

# ENDURE

50 meditations on faith that never quits

KORY M. CAPPS

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Kory M. Capps

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Dedicated to Mom and Dad.  
Thank you for a legacy of true endurance.

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# Introduction

*You have need of endurance.  
(Hebrews 10:36)*

There is one constant in life—suffering. And suffering has a way of whittling everything down to the basics; it strips away our wants and leaves us with our needs. When we suffer, we ask the essential questions: How do I keep going? Can I do another day? Where am I going to get the strength to make it through this?

“One foot in front of the other” is no cliché—it’s a call to courage. In a world that holds you down and resists your forward momentum, the slow shuffle ahead is nothing short of heroic. To make it in this life, we must keep moving, keep pushing, keep going. You see, endurance is not a luxury—it’s a necessity. We simply won’t make it without it.

Where does endurance come from? What is it made of? How do we get it? How do we develop it? How do we use it? These are essential questions; ones we need to explore together. I will frame our discussion under three categories: 1) The Source of Endurance, 2) The Guide to Endurance, 3) The Training Ground of Endurance.

## ***The Source of Endurance***

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In a breathtaking passage of Scripture, we are guided to the fountainhead of endurance. Paul writes to the Romans, “May the *God of endurance* and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together



you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5-6<sup>1</sup>).

The implications of this divine title are staggering. 1) The Triune God is the definition of endurance; in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we understand and behold the true meaning of endurance. 2) The Triune God is the source of endurance, which means that all endurance is derived from him, gifted by him, and developed in us through his help. 3) As image-bearers, we are called to reflect the God of endurance by being men and women of resilience.

### ***The Guide to Endurance***

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Paul’s discussion on the source of endurance is preceded by a critical passage that speaks to the function of Scripture as it relates to endurance: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that *through endurance* and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

This passage shows the connection between Scripture and endurance. As the source, God authors Scripture to provide us with endurance: it is the primary way God mediates it to us. 1) Practically speaking, endurance is worked in us through the encouragement and promises of the gospel that fuel our hope (Col. 1:11). 2) Scripture is also filled with endless human examples, wisdom, and guidance for developing endurance by faith. 3) Scripture identifies things that will erode our endurance and hinder our ability to persevere.

### ***The Training Ground of Endurance***

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As Scripture reveals the ways that God provides endurance to us, it identifies the main context through which this happens. Paul, the theologian of endurance, points the way again as he describes the training ground of endurance: “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from the ESV.

and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:3-5).

This passage contains several key observations regarding endurance. 1) Suffering is the arena: the place where endurance is produced and the context where God works it into our souls (Rev. 1:9, 2 Cor. 6:4). 2) Endurance is vitally connected to character; it is an essential ingredient in God's transforming work in us and the goal of making us more like Jesus. 3) Hope does not happen without endurance; you cannot remove any of the links of this chain—suffering, endurance, and character are all prerequisites of hope (Lam. 3:18). 4) We discern the role of the Holy Spirit, the God of endurance, as he works within us and beside us to produce all that is necessary for a hope that will never lead to shame.

How do we put one foot in front of the other? The answer is to pursue the God of endurance, follow his guide for endurance, and embrace the training ground of endurance. We must recognize that endurance stands outside us in the Triune God; he grants it to us as a gift, works it out in the context of hardship, and ensures we have it on the rugged journey we walk. Fundamentally, endurance is not produced by us, it is ours by faith (Heb. 12:1). We must reframe our entire thinking on this concept, endurance by faith is how we truly put one foot in front of the other.

My friends, life is hard—brutally so at times. We need endurance. In the following pages, these meditations speak to these various elements of endurance in different ways. Think of them as anchor points for the steep climb of faith: clip in and rest for a moment before you strain upward again. My prayer is that the God of Endurance would enable you to keep putting one foot in front of the other.



# 1

## The God who Walks our Speed

The average person walks three miles an hour. With a little effort, we can increase that speed, but not by much. Our inherent mode of transportation does not get us from A to B very quickly. Theologian Kosuke Koyama was riveted by this fact when he considered the incarnation that inspired his book *The Three Mile an Hour God*.

