

# Suffering and the Saints

*And we know that all things work together for  
good to them that love God, to them who are  
the called according to His purpose.*

Romans 8:28

John David Clark, Sr.

## **Original Dedication**

(1980)

To the memory of my father, George C. Clark, Sr., whose fiery zeal for the grace of God lighted the way for many.

To the memory of my mother, Martha M. Clark, whose grace under fire encouraged many broken spirits.

To the members and friends of the Pioneer Tract Society, whose patience and generosity made this work possible.

And to every hurting person.

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## My Credentials for Writing This Book

On the evening of August 23, 1981, I was studying the issue of suffering, paying careful attention to the way righteous men and women in the Bible reacted to their sufferings and to what they had to say about it. At the conclusion of my study, as I was closing my Bible, the Word of the Lord came to me and said, “It tickles the Devil for God’s people to blame their troubles on him.”

That Word from God completely and immediately changed my view of life. I understood then that as long as we blame the Devil for the sufferings we face, we will never seek our heavenly Father’s purpose for our sufferings. From that moment, I lost sight of the Devil and saw my loving heavenly Father’s goodness and power and wisdom in every circumstance, working all things for my good because I love Him. A thousand verses took on a new and more perfect meaning. Yes, even the Bible became new.

While I prayerfully studied the lives of biblical characters who suffered, I had been paying very close attention to what I was reading; I was utterly absorbed in my work. Still, until the Word of God came to me and gave me understanding, I had

failed to notice the simplest and most important point they all had clearly made. That is, they all trusted God alone to be the Designer of their sufferings. None of them ever honored other gods, including the Devil, with responsibility for determining the unpleasant circumstances they faced – or, for that matter, for determining pleasant circumstances, either.

This book is the fruit of the Word of God that came to me. Its length is regrettable and can be misleading, for the truth that inspired it is surprisingly simple. Yet, the simple truth God revealed to me on that long-ago Sunday afternoon is so different from what many of God's children are taught that it is necessary to survey more than the stories of a few biblical characters. We need to consider the story of ancient Israel and what her prophets said about her sufferings. To that is added, as well, teachings on the subject of suffering and the saints from the apostles. By all this, the reader hopefully will conclude that the doctrine found in this book does not rest on the feeble foundation of a few scriptures but that the entire Bible openly and consistently proclaims it.

May He who graciously revealed to my searching heart this wonderful, hidden mystery also speak to your heart and give you light as you read what I have written.

# Part One

Suffering “Without Cause”



## INTRODUCTION

Bad things are going to happen to you.

That is not a defeatist attitude; it is just the plain truth. Bad things happen to everybody. Bad things happened to Jesus. In fact, we can even say that bad things have happened to God, unless we think that a third of His angels and many of His earthly children rebelling against Him is not a bad thing.

On the other hand, it is equally true that good things are going to happen to you, and to everybody else. To live in this world is to live through good and bad things. No amount of positive thinking will prevent bad events from happening, and no amount of pessimism and fear will prevent good events from happening.

The difference between the wise and the foolish is not that different events happen to them but that they respond differently to the events that happen. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon repeatedly asserts that the same blessings and troubles befall both righteous and wicked people, both the wise and the foolish. Jesus himself said that God sends sunshine and rain to all people, whether good or evil. That's just how it is in this world. So, the issue cannot be whether or not you must experience joyful and sorrowful events in this life; the only issue is, what are you going to do about it?

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What you think about God will determine what you do about it. There are wrong thoughts about God that make the overcoming of this world's sufferings and pleasures more difficult, the more wrong the thoughts, the greater the difficulty. On the other hand, there are right thoughts about God which make the overcoming of earthly sufferings and pleasures more likely, right thoughts demonstrated in the faith and patience of Joseph, Job, our Lord Jesus, and others.

We are exhorted by the writer of Hebrews to be "*followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises*" (Heb. 6:12). But if we are to follow those of greatest faith, we must know God as they knew Him. For faith is a trusting *in*. It is not a vague hoping, nor is it reliance upon a nebulous, divine Somebody. Faith is a real knowledge *of*, an assured looking *to*. So, to be followers of those who persevered and inherited God's promises, we must trust God to be who and what they trusted Him to be. We must think about God what they thought about Him. After all, it is what God *is* which serves as the foundation, the reason, for true faith. The faith of righteous men and women did not rest upon their own ideas or vain theology. The sufferings they faced were too real for them to overcome, except that their faith was anchored in an equally real knowledge of God.

This is more than a collection of the stories of suffering saints, for our purpose is to learn from what they thought about their sufferings and about God's part in them.

Part One of this book (the first four chapters) focuses on the suffering as a trial for righteous people rather than suffering as chastisement for sin. What does a righteous person do, say, and think, when he has done what is right and yet bad things happen? To help the reader respond to that question the same way biblical saints responded is the purpose of this entire work.

In shaping our faith to theirs, we will surely partake of the deliverance and joy which crowned their determined trust in God. Deep in their hearts, they knew that everything that happened to them was being worked together for their eventual good because they knew God was directing the events of their lives and that they loved Him.

## CHAPTER ONE

### JOSEPH

*Moreover He called for a famine upon the land;  
He broke the whole staff of bread. He sent a man  
before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a  
servant, whose feet they hurt with fetters. He was  
laid in iron until the time that His word came.  
The word of the LORD tried him.*

Ps. 105:16-19

### Injustices

Joseph was only seventeen years old when his envious older brothers sold him to foreign slave traders. All his pleading and weeping did not move them from their decision to rid the family forever of “this dreamer”. What anguish of spirit Joseph must have suffered as the caravan carried him away from his sneering brothers and the familiar green fields of Canaan. The young man must have been torn in his soul and tormented at the prospect of slavery and death in some distant land. The reader of Joseph’s story is easily drawn to empathy with him. It is easy to feel indignation toward his brothers’ wicked deed. It is the reader’s first, natural response to want them to be held responsible for their cruel actions.

However, the abuse of Joseph by his brothers is only the beginning of his sorrows. Having become chief servant to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officers, Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar’s adulterous wife when she could not lure Joseph to her bed. Innocent Joseph was summarily condemned to the dungeons of Egypt. Again, it is easy for the reader of the story to feel disgust for Potiphar’s deceitful wife and to feel continued indignation for the injustices suffered by this righteous young man. Yet, Joseph’s afflictions still were not ended. After Joseph was cast into prison, Pharaoh’s chief butler was cast in there, too. Through a series of events, Joseph’s righteousness and innocence were demonstrated to him, and prior to the butler’s release and restoration to the personal service of Pharaoh, Joseph implored him:

*But think on me when it is well with thee, and show kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house, for indeed I was stolen away out of the*

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*land of the Hebrews, and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.*

Gen. 40:14-15

Who has not felt the quick stab of contempt for the released butler when the following terse report is read?

*Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him.*

Gen. 40:23

## Who Was Responsible?

When we read Joseph's story, our sense of justice is provoked by the injustices inflicted upon him. Our spirits are heated with empathy for Joseph and resentment toward his persecutors. Should we translate such feelings into words, they would be something like, "If I were God, I'd slap those evildoers down and take Joseph in my arms and comfort him." We justify ourselves in such feelings with the certain knowledge that Joseph was indeed suffering unjustly and that those who made him suffer were evil.

However, the spirits of "righteous indignation", which readers may feel when reading Joseph's story *are the very spirits that Joseph had to overcome* in order for God's will to be accomplished in his life. The authority of Egypt's throne, which God intended to place into Joseph's hand, was of such magnitude that it could not be entrusted to Joseph as long as there remained in his bosom any of the ungodly spirits of self-pity or desire for vengeance. But Joseph could not resist those spirits *as long as he felt mistreated*; and he could only feel mistreated so long as he held his brothers and the others responsible for his miserable condition.

Such a trial as this is the Almighty's most terrible discipline, reserved for those ordained to the highest callings.

But by the grace of God, along that agonizing journey into Egypt, or perhaps at some time in prison, in those desperate, lonely, sleepless nights filled with tears, young Joseph wrestled the spirits of self-esteem to the dust and, as his fathers had done before him, dared to believe in God's purpose in all things, *even in those things which seemed to be against him*. Contention arises only where pride is (Prov. 13:10), and Joseph was liberated from all contentiousness – even toward those who hurt him most – when, through bitter disgrace and sorrow, the stubborn, flickering sparks of pride were finally extinguished.

