful verse? How encouraging to know that the very presence of the King—the Creator of all heaven and earth—hovers near to those who are wounded and discouraged. If you could fully comprehend how deeply you are loved, you would never feel alone again. David returned to that thought in Psalm 103:11: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.”

Another favorite passage of mine is Romans 8:26, in which we're told that the Holy Spirit actually prays for you and me with such passion that human language is inadequate to describe it. That verse says, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.” What comfort we should draw from that understanding! He is calling your name to the Father today, pleading your case and describing your need. How wrong it is, therefore, to place the blame for your troubles on the best Friend mankind ever had! Regardless of other conclusions you draw, please believe this: He is not the source of your pain!

If you were sitting before me at this moment, you might be inclined to ask, "Then how do you explain the tragedies and hardships that have come into my life? Why did God do this to me?" My reply, which you've read in previous pages, is not profound. But I know it is right! God usually does not choose to answer those questions in this life! That's what I've been trying to say. He will not parade His plans and purposes for our approval. We must never forget that He is God. As such He wants us to believe and trust in him despite the things we don't understand. It's that straightforward.

Jehovah never did answer Job's intelligent inquiries, and He will not respond to all of yours. Every person who ever lived, I submit, has had to deal with seeming contradictions and enigmas. You will not be the exception.

My strongest advice is that each of us acknowledge before the crisis occurs, if possible, that our trust in Him must be independent of our understanding. There's nothing wrong with trying to understand, but we must not lean on our ability to comprehend! Sooner or later our intellect will pose questions we cannot possibly answer. At that point, we would be wise to remember His words, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). And our reply should be, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

When you think about it, there is comfort in that approach to life's trials and tribulations. We are relieved from the responsibility of trying to figure them out. We haven't been given enough information to decipher the code. It is enough to acknowledge that God makes sense even when He doesn't make sense. Does this approach seem a bit simplistic, like an explanation we would give a child? Yes, and for good reason. Jesus put it like this, "I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:17). But what do we say to the person who just can't grasp that truth? What advice



is available for that individual who is bitter and deeply angry at God for some perceived misdeed? How can he or she circumvent the betrayal barrier and begin a new relationship with the Lord?

There is only one cure for the cancer of bitterness. That is to forgive the perceived offender once and for all, with God's help. As strange as it seems, I am suggesting that some of us need to forgive God for those heartaches that are charged to His account. You've carried resentment against Him for years. Now it's time to let go of it. Please don't misunderstand me at this point. God is in the business of forgiving us, and it almost sounds blasphemous to suggest that the relationship could be reversed. He has done no wrong and does not need our approbation. But the source of bitterness must be admitted before it can be cleansed. There is no better way to get rid of it than to absolve the Lord of whatever we have harbored, and then ask His forgiveness for our lack of faith. It's called reconciliation, and it is the only way you will ever be entirely free.

The late Corrie ten Boom would have understood the advice I've given today. She and her family were sent by the Nazis to an extermination camp at Ravensbruck, Germany, during the latter years of World War II. They suffered horrible cruelty and deprivation at the hands of S.S. guards and, ultimately, only Corrie survived. After the war, she became a celebrated author and spoke often on the love of God and His intervention in her life. But inside, she was still bitter at the Nazis for what they had done to herself and her family.

Two years after the war, Corrie was speaking in Munich, Germany, on the subject of God's forgiveness. After the service, she saw a man making his way toward her. This is what she would later write about that encounter:

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And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones. It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights; the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor; the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

The place was Ravensbruck and the man who was making his way forward had been a guard-one of the most cruel guards.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out.

"A fine message, Fraülein! How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course-how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face-to-face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear from your lips as well. Fraülein,"-again the hand came out-"will you forgive me?"

And I stood there-I whose sins had again and again to be forgiven-and could not forgive. Betsie had died in that place-could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there-hand held out-but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it-I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. "If you do not forgive men their trespasses," Jesus says, "neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses."

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality. Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion-I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperatures of the heart. "Jesus, help me!" I prayed silently. "I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling."

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

"I forgive you, brother," I cried. "With all my heart."

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely, as I did then. But even so, I realized it was not my love. I had tried, and did not have the power. It was the power of the Holy Spirit as recorded in Romans 5:5, "... because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us."

Corrie's words have great relevance for us at this point. Bitterness of all varieties, including that which is seemingly "justified," will destroy a person spiritually and emotionally. It is a sickness of the soul. Corrie forgave an S.S. guard who shared responsibility for the deaths of her family members; surely, we can forgive the King of the universe who sent his only Son to die as an atonement for our sins.

We need to understand that God views death very differently than we. It is no disaster to him. Isaiah 57:1 states, "The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil." In other words, the righteous are far better off in the next world than in this one. Psalm 116:15 puts it more succinctly: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints."

What do these Scriptures mean for the living? They hint at a place on the far side of the river that is more wonderful than we can imagine. That is, in fact, precisely what we read in 1 Corinthians 2:9: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Does this sound like "the opiate of the people," as Karl Marx sarcastically described it? Sure it does, but the Bible teaches it and I believe it. And because I do, death has taken on an entirely new dimension for me.

If you have recently lost a child or a loved one, or are facing death yourself, I don't want to minimize your pain. But I hope you will see that the discomfort is intensified by a misunderstanding of time. Our journey here has the illusion of permanence about it. Billions who went before us thought the same thing. Now they are gone—every one of them. In truth, we're just passing through. If we fully comprehended the brevity of life, the things that frustrate us—including most of those occasions when God doesn't make sense—wouldn't matter so much.

This is a vitally important biblical concept. David wrote, "As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16). He also said, "Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting

is my life" (Psalm 39:4). Moses expressed the same idea in Psalm 90:12, "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom." That "wisdom" of which Moses spoke puts everything into proper perspective. It is difficult to get excited over raw materialism, for example, when one remembers that everything in this life is temporary.

To those who are hurting and discouraged at this time, I think it would be comforting to look forward to the time when the present trials will be a distant memory. A day of celebration is coming like nothing that has ever occurred in the history of mankind. The guest of honor on that morning will be one wearing a seamless robe, with eyes like flames of fire, and feet like fine brass. As we bow humbly before Him, a great voice will thunder from the heavens, saying:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

And, again the mighty voice will echo through the corridors of time:

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:16-17)

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This is the reward for the faithful—for those who break through the betrayal barrier and persevere to the end. This is the crown of righteousness prepared for those who have fought a good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith (2 Timothy 4:7-8). Throughout our remaining days in this life, therefore, let me urge you not to be discouraged by temporal cares. Accept the circumstances as they are presented to you. Expect periods of hardship to occur, and don't be dismayed when they arrive. "Lean into the pain" when your time to suffer comes around, knowing that God will use the difficulty for His purposes—and, indeed, for our own good. The Lord is very near, and He has promised that your temptation will not be greater than you can bear.

I'll leave you with these wonderful words from Psalm 34:17-19:

The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all.

About Focus on the Family Australia

Our desire is to encourage as many families as possible through timely messages and equip them through practical resources that will help restore, renew and strengthen families.

We do this by developing programs and resources relevant to the needs of families, by providing prevention and crisis services and by cultivating community partnerships with local councils, churches, schools and community groups.

Our integrity stems from our genuine concern for families and an unshakable belief that their health is linked to the welfare of our country.

For more helpful information
visit our website
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