He says, "Love has its speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice it or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore the speed the love of God walks."

And Jesus walked, a lot. Conservative estimates of his journeys in the gospels suggest he walked 3,000 miles. Take, for example, the trip Jesus made at the beginning of his ministry: "Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea" (Matt. 4:13). Nazareth to Capernaum was a forty-mile journey. At the average human pace, we are talking thirteen to fourteen hours of walking. Likely, this journey would have been broken up into two or three days. Every time we see Jesus traversing from one city to another, he is walking.

More profoundly, the New Testament speaks about those whom Jesus walked alongside. He walked with outcasts, disciples, and family members, and he walked their pace (Matt. 9:9-13, John 2:1-11, Luke 8:1-2). He walked with them through sickness, sorrow, misunderstanding, sin, abandonment, and death. He never rushed,

and he never sped ahead. Love does that: it walks at the speed of another.

But what happens when three miles an hour is far too fast? What about the reality of sorrow and loss? What about the seasons of life where it feels impossible to put one foot in front of another?

The good news is his name is Immanuel: God with us (Matt. 1:22-23). He does not qualify his name; there are no exceptions to his “withness.” The sandaled God walks with us every step of the way—no matter the speed. He walks with the sick individual (Luke 13:10-17), the grieving parent (Luke 7:11-15), and even the one facing death (Ps. 23:4). He is not just the three-mile-an-hour God; he is the one-mile-an-hour God and even the God that comes to a stand-still. He calibrates to your speed and meets you right there.

## 2

### Creation out of Nothing

From nothing God creates: this is the affirmation of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). With no raw material, he brings forth something. His powerful word springs forth the contents of his speech. To put it another way, his word does exactly what it says. This is an important aspect of God's work in both creation and salvation. It is a truth pregnant with comfort and hope.

It assures us that we serve a mighty God who is beyond capable of fulfilling all that he has promised to us. This truth shows us that our Creator contains within himself all the resources necessary to accomplish what he desires. He is the only being in the universe that is truly self-sustaining and without need as he is not dependent upon any created thing. His freedom and utter lack of need make him capable of fulfilling our every need.

It is comforting to know that God can make something out of nothing. If he can speak a fish into being, then he can certainly transform the disaster of my life. If he can raise Jesus from the dead *ex nihilo* (Rom. 4:17), then he can make my life into something of value. God is in the business of fashioning beautiful things with no raw material. I love this because it gives me hope. It means he can work with me—and you. Don't despair when life is in shambles and you have been brought to nothing; you are perfectly positioned for God's creative work.

As 16<sup>th</sup> Century pastor and reformer Martin Luther says, “It is God’s nature to make something out of nothing; hence one who is not yet nothing, out of him God cannot make anything and therefore God accepts only the forsaken, cures only the sick, gives sight to only the blind and restores life to the dead.”

A God who excels with nothing is the God we desperately need. This is good news, my friends.

## Creation out of Something

There is great encouragement to be found in God's ability to create out of nothing. In the creation account, we learn that he also shows his ability, skill, and power by making things from other things. He does not create trees and plants out of nothing. He commands the earth to bring forth vegetation (Gen. 1:11). He uses the raw material he has already created and from that makes these things. He does the same thing with livestock.

Look at the language in the creation account: "And God said, 'Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds...'" (Gen. 1:24). God issues an imperative to the earth, and it obeys! The earth immediately gives birth to living creatures. Not from nothing, but from the dust these come forth. God creates out of something. The same thing is true when he created us. Instead of declaring "let there be humans," he fashioned us from the dust of the ground and breathed life into us (Gen. 2:7). We were created out of something.

Creation out of something shows us fresh things about God. It shows his power to take from one thing and bring forth something else. It demonstrates his skill and creativity—who could have guessed that a cow could spring up from the ground? Who could have imagined that a human being could be fashioned from the dirt? Only a brilliant and capable artist could conceive and execute such a feat.