By his own experience, Joseph had to learn, without there being any scriptures yet written that could confirm it, that “*the Lord tries the righteous*” and that if the Lord had chosen to use Joseph's brothers, or anyone else, in the process of that trial, well, that was the Lord's prerogative. In one of those peculiar twists of truth, Joseph had to humble himself to confess that whatever happened to him was none of his business, that his life was not his own, but God's property.

In the light of that revelation, malice vanished. How could Joseph resent what had been done to him when he realized that his own God was responsible for doing it? Whom any longer could he not love, regardless of what part that person played in God's plan for Joseph's life?

“It Was Not You.”

Twenty-two years after being sold as a slave, the man Joseph, now thoroughly subdued under the mighty hand of God, and having become ruler of Egypt, faced his brothers again when they came to purchase food for their starving families. His words reflected the mystery of true faith, which he had learned well:

*Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every*

*man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him while he made himself known unto his brethren. And he wept aloud, and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; does my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him, for they were troubled at his presence.*

*And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me here, for GOD DID SEND ME before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land, and there are still five years in the which there shall neither be earing nor harvest. And GOD SENT ME before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So, now, IT WAS NOT YOU THAT SENT ME HERE, BUT GOD.*

Gen. 45:4-8

#### Irrelevant

None of this implies that Joseph's faith required him to pretend that there had been no harm done to him. Joseph's faith in God was such that it allowed him to see all things as they were, but at the same time, it created within Joseph the understanding that those who were doing him harm were not in control of his life. He knew his brothers made the deal to sell him away, but he committed his life into the hands of God and would not allow vengeful spirits to persuade him to believe that

his brothers could have sold him into slavery without God's knowledge or without God's will. Therefore, even though Joseph had been unjustly hated and harmed, both as a child and as a man, the very same things which others intended for evil, Joseph knew that God designed to happen to him for good!

Because Joseph understood his enslavement to be God's work, he was able to serve his master Potiphar from the heart, "as unto the Lord." Then, because he saw his imprisonment as God's work, Joseph could be the humble, hard-working prisoner he was. In both places, Joseph was acknowledged by those who ruled over him to be trustworthy, capable, and devoted as a servant to them (cp. Gen. 39:1-6; 21-23). This is what patience is: unrelenting continuance in well doing in times of suffering, as well as in pleasant times. Joseph's continuance in well doing, his patience, was the expression of his faith in God. Through his brothers' cruelty, Joseph found himself a slave in a strange land, yet he became the most diligent and trustworthy slave Potiphar ever had. Through a wicked woman's deceit, Joseph found himself a despised prisoner, yet he made himself the hardest working and most submissive prisoner in the king's dungeon. Joseph demonstrated his complete trust in God by his good works to men, obeying, thousands of years before, Peter's holy exhortation:

*Let those who suffer according to the will of God  
commit the keeping of their souls to Him in well  
doing, as unto a faithful Creator.      1Pet. 4:19*

Joseph believed that it was God who sent him into Egypt as a slave. It followed, then, that God was responsible for Joseph's being cast into prison and that it was God who let him linger there, forgotten by men, while with the fiery knife of suffering, He engraved mercy, truth, faith, and patience into Joseph's troubled spirit. And it was God who at last raised the bruised

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saint up out of the brambles and made him “*a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt*” (Gen. 45:8). Joseph learned to see God’s hand in it all.

The human beings who carried out the various details of God’s plan for Joseph’s life were not worthy to bear the responsibility for what happened to him. He was God’s property; what had happened to him was God’s plan; and to God alone belonged all the glory. As far as responsibility is concerned, it is irrelevant that Joseph’s brothers thought it was their idea to sell him into slavery. As far as responsibility is concerned, it is irrelevant whether or not Potiphar’s wife or Pharaoh’s butler felt any guilt for Joseph’s long imprisonment. And before God gave Egypt’s power to Joseph, God made certain that Joseph knew that. Otherwise, upon seeing his brothers, Joseph probably would have slain in a fit of vengeance the very ones whom God had all along intended for him to save.

So far as judging others is concerned, that was not Joseph’s place. God alone was responsible for what He ordained for others to do to Joseph, and God alone knew to what degree, if at all, any of them should be punished. When their father Jacob died, Joseph’s brothers became fearful that Joseph would at long last retaliate for what they had done, but

*Joseph wept when they spake unto him. . . . And Joseph said to them, Fear not, for am I in the place of God? But as for you, you thought evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save many people alive. Now, therefore, fear ye not. I will nourish you and your little ones. And he comforted them, and spake kindly unto them.*

Gen. 50:17-21

Joseph was able to love his brothers like this because he never lost sight of God's love and care for him. Joseph did not believe that his brothers were responsible for selling him into Egypt and that God only later managed to work it out for good. No, from the beginning, God "meant it for good." That is to say, God controlled and had a purpose for every event that befell Joseph. Joseph would not have wanted it, and God would not have allowed it, to be any other way.

#### Conclusion

For all their faith in God, the biblical characters of greatest faith were always those, like Joseph, of greatest suffering. Who suffered more than Jesus, or Job, or Paul, or David? Yet, in what is possibly the most astonishing paradox of true faith, all these holy men, the ones who knew God best, looked to Him not only as the Giver of life, hope, and healing but also as the Designer of every suffering they faced. Hardships never caused righteous men and women to doubt God's power over their lives. On the contrary, hardships always served to remind them of it.

But why? What revelation about God inspired such faith? After studying the stories of suffering saints that you will read in this book, I realized that I didn't know. To acknowledge that Joseph held no one but God responsible for his sufferings is not the same as to understand why he did so, or why it was right for him to do so. So then, what was it that Joseph knew about God which inspired him to behave as he did toward those who hurt him most?

Please don't expect any high and mighty theology. There will be none. For, like the proverbial man who pursues happiness around the world, only to return home and find it, the revelation of God which inspired the faith of wise and righteous biblical characters, I found, after long search, to have always

been before me in full, clear view – truth so simple that its very simplicity causes it to be overlooked and its value vastly underestimated. The rock from which rose the greatest faith is the magnificent revelation contained in the very first words of the Bible:

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*

To the saints who found themselves in the darkest pits of suffering, what that simple-sounding truth taught them about God's goodness and power and wisdom formed the foundation upon which all their hopes were secured. The revelation of God as Creator, when rightly understood, is of such commanding majesty that it demands utter faith even as it inspires it. That wondrously simple, majestic revelation is of such purity and holiness that it purifies and sanctifies the very faith that perceives its meaning. To that end, now having Joseph's faith as a point of reference, we take time to consider the importance of the revelation of Creation. Then, entering into the stories of Job and Jesus, we may more fully appreciate their labor.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CREATOR

*He left not himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness.*

Acts 14:17

### The Goodness of God

An astute and witty observer of life has speculated that the last reality that a fish would discover would be water. A fish could easily notice the water plants swaying with the currents. Other fish gliding around him, obviously, he would see. Sol's bright light and the dark floor beneath him, the fish would easily perceive. Even garbage tossed into the fish's home would attract his attention. But that life-sustaining, life-enveloping substance surrounding him, that absolute necessity for his very existence - the water in which he spends his entire life - the fish might never discover at all.

Of course, this is a parable concerning mankind. For, in a sense which is not far from literal, we all do swim out our lives in the pervasive, sustaining, enveloping goodness of God. To the philosophers of Athens, Paul said of God:

*He gives to all life, and breath, and all things . . . that they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after Him, and find Him, though He be not far from every one of us. For in Him we live, and move and have our being. Acts 17:25b, 27, 28*

As with the fish, the mundane realities of our world hardly escape our notice. Other people and the concerns of daily living demand much of our attention. Human garbage, literal and figurative, is commonly and easily seen. But that upon which our very life rests, that "first cause", that elementary reason for our being - the goodness of God - is often among the last things realized or appreciated by men. Some, alas, never discover it at all.

Nevertheless, it is only of God's goodness that life on earth continues. It is God "*who gives rain upon the earth, and sends*

*waters upon the fields” (Job 5:10). It is God who “maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good” (Mt. 5:45).*

*He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man, that He may bring forth food out of the earth, and wine that makes glad the heart of man, and oil to make his face to shine, and bread which strengthens man’s heart.*

Ps. 104:14-15

How true are David’s words:

*The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.*

Ps. 33:5

### Because God Is Good

If mankind merely evolved, if our existence is the result of pure chance, then we are not alive because God especially loves us. If mankind is simply another plateau of an ongoing evolutionary process, then God is just as pleased that we not be, is just as pleased that some other temporary specimen of evolutionary impulse exist in our stead. There is not in that case any bond of love between God and man. Scientists tell us that in the evolutionary scheme, the odds against our coming to exist are virtually incalculable. Certainly, anyone who could, and then would have stacked the odds against us to that degree could not have been eager for us to live, could not have dearly loved and provided for our kind.

But God created us. And He created us *only because He wanted to create us*. It is of immense spiritual value for us to appreciate that. In creating us, God was coerced by nothing. He had nothing suggested to Him, was advised by no one as to how or to what extent Creation was to be accomplished. From Psalm 135:6:

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*Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did He in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.*

We human beings did not have to be. There were no laws of physics which demanded our formation. *We exist only because God wanted us.* Out of the endless possibilities available to His mind, God chose for us to be. Of His own heart, He conceived the idea of man and then made a conscious choice that man should live. We are creatures of His design, our contours fashioned by His hand. And grace upon grace, He was pleased to bestow upon man the sacred honor of being created in His own image. Man has dignity and wisdom and dominion in the earth because it pleased God to give it to him. We are man only because God is good.

## On Purpose

It is compellingly clear that God created what He wanted to create, no less and no more. On the seventh day, He did not scan with remorse His completed Creation, ruefully wishing He had done something better or differently. Quite the opposite is true. As the sun lowered upon the sixth and final day of Creation, God paused to look,

*and God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was very good.* Gen. 1:31

In accordance with this, we must acknowledge that when God created man, He created man the way He wanted man to be. It pleased the Creator to make man healthy and sinless and to give him dominion on earth. It was His heart's desire that man should be greatly and continually blessed. There is comfort available to us in the knowledge that God created man well and happy *on purpose*.

Those of greatest faith believed that the goodness of God – His mercy, His justice, His compassion, etc. – was as certain as life, for life itself is irrefutable proof of it. In whatever circumstance they found themselves, they could not surrender hope, for they had committed their lives into the mighty hands of their unchanging Creator, believing that His will, as it was in the beginning, is that men should be happy, healthy, and pure.

#### The Power of God

As Creation itself is the surest and most constant witness of the Creator’s goodness, so it is with His terrible power. That God *wanted* to create is one thing, but that God *could* create what He wanted is altogether another. To believe in God as Creator is to believe in a good God of incalculable power and authority. So awesome is His creative power, that God cannot lie. It is a power so terrible that whatever God says, is. Even the breath that proceeds from His lips performs deeds.

*And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*

Gen. 2:7

*By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.*

Ps. 33:6

The magnificent implications of this truth are being decreasingly appreciated by believers because (1) the doctrine of creation is not well understood and (2) we confuse ourselves by applying the term “creative” or “creator” to men. Biblically, to speak very strictly, it is idolatrous to believe that man or any other created being can create anything. Man can invent. Man can rearrange particles of what God has created. But there is

only one Creator, and there is none other even remotely like Him. Any being who can lie cannot create.

#### No Other Source

King David's reflection upon the power of the Creator which was demonstrated in Creation inevitably led him to marvel at God's providence for men. Of particular interest was God's delegation of power to the beings that He had created.

*When I consider thy heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have ordained, what is man, that you are mindful of him? And the son of man, that you visit him? For you have made him a little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor. You made him to have dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.*

Ps. 8:3-6

As David observed, man's dominion on earth was graciously granted by God. The great King Nebuchadnezzar was given the mind of an animal and for seven years ate grass with cattle in the fields until he learned, in Daniel's words,

*that the most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomsoever He will.*

Dan. 4:25

But concerning dominion and the delegating of authority by God, there is much more to be considered than governments of men. For just as certainly as *man* would be powerless on earth had God not given him power, the same may be said of *every other creature in every other realm*. Whether earthly powers, heavenly powers, or powers of spiritual darkness, all life and all

power exist only by the will of the Creator. There is no other source.

Every physical or spiritual strength of man, of nature, of fallen or faithful angels, and even the power of Jesus Christ himself – yes, all power and all authority – is subservient to God's power. No person, beast, or spirit has any power of its own or has received power ultimately from any other source than God. It came from God. It is a gift of God. All creatures, great and small, carnal and spiritual, owe Him all fear and thanksgiving for it. To fail to pay that debt is sin.

#### To Bless Or To Curse

Numerous gods with various fabricated personalities were worshiped and feared throughout the ancient world. This was not the case just among isolated barbarians, for polytheism dominated the entire ancient history of man. The learned and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, the governors and the governed – virtually all people in all nations – were immersed in this kind of spiritual darkness. The dying request of Socrates, an intellectual giant among men, was that an offering be made to the gods for his sick friend, Plato. The businesses associated with idolatry were both prosperous and secure (cp. Acts 19:24-25). Among the most famous buildings on earth in those days were temples dedicated to particularly revered gods, such as the brilliantly designed Parthenon in Athens.

But the idolatry of the ancient world did not actually lie in the erecting of idols or temples or even in the performing of worship rituals for those other imagined deities. Those things were only the outward expressions of idolatry, for idolatry is an inward, spiritual disease. The real idolatry, the real disease, lay in fearing that those gods had power. It lay in believing that they, like God, could do what they pleased, that they, like God, could determine and effect changes in the circumstances of the

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universe, that they, like God, could bless or curse whom they would. In short, the real spiritual disease of idolatry is believing that there exists another like the Creator. On these grounds, Jeremiah begged Israel to reconsider their faith in those other gods:

*Be not afraid of them, for they cannot do evil;  
neither also is it in them to do good.* Jer. 10:5

The revelation of God as Creator overcame the idolatrous spirit of those ancient times because included in that revelation is the truth that all power, whether to heal or to afflict, to lift up or to cast down, to save or to destroy (and therefore all fear and all worship), belongs to God. It was during a blunt condemnation of Israel's fear of other gods that the Lord, through Moses, proclaimed these stunning words:

*See now that I, even I, am He, and there is no god  
with me. I kill, and I make alive. I wound, and I  
heal. Neither is there any that can deliver out of  
my hand.* Dt. 32:39

It was neither God's nor Moses' intent to intimidate or harass the Israelites. God's goodness precludes that. The purpose of these words was to remind the people of the Creator's absolute power over His Creation and, so, to expose the foolishness of fearing or serving any other but Him. The faithful in Israel rejoiced in that truth:

*My heart rejoices in the LORD. . . . There is none  
holy as the LORD. For there is none beside thee.  
Neither is there any rock like our God. . . . The  
LORD kills, and makes alive. He brings down to  
the grave, and brings up. The LORD makes poor,  
and makes rich. He brings low, and lifts up. . . .*

*For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's and He has set the earth upon them.*

Hannah, in 1Sam. 2:1-8

Hannah gloried in God's power because she trusted in His love. But how did she glorify Him for His power? By acknowledging His authority over every circumstance of human life. Throughout Israel's history, in opposition to the idolatrous spirits of their times, the prophets declared the singular power of God:

*I am God, and there is none else. I form the light, and create darkness. I make peace, and create evil. I the LORD do all these things. I have made the earth, and created man upon it. I, even my hands, have stretched out the heavens, and all their host have I commanded. I am the LORD. That is my name. And my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images.*

Isa. 45:22, 7, 12, 42:8

Strange as it may sound to modern ears, the righteous men of faith would not have so much as considered the possibility that their whole lives – including their sufferings – were being directed by any other than God. It was the idolatry of believing that other gods were at work in their lives which ruined Old Testament Israel, as it was the righteousness of proclaiming that Israel's life was in God's hands alone that set the prophets apart.