Such creation also demonstrates humility that will be shown again and again throughout Scripture. God loves to work through



created things to bring about a new creation. He certainly could have bypassed the earth to create living creatures, but he didn't. He chose to work in and through the earth to make that happen. In one sense, he is a co-worker with creation to bring about creation.

Creation out of something also teaches us some things about ourselves. It instructs us about bonds that have been forged in the created order since the beginning. There is a reason why living creatures and humans were fashioned from the ground; we were created for the earth and the earth for us.

We are earth-bound creatures. Our feet were meant to walk this earth, forever. This is why a new earth is our eternal destiny and not some disembodied heavenly state. This is also why birds and fish were not made from the earth. The sky is the home of the bird and the water that of the fish.

There is a lot of flawed theology that disparages life on the earth. We are led to believe that spirituality is about transcending our creatureliness. We are told that the goal of this life is to escape from this earth, our bodies, and our limitations as humans. This is simply not so. We will only know freedom when we embrace the fact that we were made from the dust and for the dust, that we belong here.

All the down-to-earth activities of living are deeply important. We need rescue from sin, not the earth. We need resurrection for our bodies, not liberation from them. We need salvation from our rebellious attempts to be gods who refuse to embrace our glorious position as creatures. We were not made for the sky; we were made for the earth. We need a Savior who will come and restore us and the dirt we come from. In Christ, we have such a Rescuer—the Creator who became a dirt-dweller and enacted the eighth day of creation. His birth, life, death, and resurrection affirm our earthly existence and rescue us back into it.

# 4

## Creation by Transformation

In Genesis 1-2, we encounter three types of creative activity. God creates out of nothing. God creates out of something. And finally, God creates by transformation. I want to focus on the third for a moment. We can see this dynamic in the first three days of creation. After God creates light out of nothing, we are told that he separates it from darkness (1:3). He then names what he has divided: "Darkness, your name will be night. Light, you will now be called day." The division between light and darkness is creative transformation. He takes what he has made and brings about change.

We know from Genesis 1:2 that the earth was covered in water. On day two he goes to work transforming this situation. This part of the creation account has always intrigued me. God speaks to the watery earth: "Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters" (1:6). The result is a division of waters. Some remain below and some are held above (1:7). On day three he picks up where he left off. He gathers the waters below into one place to allow the dry land to appear (1:9). He then names these two creatures earth and sea.

God speaks a formless world into existence (1:2). Like a potter he then takes his clay and begins to shape it into something beautiful. He takes some of the clay and makes other things out of it (plants, animals, humans). The remainder of the clay is transformed by the steady hand of the divine artisan (separation of light and darkness,

land and water). This is what's going on in creation by transformation—he is working the clay.

God chose not to create a completed world; he chose to create one that needed further work. It's like a man who chooses to buy a plot of land and build a log cabin with his own hands. He is not interested in a pre-fabricated cabin; he wants to roll up his sleeves and use the resources on his land. He loves the feel of the hammer as he transforms his plot into a home. Creation by transformation reveals a God who loves to work. According to Genesis 2:2, God wore a hardhat for six days, and the universe was his construction zone. Here we have the seeds of a theology of work and vocation.

The God who works is revealed further in the coming of the Son. The life of this carpenter is an extended sermon on the value of work. In the incarnation, he takes up his tool belt—his project, our salvation. The vigor of his labor stains his brow with sweat and blood. His vocation leads him to a cross, the construction site of the new creation. To complete his work, he must relinquish his hammer, and instead of pounding nails, he must receive them. On that bloody wood beam, we see the kindness and endurance of the God who works for us.

## The Comfort of Creation

When you want to instill hope and encouragement in someone, where do you normally point him or her? When you counsel people, where do you often take them? Where do you point people that they might know comfort and solace? I have three anchors I encourage people to tie into when the winds are high and the waves are big: cross, coming, and creation.

There is a pattern in Scripture that calls on us to look back to the cross and forward to the return of Christ for our confidence, nothing surprising here. But creation as a source of comfort, that's a bit unexpected. Here are three examples of how creation is used as a source of comfort in Scripture.