This truth is of such abiding authority, however, that it not only challenged ancient idolatrous notions about God, but challenges modern notions as well. It is as distasteful to many modern ecclesiastical palates as it was to false prophets in ancient Israel, for the saints to confess that God is God of *all*, but it is as irrefutably true now as it was then. And we are not of the same faith, not followers of that faith of the holiest and

wisest of men, until we see, as they saw, that all of our sufferings as well as all of our comforts are determined for us by God. Anything short of that is too reminiscent of the ancient world not to be labeled idolatrous.

For saints living now, this is probably the most difficult truth to believe about God. For we are living in an era wherein, as during the latest Old Testament times (cp. Mal. 2:17), the Creator is characterized as being ever gentle, never stern, ever loving, never doing harm. The power of God to afflict is virtually denied by the spirit of our age. Satan, instead, is almost everywhere honored with responsibility for the suffering of the saints. Unwise instructors have taught the saints to believe in God only as the God of all blessing and, in effect, to trust Satan to be the god of all discomfort. But you will never find any such doctrine in the mouth of righteous biblical characters. Later, we will speak more fully on this matter.

#### The Wisdom of God

*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor? Or who has first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things. To whom be glory for ever. Amen.*

Rom. 11:33-36

Faith in God's goodness and His power, as secure a foundation as those provide, is not enough to sustain us in the hardest trials. We can become bitter if all that we know is that God is good and powerful because we know that bad things have happened, and that we know He could have prevented it.

It is “a threefold cord” that “is not easily broken”, and when we have faith in God’s goodness, power, *and wisdom*, then we are bound to Him, and there is no seat left in our hearts for any discontented visitor.

God has promised that He will end all suffering forever for those who love and obey Him. “*He will make an utter end,*” wrote Nahum the prophet, “*affliction shall not rise up the second time*”(1:9). For the faithful in Christ, the apostle John saw in his revelation that

*neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat.  
For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne  
shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living  
fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all  
tears from their eyes.* Rev. 7:16-17

There are, of course, questions as to why we must wait for those promises to come, and why we must through all our lives be confronted by sorrow, disappointment, and pain. We know that Jesus himself was “made perfect through the things that he suffered” (Heb. 2:10; 5:8-9), and so, that we might be made perfect is one of God’s reasons for suffering to continue. But that is actually beside the point, for even though some answers to our questions concerning suffering are revealed, we can rejoice even if we are completely ignorant, so long as we know that God knows all things. It is the revelation of God as Creator which assures us that He does know all things, for He could not have created all things without His own knowledge.

#### Consider the Lilies

It is only by God’s wisdom that birds take their flight (Job 39:26). Only by His wisdom do the stars gather in the evening skies (Job 38:31-32). By His wisdom the clouds gather and darken to water the earth (Job 38:25-27). By His wisdom,

microscopic unions form successive generations of men. By His wisdom, seasons change, beasts of the earth are nourished, men and women can think and feel and ask, and fires can turn leaves into rising columns of white and grey.

*O LORD, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom have you made them all. The earth is full of thy riches.* Ps. 104:24

In contemplating the heavens, King David was not being an impractical dreamer, neglecting the weightier matters of his kingdom. Nor was Jesus promoting indolence when he enjoined us to consider the lilies. The most unforgettable spiritual lessons contained in the Holy Scriptures are those based upon natural phenomena: a vineyard, the rain, fish in the sea, the wind, the planting of seeds. Wise Solomon was made still wiser by observing the ant (Prov. 6:6-11). The ephemeral quality of grass instructed Isaiah's heart in the wonder of eternity (Isa. 40:6-8). By His own immaculately wise design, the Creator's fingerprints remain, with subtle starkness, upon every article of His Creation, and within the smallest element of Creation is hidden the potential of revelation of the God who created it.

*For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.* Paul, in Rom. 1:20

Pondering Creation, King David was enamored with the revelation of God in the rain, or in the animals of the forest, or in the daily labor of men (cp. Ps. 104). To David, there were testimonies in the trees, sermons in the silence of the stars. As if in a language both foreign and understandable, the skies to David seemed to be incessantly evangelizing the inhabitants of the earth.

*The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament displays His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard.* Ps. 19:1-3

Oh, let us recapture this lost, holy sense of amazement at the Creator's labor! Let us with childlike wonder join in the prophet's song of praise:

*O give thanks unto the LORD; for He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him who by wisdom made the heavens for His mercy endureth for ever. To Him that made great lights, the sun to rule by day, the moon and stars to rule by night; for His mercy endureth for ever. Who giveth food to all flesh; for His mercy endureth for ever. O give thanks unto the God of heaven; for His mercy endureth for ever.*

Excerpts, Ps. 136

### Even Our Ignorance

Like chapel bells in winter, echoing loud and clear against cold and closed buildings, the exhortations of the ancient men of faith rebound against the empty confidences of proud mankind:

*Look unto the heavens, and see, and behold the clouds which are higher than you!*

Elihu, in Job 35:5

Known but to God, there is a measure for that which men call the measureless. There is in His heart the knowledge of that which men call the unknowable. There is a hope beyond what men have dreamed or can dream (Isa. 64:4; 1Cor. 2:9).

There are worlds even within our own that we know nothing of, secrets in the seas which man may never discover. On distant stars, what epic scenes of beauty and violence must surely play, beyond the realm of man's cognitive, even imaginative, capacities. All of these unperceived, mysterious realities declare the glory of our Creator every bit as much as did the discernable heavens to David's awe-stricken heart. For everything we do not know is a reminder of the awesome knowledge of our Creator. In a curious twist of His fathomless wisdom, God has determined that even our ignorance, along with every other part of Creation, should bear witness to His wisdom.

#### God's Purposes

Regardless of how much a parent loves a child or how much power a parent possesses to provide for a child's needs, both that love and that power can be unwisely demonstrated. But God is never like that. He is the perfect Father. He didn't have to *learn* to be a good parent. He was good from the beginning. He does not make mistakes. Regardless of how much goodness and power Joseph trusted God to possess, had Joseph not trusted in the Creator's wisdom, he would have wondered if his suffering was really necessary, if it was serving any good purpose.

We as the body of Christ are letting slip from our grasp that thrilling sense of God's purpose in all things. To the eyes of faith, the sun does not just shine; it shines because the Creator has a purpose for its shining. To the eyes of faith, the sky itself never gives rain (Jer. 14:22); only God can do that. When God does anything, He does it for a purpose. "*All things are full of labor*"(Eccl. 1:8) because all things are fulfilling the often hidden purposes of God, and, oh, that He would ever keep that

truth alive in our hearts! Jesus encourages us to trust in God's purposes with these amazing words (Lk. 12:7):

*Even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*

Jesus' meaning is not that after you were born, God came while you slept and counted the hairs on your head. Rather, it is that the hairs on your head are numbered *to you* by the Creator, the point of Jesus' words being that God's care for us is so complete that every circumstance of our lives is contemplated by Him before it happens. That is, no circumstance, either pleasant or otherwise, is ever permitted into the lives of His children that does not fit into His plan for their lives or that is not tailored by Him to match their faith (1Cor. 10:13). The reliance upon that truth during times of great suffering is the one act of faith which most clearly set the righteous apart from their idolatrous times.

#### Conclusion

Some may ask why, if all the circumstances of our lives, including our sufferings, are determined by God, should we desire to be delivered from suffering? The most obvious answer is that suffering hurts, and sane people do not enjoy pain. The prophets knew that God sent famine upon their land (2Kgs. 8:1), but they didn't pray for more famine. They prayed for rain (cp. 1Kgs. 8:35-40), in humility and fear before God.

Secondly, we should desire deliverance because the suffering that God determines for us is not an end in itself; it is never intended to last forever. It is only used now to serve God's purposes. Therefore, it is never wrong to want, or to pray for, or to expect healing. Indeed, it is wrong not to want or expect healing, because that betrays either an ignorance of, or worse yet, unbelief toward the Creator. It is always right to pray for healing, not only because healing would make us feel better,

but also because God's purpose is always inextricably entwined with our healing. We cannot pray for healing without, at least implicitly, praying for God's purpose to be accomplished in our lives, for they are too much of the same thing. Joseph's deliverance from the dungeon cannot be separated from his rise to Pharaoh's throne. By praying for the one, he was working with the will of God toward the accomplishment of the other.

Thirdly, we should pray for deliverance because when things are made right in our lives, and when God's purposes are accomplished, God receives glory. Risking the appearance of too much spirituality, let me suggest that to bring glory to God may be the best reason to pray for healing and deliverance (cp. Ps. 30:9-12), even outweighing one's desire for personal comfort. Certainly we could not be wrong in attributing that depth of holy commitment to our Lord Jesus, whose only purpose in coming to earth was "*to do thy will, O God*" (Heb. 10:7).

To conclude, then, I say that to believe in the Creator is to believe in healing, in being made whole. I cannot imagine how we could know and trust in God without expecting good things to happen to our lives, since goodness is so much a part of what He is. The very reason faith asks for healing is because faith knows God. Faith seeks for God's "way of escape" from every temptation (1Cor. 10:13) because it believes there is one. Faith knocks on the door of deliverance because it believes that door has hinges (Mt. 7:7-11; Lk. 11:5-13; 18:1-8). Regardless of the bleakness of the situation, the men of greatest faith still possessed the faith to call upon God for help. Indeed, our heavenly Father bids us to do so:

*Call upon me in the day of trouble. I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.* Ps. 50:15

All the righteous from the beginning of the world have heard that compassionate voice of the Creator, beckoning all who would to come find shelter in His care. In the ancient, forgotten land of Uz, the Lord chose a man named Job to demonstrate for us the value of following after that voice.

## CHAPTER THREE

### JOB

(If you are unfamiliar with Job's story, please read the first two chapters of Job before you begin to read this.)

*He causes it to come, whether for correction, or for His land, or for mercy. Hearken unto this, O Job. Stand still and consider the wondrous works of God.*

Job 37:13-14

### The Hand Of God

I evidently offended the concept of spiritual good taste which some held, when at a home Bible study I was asked, “Who was responsible for the sufferings of Job?” The expected answer was either “Job” or “Satan”, but my answer, “God”, was neither appreciated nor welcomed. Nevertheless, as even a simple reading of *Job* reveals, it was never so much as suggested, either by Job or his comforters, that any other than God was responsible for Job’s misery. The heated debate between Job and his friends centered on an entirely different matter; namely, was the Almighty afflicting Job because Job had sinned or, as Job maintained, was God afflicting him “without cause”? From either point of view, Job’s suffering was rightly seen to be God’s handiwork.

In the first chapter of Job, there is described a meeting of the sons of God, among whom was the creature named Satan. When asked of God, “Where have you come from?” Satan replied,

*From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. And the Lord said unto Satan, Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one who fears God, and eschews evil? Then Satan answered the Lord and said, Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he has on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.*

Job 1:7-10

Let’s examine this situation. For an unspecified period of time, Satan had been traveling and observing the inhabitants of

the earth. God, of course, was aware of that. Included among those whom Satan had been observing was the righteous man, Job. God already knew that, too. Had Satan possessed standing authority and power to destroy or even to trouble Job, certainly he would already have done so. But Satan, during none of that time, had assaulted Job, nor could he, of himself, have done so. Both he and God knew that.

Please notice that it was *God* who brought up the subject of Job. I dare say, Satan would rather have discussed another subject, something less galling than a man who “*was perfect and upright, and one that feared God and eschewed evil.*” It was God, not Satan, who brought up Job’s name, and He did so because in His fathomless wisdom, at His own time, and for His own purposes, He had ordained a trial for Job that would match Job’s transcendent faith, and He had chosen Satan as His instrument of affliction.

God’s question to Satan, “*Have you considered my servant Job?*”, was not asked by God to find out *if* Satan had considered Job. God already knew the answer, as He knows the answer to every other question He may ask. By bringing up the name of Job, God was setting in motion the beginning of Job’s trials. Consider carefully Satan’s response:

*But put forth YOUR HAND now, and YOU [God] touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself put not forth your hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.* Job 1:11-12

Up until this moment, when God gave it to him, Satan had no power whatsoever against Job. Satan knew that he never could touch Job, unless and until God ordained it to be. The fact

that Satan was, in this case, God's agent of destruction has led some to believe that Satan was carrying out his own plans against Job's life. Not so. This was altogether the determination of God, Who is neither advised nor coerced in His decisions concerning His children, any more than He was advised or coerced in His decision to create man in the beginning.

Following this heavenly meeting, the dam in Satan's heart, which stores up hatred for righteous men, was relieved a little of its burden, as a torrent of tragedies pummeled innocent Job. But at the control of the floodgates was Job's Redeemer, and everything that happened to Job happened according to God's ordination, with God's limitations, in God's predetermined time. Satan knew that. God knew that. Even Job knew that. It was *God's hand*, not Satan's, which was stretched over Job. In his bitterness, Job cried to his friends:

*Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O my  
friends, for THE HAND OF GOD has touched me.*

Job 19:21

In one day, Job suffered the loss of his children and virtually all of his many possessions. It was a crushing, heart-rending experience, but not one that was able to crush either Job's faith or his love for God. The agonizing man "*arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshiped.*" He and his wife mourned for their children and came to know well the humiliation and frustration of poverty.

An indeterminate period of time passed, and then Satan was given permission by God to torment Job physically – but not to the point of death. Huge boils covered him, expanding with their piercing throbs until they erupted with foul-smelling, worm-infested corruption, which matted his clothes to his body

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(7:5; 3:18). When he sought refuge from his misery in sleep, gruesome nightmares chased him back to consciousness (7:3-4; 13-15), leaving Job exhausted, confused, and, in time, prematurely wrinkled (16:7-8). Demonic fingers around his throat would narrow his breathing passages (9:18), leaving Job sprawled in his own squalor, kicking in desperation for breath, forgetting for the moment the pain that returned with renewed fury when he was allowed again to breath.

Hardly a soul could bear to be around him. Virtually all of his friends forsook him. His servants ignored his plaintive cries for help. His wife, in utter frustration, offered the advice she considered best for him: “*curse God, and die.*” With neither strength to provide for himself nor anyone to provide for him, Job wasted away to a stick-man appearance. “*My bone cleaves to my skin and to my flesh, and I am escaped with the skin of my teeth*” (19:20). Contributing also to his dramatic loss of weight was an excruciating bowel disorder (30:27), which prevented normal digestion. Moreover, crippling bone and muscle diseases tortured Job with relentless pains (30:17, 30). Day and night, without rest, weeping Job cried out for respite, even for death (but death was not allowed), and month after month no respite was given.

*Oh, that I were as in months past . . . when God preserved me, when His candle shined upon my head, and when by His light I walked through darkness. As I was in the days of my youth, when the secret of God was upon my tabernacle, when the Almighty was yet with me, when my children were about me, when I washed my steps with butter, and the rock poured out rivers of oil for me.*

*The young men saw me, and hid themselves. And the aged arose, and stood up. The princes refrained from talking, and laid their hand on their mouth. The nobles held their peace. . . . When the ear heard me, then it blessed me, and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me, because I delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him.*

*The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me, and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy. . . . I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame. I was a father to the poor. . . and I broke the jaws of the wicked and plucked the spoil out of his teeth.*

*Unto me men gave ear, and waited, and kept silence at my counsel. After my words they spake not again, and my speech dropped upon them. They waited for me as the rain. . . . I sat chief, and dwelt as a king in the army.*

excerpts from Job 29

Formerly the paragon of success and integrity, Job now groveled like a dog for crumbs from his master's table. In appearance almost inhuman, Job now was mocked by heartless low-lives in the community. "*Children of fools*", Job cried, "*Yea, children of base men. . . . They abhor me, they flee far from me, and spare not to spit in my face*" (30:8-10). Job, weeping and bleeding, was cursed and physically abused (30:11-14). A repulsive and despised shell of a man, he was repeatedly accused of hypocrisy by his three closest friends for hiding what they believed were secret sins. They accused him, confident of being right because according to their doctrine, righteousness is evidenced by one's wealth and health; therefore, sickness and

poverty proved Job's guilt. So, while asleep, Job was tormented by demons, and while awake, men joined in the vicious attack. Whether awake or asleep, there was pain. Always pain.