What message would bring hope to those who have lost their homes, their families, their faith, and their well-being? This was Isaiah's challenge in communicating with the exiled Israelites who had lost everything. Yet, God calls to Isaiah, "Comfort, comfort my people" (Isa. 40:1). What should he say? What follows in Isaiah 40 is a creation sermon calling on the exiles to look to God's power and care in creation.

He says, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" (Isa. 40:12). He wants to remind them of his greatness, power, ability, and self-sufficiency. He wants them to grasp that

nothing is too difficult for their God, which provides hope in tragedy and pain.

Job was a man who was in similar circumstances: he lost all his children, his wealth, his home, his health, his friends, and life as he knew it. How would you approach a man in this situation? God comes to him with an unexpected message. He sits Job down and gives him a thorough creation lesson.

To Job, he says, “Who shut in the sea with doors when it burst out from the womb, when I made clouds its garment and thick darkness its swaddling band, and prescribed limits for it and set bars and doors, and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed’? Have you commanded the morning since your days began, and caused the dawn to know its place?” (Job 38:8-12).

He preaches creation to humble, comfort, and awe Job. His words conveyed his providential concern for and intimate knowledge of him. God talks with Job about the stars, the horse, the snow, the goat, the rain, and the ostrich—demonstrating his profound investment in and awareness of each of them. With compassion and mercy (James 5:11), he leverages creation to show his love for Job. Creation is exactly what this suffering man needed.

The comforting power of creation can also be seen when the new heavens and new earth are discussed in Scripture. What message would you bring to a group of Christians facing severe persecution, imprisonment, and even death? This is the daunting task of the apostle John in the book of Revelation. He anchors suffering Christians in the promise of a new creation.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” (Rev. 21:1, 3)*

The hope for the sufferer is in God's restoration of all things. The removal of tears, pain, and death comes when God fixes all that's been broken. It is this creation restored that should stoke the flames of hope; it's the certainty of life with God and his people on a new earth that pushed the churches in Revelation to endure even unto death.

These examples suggest that creation is a significant source of comfort. Jesus confirms this when he uses a sparrow as a baseline for thinking about how much God cares for people (Matt. 10:31). Be observant: there is comfort all around you, reminders of God's intimate care for you, and the hope of a perfectly restored creation to come.



## Creation by Grace

The first line of the Apostle's Creed reads, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." It asserts something fundamental about God and ourselves. We are created, and God is Creator. This is an important starting point for thinking about our identity and the character of our God. Martin Luther's discussion on this line of the creed is helpful:

*What does this mean? Answer: I believe that God has created me and all that exists; that he has given me and still sustains my body and soul, all my limbs and senses, my reason and all the faculties of my mind, together with food and clothing, house and home, family and property; that he provides me daily and abundantly with all the necessities of life, protects me from all danger, and preserves me from all evil. All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part. For all of this, I am bound to thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true.*

When we affirm this sentence of the creed, we affirm all these many things, says Luther. We are given existence and sustenance from his hand. Every breath and all our bread come from him. The abilities of our minds and the aptitude of our speech are gifts from



our Sustainer. The clothes on our backs, the shoes on our feet, the roof over our heads, and all else are gifts from God. This is a profound affirmation—I believe in God the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

Notice too Luther’s assertion that all this is a strong statement of God’s grace: “All this he does out of his pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness on my part.” Utilizing the language of gift, he speaks about creation.

Our existence and all the gifts we receive as God’s creatures have nothing to do with our merit. Our very being is not something earned, deserved, or contingent upon anything we do. Goodness, mercy, and love are the basis of our existence. Creation is by grace. Robert Ingram says it well: “Nothing merits existence. Nothing deserves to be. God owes it to nothing to bring it into being, even when he pronounces it good.” To be is grace. To be saved is grace. All is of grace.

## Finding God in Unexpected Places

The cross changes everything. It is the place where forgiveness becomes possible and the location where God communicates his posture toward us. God rescues and reveals in that unexpected place, and nothing has been the same since.

Martin Luther once said, “Now it is not sufficient for anyone, and it does him no good to recognize God in his glory and majesty unless he recognizes him in the humility and shame of the cross...for this reason, true theology and recognition are in the crucified Christ.”