Most grievous of all, and adding weight to the heaviest of his burdens, was the inexplicable silence of God. Why did He hide Himself? This was the hot knife's edge of Job's sufferings. This was the point whereat Satan waited to see Job's faith fail. But this is what he saw and heard from Job concerning his God:

*Oh that I knew where I might find Him! That I might come even to His seat! I would order my cause before Him, and fill my mouth with arguments.*

*Behold, I go forward, but He is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; on the left hand, where He works, but I cannot behold Him. He hides Himself on the right hand, that I cannot see Him. But He knows the way that I take. When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold. My foot has held His steps; His way have I kept, and not declined. Neither have I gone back from the commandment of His lips.*

Job 23:3-4, 8-12a

"God is faithful," wrote a man of God long after Job's time. "He will make a way of escape" (1Cor. 10:13). Job found his "way of escape" by following the road that leads out of all suffering: the road Isaiah called "the way of holiness" (Isa. 35:8). By refusing to do evil and persisting in doing good, Job finally overcame all the evil which befell him. "Until I die," he firmly argued through his searing pain, "I will not remove my integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let

*it go. My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live!*" (Job 27:5-6).

### Not Charging God Foolishly

As if Job's "miserable comforters" failed to accuse Job enough, some believers today still find fault with this incredibly righteous man. "Job deserved what he got," one man told me, "because he said that '*the thing which I greatly feared has come upon me.*' He feared the Devil, and that opened the door for the Devil to hurt him." But "the thing" that had come upon Job, "the thing" which he had greatly feared, was God, not Satan. We are told that in the very first verse of the book (Job 1:1). Fearing God is not a fault. Indeed, it is more than a fault not to fear the hand of God, as both David and Paul taught (Ps. 36:1; Rom. 3:18), and the author of Hebrews agreed: "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (10:31).

During his sermon, a pastor friend of mine accused Job of "teaching false doctrine" because Job held God alone responsible for taking away his children, possessions, and health. He couldn't agree with the words of Job, which are among the most quoted of all Scripture:

*Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and  
naked shall I return thither. The LORD gave, AND  
THE LORD HAS TAKEN AWAY. Blessed be the name  
of the LORD.* Job 1:21

Job was right to glorify God as the one responsible for both giving him blessings and for taking them away. A man who does not know that God loves him cannot do that. A man who does not trust God's wisdom cannot do that. A man who believes in the power of other gods, including Satan, to determine destruction for the saints cannot do that. Job knew his Creator too well to believe that Satan could take God's

blessings away, unless God Himself determined that it should be done.

Yet, of even more importance than Job's saying such words is the Bible's immediate commentary:

*In all this, Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.* Job 1:22

The Bible's judgment concerning what Job said was that it was neither sinful nor foolish for Job to attribute responsibility for his suffering to God. This is God's judgment concerning Job's words. For us, my friends, the question is this: Is our understanding of God such that we do not agree with Job? Do we think that God is not what Job knew Him to be? Is it our doctrinal position that he did not understand who was responsible for what happened to him?

Job's knowledge of God made sure his faith in God's goodness and power and wisdom. Nothing could move him from that faith as long as it was anchored in that knowledge. When his wife's counsel was that Job should "curse God, and die," Job's answer reflected his hope and faith in God's providence:

*But he said unto her, You talk as one of the foolish women talk. What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?* Job 2:10

And then, again, as if to assure us most firmly of divine approval of Job's words, the Bible immediately adds this note:

*In all this, Job did not sin with his lips.*

It behooves us to agree with Job in believing that he received evil (meaning "harm") from the hand of God, if the Holy Scriptures themselves confirm it. Or do we fear that

somehow we would be wrong, were we to believe what Job believed about God?

“Without Cause”

*My face is foul with weeping, and on my eyelids is the shadow of death. Not for any injustice in mine hands. Also my prayer is pure.* Job 16:16-17

*For He breaks me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds WITHOUT CAUSE.* Job 9:17

Statements as these can seem irreverent and self-serving. By uttering such words, Job risked being accused of pride and of stubbornly justifying himself. That was certainly the conclusion of Job’s three “comforters”:

Eliphaz:

*Who ever perished, being innocent? Or where were the righteous cut off? . . . Your own mouth condemns you, and not I. Yea, your own lips testify against you.* Job 4:7; 15:6

Bildad:

*Does God pervert judgment? Or does the Almighty pervert justice? . . . If you were pure and upright, He would surely now awake for you, and make the habitation of your righteousness prosperous. . . . Behold, God will not cast away a perfect man, neither will He help the evil doers.* Job 8:3, 6, 20

Zophar:

*Should not the multitude of words be answered? And should a man full of talk be justified? Should your lies make men hold their peace? And when*

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*you mock, shall no man make you ashamed? For you have said, My doctrine is pure, and I am clean in thine eyes. But, oh, that God would speak, and open His lips against you! And that He would show you the secrets of wisdom, that they are double to that which is! Know therefore that God is exacting of you less than your iniquity deserves.*

Job 11:2-6

Job's friends were indignant when they heard Job say that God was destroying him "without cause". But what would those wise men have thought, could they indeed have heard God "open his lips and speak", as He did to Satan after Job's afflictions had begun?

*Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one who fears God, and eschews evil? And still he holds fast his integrity, although you moved Me against him, to destroy him WITHOUT CAUSE.*

God, in Job 2:3

It should be noted that for God and Job to say that his suffering was "without cause" is not at all to say that his suffering was without purpose. Job, believing in God's purpose, spent much of his time of suffering in prayer, trying to discover what God's purpose was. To say that Job's suffering was "without cause" is only to say that Job had not, by sinning, provoked God to afflict him. But there was purpose in his suffering, as untold multitudes of saints throughout salvation's history who have been strengthened to faith in the face of sorrow by Job's example can bear witness.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar vehemently disagreed with Job because they did not believe that God would cause suffering

without being provoked by sin to do so. Unfortunately, many of the saints today would disagree with Job, too, principally because we are being bombarded with the insane notion that God will not cause suffering under any circumstances. But surely we can admit that Job was right in saying God was afflicting him without cause *if God Himself said the same*. It is the least we can do to confess that God spoke the truth, even if it is difficult to bring ourselves to confess that Job did.

#### The Greatest Commandment

It was the knowledge of the goodness, power, and wisdom of the Creator, constantly affirmed in Creation, which so firmly upheld the faith of Joseph and Job under enormous pressures. Any other foundation would have collapsed. Had they been any less understanding, they could have found some other god or person to hold responsible for their suffering. But to look to other sources was the heathen way of believing. It was the heathen way to hold grudges against men, to hate, and to seek revenge for being mistreated. It was the heathen who had gods of love and kindness and gods to cause suffering, wise gods and foolish gods, a god to hold the keys of hell, a god to pull the sun across the sky, gods who lived and governed in the seas, and gods who ruled upon the land. That is how they believed, being chained to ignorance of the Creator. Their love, their worship, their fear, their faith, their whole lives were divided in their ceaseless efforts to keep the gods appeased. What a liberation, what a joy was the revelation of the truth!

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is ONE LORD.  
And you shall love the LORD your God with all  
your heart, and with all your soul, and with all  
your might.*

Moses, in Dt. 6:4-5

It is no wonder that Jesus would say that this is the greatest commandment contained in the Holy Scriptures (Mk. 12:29-30). It is of the highest spiritual benefit, of first importance to an unadulterated faith, to know that there is but one God who is all things to His beloved people.

#### The Other God

The kind of idolatry that dominated the ancient world is all but gone, but there exists in its stead another, more deviously subtle kind. For, to many believers, Satan has, in effect, replaced those gods which once were thought to have tried the hearts of men. Whereas God was, by most of the ancient Israelites, thought to have been one among many gods, He is now thought by many of God's people to be one of only two. He is still rightly trusted to be the God of love and healing and truth, but at the same time, Satan is trusted by many saints today to be the god of their suffering. He has become, for all purposes, the "other gods" of the New Testament people of God, and the fact that the saints are taught to dislike Satan for doing them harm makes their faith in him no less idolatrous. There were unlikable gods in the ancient world, too. Personal dislike of other gods had nothing to do with the fact that it was idolatry to believe in their power to determine circumstances, whether in the lives of God's people or in any other part of God's Creation. Why, it is the fear of, faith in, respect for, or any other form of reverence for any other god, which is the *very first thing forbidden* in the Ten Commandments! The fear of the Lord, we must remember, is the very beginning of all wisdom (Prov. 1:7).

#### God is God

I overheard an older saint attempt to woo a young girl to Christ with these words, "You don't ever have to fear God,

honey. But you'd better be afraid of that old Devil." I caught my breath in disbelief. What kind of doctrine is that? In whose power was this saint persuading that young girl to believe?

Oh, that God would circumcise the ear of our souls to hear words of the men who walked by God's light! It is, to me, as though Job were screaming the truth so that he might be heard, even by us, over the din of confused tradition:

*Know now that GOD has overthrown me, and has compassed me in HIS net. . . . HE has fenced up my way that I cannot pass, and HE has set darkness in my paths. HE has stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. HE has destroyed me on every side, and I am gone.*

Job 19:6, 8-10

It was Job's understanding of God that gave him the faith to say those things. That those things were true was actually his only hope. For if God had not destroyed him, then who had? And if Satan or some other god were responsible, where had God been when it happened? No, either God was responsible, or God is not God. But Job knew that God was responsible and that God loved him and would be glorified in his complete deliverance (Job 13:15-16), if through it all, he would wait for that salvation in the way of righteousness. That is perfected faith. That is faith that rests upon the unshakable foundation of God's goodness, power, and wisdom. That is the beauty and benefit of the knowledge of God as our Creator.

Finally, should there remain any doubt that Job's attitude concerning his afflictions was correct, serious consideration should be given to God's final appraisal of the faith that Job had demonstrated throughout his trial. Speaking to one of Job's "comforters", God said:

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*My wrath is kindled against you, and against your  
two friends, for you have not spoken of me the  
thing that is right, AS MY SERVANT JOB HAS.*

Job 42:7

### Jesus

The life of every one of God's people is the sole responsibility of the Owner. He may use it or leave it upon the shelf. He may brand it, break it, twist it, or melt it. But whatever happens to the Master's instruments is determined by no one but the Master. Faith, when it is matured, rejoices in that. Who better than our God to be in control of our circumstances and our fate? This is the faith that guided Joseph and Job to victory over suffering, and it is the faith that guided our Lord Jesus through his sufferings to eternal glory.



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## CHAPTER FOUR

JESUS

*Do you think that I cannot now pray to my Father,  
and He will presently give me more than twelve  
legions of angels?* Mt. 26:53

## As a Lamb

In the first seven chapters of Leviticus, God's laws for sacrifice in ancient Israel are given. They were very simple laws, easily understood and obeyed. One of the most basic of those laws was that all sacrifices had to be voluntarily made. No one was forced to make sacrifices to God under the Law. As proof that the sacrifice was voluntary, it was required that before the priest could make the offering to God, *the one to whom the animal belonged was to kill it*. The priests could not kill an animal for the owner.

*If his offering be a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish. He shall offer it of his own voluntary will at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the LORD. And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. And he shall kill the bullock before the LORD. And the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.*

Lev. 1:3-5

The requirement that the owner should personally slay his offering should be kept in mind whenever we think or speak of Jesus as the Lamb of God. He was not the Lamb of men or of Satan. Only the One to whom he belonged had the authority to "put him to grief."

Isaiah was moved to prophesy of the suffering Savior in just this manner (excerpts, Isa. 53) :

*It pleased the LORD to bruise him; He has put him to grief. . . . [He] shall make his soul an offering to sin.*

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Jesus knew that God's will was for him to "*give his life a ransom for many*" (Mt. 20:28), but his faith in God was such that he thoroughly expected his suffering to be the gateway to eternal blessing, and he "*became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*" He was never bitter, never vindictive. Rather, by doing good to others, he demonstrated that he had committed his life to God "*as unto a faithful Creator.*"

## Nobody but Jesus

Some, however, were provoked by Jesus' submissive attitude toward his suffering. Pilate, angered by Jesus' silence, demanded,

*Do you not speak to me? Know you not that I have power to crucify you, and have power to release you? Jesus answered, You could have no power at all against me except it were given you from above.*

Jn. 19:10-11

Pilate did not know that his authority over the Jews at that moment in history was a gift from the God of the Jews. But ignorance of God's hand in all these events was not reserved to Pilate. The Jews thought that the crucifixion of Jesus was their idea. They could never have dreamed that the plans they were fulfilling actually belonged to the Father of the victim. Even Jesus' closest friends were unaware of the terrible truth they were witnessing. When Judas led the evil mob to the garden of Gethsemene, Peter drew his sword to protect Jesus.

*Then Jesus said to Peter, Put up your sword into your sheath. The cup which MY FATHER HAS GIVEN ME, shall I not drink it? Then the band and the captain and officers of the Jews took Jesus, and bound him, and led him away.*

Jn. 18:11-13

Nobody but Jesus saw beyond the angry mob and the sadistic Roman soldiers. Nobody but Jesus saw beyond the humiliation and horror of his crucifixion to see the loving hand of God at work, providing hope of eternal life for all mankind. Neither Pilate nor the Jews, not even the disciples – nobody but Jesus – knew that what they themselves were doing had been ordained by God since the foundation of the world. Nobody but Jesus knew.

*And when they were come to the place which is called Calvary, there they crucified him and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. Lk. 23:33-34*

It was only after Jesus ascended into heaven and the Spirit of truth had come that the disciples began to grasp the truth, the awful, wondrous truth: Christ Jesus had been purposely delivered into the hands of wicked men “*by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*” (Acts 2:23 cp. Lk. 22:22). It was only when the purpose of Christ’s suffering was accomplished and his followers were filled with the Spirit of truth, that the knowledge of what God had done enabled them to pray “with one accord”,

*Lord, you are God, who has made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all that in them is, who by the mouth of your servant David has said, Why did the heathen rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ. For of a truth, against your holy child Jesus, whom you have anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together,*

*FOR TO DO WHATSOEVER YOUR HAND AND YOUR  
COUNSEL DETERMINED BEFORE TO BE DONE.*

Acts 4:24-28

It was a “vain thing” for raging Pilate to imagine that he had power either to crucify or to set free the Son of God (Jn. 19:10). It was a “vain thing” for the rulers of the Jews to conspire against Jesus to put him to death (Jn. 11:47-53). It was a “vain thing” for Roman soldiers to guard the tomb, lest the body of Jesus be stolen away. All these were “vain things” because none of them to the least extent determined what happened to Jesus. The Jews’ conspiracy against Jesus was just as vain as was the guarding of the tomb, the only difference being that what the Jews conspired to do, God had planned already to do, and what the guards were sent to do, God’s plan did not include. The fact that God allowed some men to imagine that they were accomplishing their purpose, when they were only accomplishing His, speaks only of the greatness of His mercy and wisdom and power, and does in no respect make less vain the evil intentions of men. It is altogether fitting to genuine faith in Christ that we should acknowledge and confess that if God had not sent His Son to the cross, there is no power in heaven or in earth that could have forced him to go there.

Not of man’s design or purpose, the sacrifice of Christ “*was foreordained before the foundation of the world*” (1Pet. 1:20). “*The Son of Man shall be delivered into the hands of men,*” said Jesus (Lk. 9:44). But by whom? “*God delivered him up for us all,*” wrote the apostle Paul (Rom. 8:32). “*The Father sent the Son*”, John wrote, “*to be the propitiation for our sins*” (1Jn. 4:10).

*Wherefore, when he came into the world, he said,  
Lo, I come to do YOUR will, O God.*

Heb. 10:5, 7



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of Roman soldiers pounding spikes into his hands and feet. But neither did his awareness of what men were doing blind his spirit to the reality of his Father, determining moment by moment what would and what would not be done to His dear Son. At every point in his earthly pilgrimage, despite what everyone else thought they knew, Jesus humbly maintained that his sufferings were “*things that belong to God*” (Mt. 16:21-23). But at the time, nobody but Jesus knew.