To put it another way, we will completely misunderstand God if we do not anchor our thoughts of him in the cross of Jesus Christ. The cross tells us of God’s love, justice, mercy, compassion, and kindness. It speaks of his thoughts toward us, sin, and forgiveness. For every question we have about God, the cross has an answer.

This is critical because we often interpret God’s heart toward us from our circumstances. If we believe that God is smiling on us when things are going well, where does that leave us when things go south? In my experience, it doesn’t leave you in a good place. The cross is God’s fixed sentiment toward us; it always accurately portrays his heart. We must return here, again and again, to realign ourselves with what God thinks about us.

It is also important because it trains us to find God in the most unexpected places. Who anticipated finding God in a crib? Whoever imagined locating the author of justice on a criminal’s cross? But, as

Luther said, the “crib and the cross are cut from the same wood.” In other words, God always shows up in unanticipated places. The very things we associate with God’s absence, whether weakness, shame, or suffering, may be indicators of his presence.

This same logic shocks the disciples. In a preview of the Final Judgment, Christ pictures his sheep asking, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?” And the King will answer them, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:37-40).

God hides in the least likely places: the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner. You see, the logic of the cross requires us to think differently. Foolishness now becomes wisdom, the last is first, service equals greatness, strength is weakness, and the ungodly are justified.

The cross turns the world on its head, and for us to see straight, we must turn with it.

## Desperation and the Design of the World

We often ask “why” in desperation. Why this and not that? Why here and not there? At times, our why’s even become desperate with sorrow or pain. Why were you born into your family? Why were you born at a certain point in history? Why were you born in a certain geographical location? Why were you born with a specific ethnicity? Why were you born rich or poor? Why do you have the job you are working? Why are the circumstances in your life the way they are? While there is mystery surrounding these things in our lives, God’s word does shed some light on the greater purpose underneath where he locates us.

*And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:26-27)*

Desperation underlies his design. God orchestrates every detail of our existence that we might seek after him. He positions us at a strategic point in time in a particular location, gives us a certain family, fashions us in unique ways, and even situates us for particular experiences all with the kind intent that we might find him.

There are many things we don't know or understand about our backgrounds, circumstances, and challenges. But one thing is certain from this passage of Scripture: there is design in them. The ups and downs, joys and pains, sorrows and victories have purpose in them.

What encouragement to know that he is “not far from each one of us.” There are no exceptions here. He is accessible to all, and our circumstances have been arranged in such a manner that we might reach out to him and actually find him. So, friend, wherever you are—whether the lights are out in your life right now or you are thriving—let your circumstances serve as signposts to God; he is not far from you.

## How the Cross Settles Judgment Day

Courtrooms are hard places, especially when guilt is involved. Dread, anxiety, and vulnerability are fixtures in this context. If this dynamic is accurate in a local courthouse, how much more before God. There is this sobering fact in life we cannot escape: one day we will be held accountable for our thoughts, actions, and speech. As one passage says, "It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). Without Christ, this is a terrifying day, but with him, it is a day we do not have to fear.

The cross has everything to do with God's judgment—the one I deserve but he takes. There is such good news here, my friends. You see, the cross *is* the final judgment and settles our standing before God once and for all. New Testament scholar Mark Seifrid says it this way: "The day of judgment has been brought into the present in Jesus Christ crucified and risen."

To put it another way, the cross and empty tomb serve as the courtroom where God settles our account by condemning our sin and makes us righteous through Jesus Christ. It is as though God rips that coming day of judgment out of the future and drops it right down into the present so that we know exactly where we stand with him. Scripture reassures us that God will never reverse his final verdict.

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (Rom. 8:31-34)*

On the final day, no charge will stand against us. But why? Because the one who condemns is the same one who has justified us! The one sitting on the bench sends down a verdict and absorbs the entirety of the punishment in himself. In Christ, God the justifier has made us right with him. He has declared there is “no condemnation” over us, and that verdict will never be altered (Rom. 8:1).