It is the very soul of the gospel that what happened to Jesus at Calvary was the will and plan of God. We should follow Jesus’ example and never lose sight of that, lest the deceiver deceive us into honoring him with responsibility for what happened at Calvary. Satan, too, despite what he would have us to think, was merely an outwitted pawn in God’s inscrutably wise plan. The glorious truth now and forever remains that “*God so loved the world that HE GAVE His only begotten Son.*”

And His accomplished purpose remains with it:

*that whosoever believes in him should not perish,  
but have everlasting life.*

## Times

Listen to Solomon’s wisdom:

*To every thing there is a season, and a time to  
every purpose under the heaven: a time to be  
born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a  
time to pluck up that which is planted; a time to  
kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and  
a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to  
laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a  
time to cast away stones, and a time to gather  
stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to*

*refrain from embracing; a time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence; and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace... He has made everything beautiful in His time.*

Eccl. 3:1-8, 11

In each of our lives, there is a time for all things: birth and death, joy and sadness, gain and loss. It is a matter of unspeakable joy to discover that all our “times” are determined by our loving heavenly Father!

*I trusted in you, O LORD. I said, You are my God.  
My times are in your hand.*

David, in Ps. 31:14-15

When men would have killed Jesus before God’s appointed time, they repeatedly failed. And the only reason they failed is, as John wrote, “*because his hour was not yet come*” (Jn. 7:30; 8:20). Early in his ministry, Jesus plainly told his brothers, “*My time is not yet come*” (Jn. 7:6). Neither men nor demons, nor any other creature, could have determined the time of Jesus’ death. His times were in his Father’s hands. He was his Father’s Lamb, not theirs.

It remains for us to consider soberly the truth that we, too, are called to be lambs in His flock (cp. Jn. 21:15-17) and to commit ourselves entirely to His care “*as unto a faithful Creator.*” We, too, can “*shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end*” (Heb. 6:11). We, too, can “*trust in Him at all times*” (Ps. 62:8). Amen.

### All Things

None of those whose stories we have thus far studied were mistaken in looking beyond the agents of their shame and

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suffering to see nothing but God at work, accomplishing His good purposes. Neither shall we be mistaken by following their perfect example. But it is very likely that we shall languish in immature spiritual confusion as long as we fail to acknowledge the hand of God to be at work in all things at all times for us.

*We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.* Paul, in Rom. 8:28

In the few sorrows, hardships, and disappointments in which he is personally involved, Satan's intention is to steal a part of our faith in God. But the faith that overcomes the world believes that if those sufferings were actually of such weight that we could not overcome them, God would not have sent them our way. "*God is faithful,*" wrote Paul, "*who will not allow you to be tempted above what you are able*" (1Cor. 10:13).

## God is Faithful

Say it to yourself when you are hurting. God is faithful! Say it to the spirits of depression and fear! God is faithful! Say it to those who would have you to surrender your faith and hold a grudge against someone who has wronged you! God is faithful! Concerning the miseries, distresses, and persecutions that confront us, the apostle Paul asks, "*What shall we say to these things?*" Then, to answer his own question, he writes that to all these things we should say, "*If God be for us, who can be against us?*"

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?  
Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or  
famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? . . .  
Nay, in all these things we are more than*

*conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Rom. 8:35, 37-39

Say to the spirits that would have you to fear anything, from catching a cold to a nuclear war, “God is faithful!” Confess the truth and overcome the world! Look for God’s good purposes in the trials of your faith. See them as from His hand and be encouraged, rather than be embittered as though an enemy had broken through His defenses.

Sometimes, I think God has more confidence in our faith than we do. He certainly places us in situations where we wonder if we will ever be healed, or ever be happy again, or ever again be free in spirit. But having already measured that hurt or loss, the Father knows that we will be even healthier, happier, and freer than ever if we will but trust Him and be faithful. If we trust Him through the hard times, we will discover that our greater blessing was actually His purpose all along.

Yes, we can joyously expect all things to be working for our good, but only if we do “*love God and are the called according to His purpose*” (Rom. 8:28). For those who do not love God and are not the called according to His purpose, there is nothing working for their good. Even the pleasant things of their lives will eventually amount to nothing. Solomon noted this (excerpts, Ecclesiastes 6):

*If a man beget an hundred children, and live many years, so that the days of his years be many.  
. . . Yea, though he live a thousand years twice*

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*told . . . and his soul be not filled with good . . . I say that an untimely birth is better than he.*

Then let our souls seek to be filled with His goodness, for God has ordained the trials of our faith to work for our good only if we love Him, only “*if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.*”

I believe that the key to this kind of love and faithfulness is a genuine knowledge of God and that the key to possessing that knowledge is the revelation of Creation. When we experience the revelation knowledge of God as Creator, the rope of trust in God is no longer something at which our wondering hearts desperately grasp; rather, faith becomes woven into the fabric of our mind and spirit, so that it becomes part of what we are. It becomes our foundation instead of our goal. Then, growing into this grace and knowledge of our Savior, we survey past experiences which we once denounced as Satan’s intrusions, and we perceive the short-sightedness of such a view. We see those experiences as the very stones upon which we now stand and view the glory of God, as stepping stones which were hewn by caring hands to match our toddling steps. Yes, Satan may have been allowed to shove those stones into our pathway, but he neither determined the size of those stones nor when in our pilgrimage we would face them.

I am reminded of Jesus’ words to the saints in ancient Smyrna:

*Fear none of those things which you will suffer. Behold, the Devil shall cast some of you into prison, that you may be tried. And you will have tribulation for ten days. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you a crown of life. Rev. 2:10*

Yes, it was Satan who would cast some of these faithful saints into prison, but why just “some”? And why just ten days? The purpose of this suffering, according to Jesus, was that they “may be tried”, not that “they might be destroyed.” Then, whose purpose was this trial serving? Who matched this trial to the faith of these saints so that they could overcome it and be crowned with eternal life?

It is the proclamation of perfected faith that the Lord both “tries the righteous” (Ps. 11:5) and “saves the upright in heart” (Ps. 7:10). The apostle Peter rejoiced in this and saw absolutely no conflict in saying that the saints were being “*kept by the power of God*”, and in the following verse adding, “*though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations*” (1Pet. 1:5-6). That you are being tried does not mean that God’s power is no longer keeping you. In fact, God’s power may be most at work in your life during your weakness and sorrow than at any other time (cp. 2Cor. 12:7-10). James wrote (1:2-4):

*My brothers, count it all joy when you fall into diverse temptations, knowing this, that the trying of your faith works patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that you may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.*

Only a man who knows that he loves God and who knows how much God loves him could pray, as righteous David prayed,

*Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*

Ps. 139:23-24

Our faith must be tried. If we trust God to provide for us only the trials that we can overcome, our faith will be perfected

as we struggle through our hurt to understand and accomplish the will of our heavenly Father. If we do not see beyond our difficult circumstances to behold the hand of God at work for our good, our faith will never be perfected. We will always have trouble forgiving from our hearts those who have wronged us. We will always be victimized by bitterness at our “fate”, as though God were unmindful of us, or still worse, unjust.

Is there anyone among us who has been treated more unjustly than Joseph? Is there anyone among us who has suffered greater loss than Job? Is there anyone among us who has been more misunderstood, maligned, and hated than our dear Lord Jesus? Satan, confident that his purposes would prevail, poured pain like a river into the lives of those holy men and dared them to believe in the purposes of God. One by one, each in turn took that dare, and they each overcame the world and the Devil by doing the good that God had taught them to do. Will we? Are we as committed to our Creator as we are to our human spouses, “for better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, till death . . .?”

God can be trusted with our lives. That means that He can be trusted to be doing the right thing, every moment, with our lives. To trust God, that is the real spiritual warfare, not warfare against flesh and blood but against the spirits of this age that are envious of the love and fear and trust which belong solely to the Creator.

Dare to hope in God’s goodness. Dare to rely upon His power. Dare to believe in His purposes. Dare to abandon your life, your circumstances, and your future to His will. Dare to speak to despair, to worry, “God is for me! You can’t destroy me!” Dare to say to sickness, depression, even death itself, “God is faithful – and so will I be!” Go beyond the spirits of vengeance and ill-will. God can be trusted with your life! Dare

not to grumble at the trial He has prepared for you. Dare to believe that you will overcome it, that you will be healed, that things will be made right in your life again, and that such was His plan from the start. The Lord Jesus, Joseph, and Job all clung tenaciously to that blessed hope. So should we. We may with every confidence follow their wise, righteous examples into eternal rest in the presence of God.

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