This is tremendous news—the one who will stand as our judge is the same one who died, rose, and is interceding for us right now. Take heart, our judgment has been completely handled by Jesus. When he declared it “finished” on the cross, he meant it (John 19:30).

## When God Is Nowhere to Be Found

We need to think about the absence of God for two reasons. First, our experience demands it. Second, the Bible speaks at length about it. If we allow these two reasons to work hand in hand, we will find much-needed help when we feel desperately alone.

Here's what I mean: when we can't find God anywhere, we will be tempted to avoid Scripture. When we resist that impulse and allow the Bible to frame our thinking, we will realize that divine absence is a fixture of Christian discipleship and faith. In other words, the Bible normalizes the experience of God's absence and equips us with the necessary resources to journey through it.

Think about the last time God was nowhere to be found in your life. How would you characterize that season in your journey? What did it feel like? What did it produce in your heart? What did it unravel in your worldview? How did it change you?

As a military member, I deploy regularly. I remember one six-month stretch away from my family that was particularly strained. My boys were navigating teenage challenges, my daughter was figuring out life without Dad for the first time, and my wife was dealing with chronic pain. One phone call stands out to me. In the middle of the night, I was walking around in the desert trying to get more than one bar of cell reception, and my wife was in tears on the other end. I helplessly listened to everything my family was going through and soaked the sand at my feet with tears. This experience



and many like it have left me a different person. When I think about those painful seasons, I recall a profound sense of disillusionment, fear, hurt, anger, and pain. I remember certain truths ringing hollow in my ears. What we need in such moments is the affirming experience of Job.

Job knew God's absence. In one sense, the book of Job is an exploration of this very theme. Job states his predicament at many points, but most clearly in Job 23. "Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him" (Job 23:8-9).

Job pulls out his compass, hunts for God in every direction, and comes up empty. This, my friends, is the normal Christian journey. At some point, we will all find ourselves lost with compass in hand. Hearing Job's voice helps us know we are normal; it also stands as an invitation to find our voice in disillusionment.

Job doesn't only express confusion; he voices trust: "But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold" (Job 23:10). I don't know where God is, but he knows where I am! God knows our ways; he knows us intimately. This is comfort when God can't be located. You see, more important than knowing God is being known by God (Gal. 4:9), and more assuring than holding on to God is being held by God (Jude 24).

C.S. Lewis captures the tenacity of this kind of faith in his *Screwtape Letters*. "Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken and still obeys." One does this by affirming God's absence and trusting that he knows the way we take, that he knows where we are.

## Begin Again and Again

How we frame faith and the process of transformation matters; it may be the difference between walking away from God or continuing to slog through the pain of life with him. Life is messy, it's hard, and so is the journey of faith. Realism is essential here, and thankfully the Bible is filled with that very thing.

It was Martin Luther who said, "To progress is always to begin again." How did we begin? We believed the gospel, and we trusted in the good news of Christ's death and resurrection. How do we continue? In the same way, we battle to continue believing that news and work it out in our lives (1 Cor. 15:1-3, Col. 1:21-23). We never move on from the gospel; we simply press deeper into it and conform our lives more faithfully to it.

But that is precisely the struggle, right? Much easier said than done. My good friend uses the phrase "gospel amnesia" to describe how we walk around in life forgetting about Christ and what he has done for us. The Christian life is a life of repentance because of our straying hearts and consistent failure to trust Jesus.

My life is patterned by stopping and going, sinning and repenting, doubting and trusting; it is the definition of messy. But if I have learned anything, it's that this is the normal Christian life. Fumbling into the darkness is a given. It's coming into the light again and again that marks a Christian (1 John 1:4-9).

We will certainly fall, but getting back up, that's where godliness comes in according to biblical wisdom: "The righteous falls seven times and rises again" (Prov. 24:16). You see, falling is an essential element of gospel-living: it's what drives us back to the work of Christ. Recognition of our need for grace is what creates an appetite for the gospel. This may be why the Lord's Prayer moves directly from daily bread to forgiveness, rescue from temptation, and deliverance from evil—the gospel is spiritual bread, without which we starve (Matt. 6:11-13).

Theologian Gerhard Forde writes, "Sanctification is the art of getting used to justification. There is a kind of growth and progress, it is to be hoped, but it is growth in 'grace,' a growth in coming to be captivated more and more, if we can so speak, by the totality, the unconditionality of the grace of God." In other words, we progress by incrementally embracing what Christ has done for us more fully, trusting in ourselves less, and recognizing that grace permeates every fiber of transformation.

## Things We Can Be Sure Of

Much of life is uncertain, so when the Bible speaks about “things that are certain,” it is quite encouraging. Two times in the New Testament, Paul uses a similar phrase to talk about things he does not doubt; both are very helpful.

He says, "And I am *sure of this*, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). That's gospel news—we can be certain that God won't abandon what he started, that he will not quit but will reach his goal with us. God finishes what he starts, so if he began a work in our lives, he won't back out of his commitment to that project.

The day of Jesus Christ refers to his return, which means that the good work envisioned encompasses every moment of our lives in this world until the end. Further, it means that God will not forsake us on that final day since that would be the epitome of failing to complete his good work. There is tremendous assurance in Paul's words: we can know without doubt that God finishes what he starts. He won't give up on us.

Paul uses the same language in another place: "For *I am sure* that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39). It is similar to what he said

in Philippians, but here he lays out the things that threaten the good work he has begun in us and assures us they will not get in his way.

Paul's litany of dangers is all-encompassing. There is nothing in this life—nothing created; nothing spiritual or physical; nothing past, present, or future; nothing in us; nothing outside of us; nothing above or below—nothing at all that can or will separate us from Christ's love. It doesn't get any better than this; this is why we call it *good* news. He wants us to be certain, to be assured, to know without doubt that he's got us and nothing can change that.

In uncertainty, anchor yourself with Paul in the things you can be "sure of," the truths that cannot be altered, the unmovable hope.

## The Hiddenness of God

God is in the business of hiding. Listen to this strange verse: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isa. 45:15). What is going on here? How should we understand the idea of God's concealing himself?

Take the book of Job as an example of this theme. If you've read that book, you may have walked away convinced that you know less about God than when you began reading. Strangely, that may be one of its designs (Job 11:7). Hear me out. As strange as it sounds, I am saying that books like Job have a dual function of revealing and concealing the nature of God.

It is paradox for God to reveal to us that he is hidden, but that is exactly what he does. In essence, he is saying, "I want you to know that there is so much of me that you cannot know." This concealment is tied to his glory (Prov. 25:2).

God alone has an exhaustive knowledge of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit hold the exclusive rights and ability to fully comprehend one another (Luke 10:22, 1 Cor. 2:10-11, Rom. 8:27). There is a unique splendor in a God who is beyond searching out, a God who possesses an infinite and often incomprehensible nature, a God who can never be completely understood.

The paradox of revealing and concealing shows up strongly in the cross of Christ. The cross was the last place on the planet anyone

would look for God. You simply do not look for God on death row—that's nonsense. And yet, the cross is precisely where God was hidden.

Ironically, the cross is where God also reveals himself. The New Testament identifies the cross as the defining point of God's love, hospitality, generosity, kindness, and justice. God cannot be understood apart from the sacrifice of Christ; it's through the cross that he is known.

To find the revealed God, we must pursue the hidden God. Or as Luther put it, "God hides so as not to be found where people seek him and reveals himself where he is not sought."

## The Gospel according to Job

The book of Job is a stunning portrait of God as the Creator and Sovereign of the universe. In many ways, it is Genesis 1-2 with flare. Genesis 1-2 paints with broad, sweeping brushes while Job 38-42 paints with small, elaborate strokes.

In these four chapters of Job, we read of God's intimate involvement in all of creation. We see God as the Creator, Overseer, and Sustainer of all these things: sea, waves, mountains, wind, lightning, thunder, stars, clouds, sun, day, night, snow, rain, desert, lion, raven, oxen, donkey, ostrich, mountain goat, horse, hawk, Behemoth, and Leviathan.

As our view of God expands and grows in the reading of these chapters, we grow smaller and smaller. We are put in our rightful place as creatures and are drawn to worship a great God. As Paul made clear in his letter to the Romans, creation is a sermon all its own. It is telling us of the great power of the invisible God (Rom. 1:19-20); it is speaking of God's glory (Ps. 19:1ff); it is preaching a magnificent message.

But listen to what Job says about this creation sermon: "Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of him!" (Job 26:14). Astounding. The sun, the Pacific Ocean, the Rocky Mountains, the sunflower, the rhino—whispers! Mere fringes and murmurs of God's ways: that's how Job describes the grandeur of creation.



With the coming of Christ, we move from the fringes to the center. In Jesus, God is seen, heard, and touched. His character, his heart, his will, his plans—these are made abundantly clear. In the manger, cross, and empty tomb, a whisper gives way to a shout.

Though creation can tell of tremendous inventive power and careful design, only the service of Jesus can tell of sacrificial love and regal humility. Creation whispers, the cross shouts. The cross is God's definitive sermon on his character and ways.

At the cross, the veil is shredded, and we are welcomed past the fringes into the holiest place. At the cross, God stands in the pulpit and heralds a message that eclipses the sermon of creation. This is why the cross alone must be our theology.

## Immanuel: God with Us in Our Sin

Names mean something; this was especially true in the ancient Near East where Jesus lived. Names were carefully chosen and would often set the trajectory of a child's life. In the gospel of Matthew, we learn that the naming of Jesus was no different. Mary and Joseph received divine guidance regarding what they would call Jesus: "You shall call his name Jesus, for He will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

The name *Jesus* has Hebrew roots; it means "God saves." God the Father makes clear what the saving work of Jesus is focused on: sin. His name indicated the reason for his coming, a constant reminder of why he was born. Dealing with sin was central to Jesus' purpose. Only a few verses later, we learn that Jesus was given another name, *Immanuel*, which means "God is with us" (Matt. 1:23).

Placing these two names side by side is instructive, something the context also seems to require. God is with us, and God saves us from sin. Jesus is the God-man who enters the fray, he comes alongside us and is present with us even in our sin. To save us from our sin, he must walk with us as we struggle and falter. The saving work of God is not accomplished at a distance. He is uncomfortably present, so much so that "he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21).

When we speak of the God who is with us, we mean to say that he is with us in our darkest moments, our greatest sins, our desperation, our brokenness, our weakness, our pain, our grief, and our suffering...he is with us in the places where we need him most.

## The Monster Within: Fighting Your Demons

A European Radio show asked listeners to send in responses to the question, "What's wrong with the world?" Author G.K. Chesterton sent in a letter with two words: "I am." Put another way, Teddy Roosevelt once said, "If you could kick the person in the pants responsible for most of your trouble, you wouldn't sit for a month." Can you relate? I sure can.

Chesterton and Roosevelt nailed it, and the New Testament also speaks in detail about this dynamic. Paul says there is a monster that dwells within each of us: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Rom. 7:15, 17; cf. Gal. 5:17). In other words, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

Sin makes its home in me and you; we were born into it and are enslaved to it (Ps. 51:5, John 8:34). Hostile by nature, sin aims at God, our neighbors, and ourselves—its default mode is destruction (Rom. 8:17, 13:10, Eccles. 9:3). The only hope for freedom is found in Jesus Christ, and even then, we face the stubborn presence of sin in our lives and the danger of plunging back into slavery again and again (Gal. 5:1-2).

On a practical level, the doctrine of sin is undeniable. Malcolm Muggeridge is right when he says, "The depravity of man is at once the most empirically verifiable reality but at the same time the most

intellectually resisted fact.” The more life I experience, the more concrete this truth is for me, as much as I push against it.

At times, it feels like I’m getting worse as the years pass. Is the monster getting bigger? Are the demons growing stronger? Am I going backward? I thought I had a hold of my anger—guess not. I was sure I had greed, envy, and jealousy under control...think again. My heart is an idol factory, and it seems that production quality and efficiency have only increased through the years.

With Paul, I hate that I continue to do the things I hate. It is demoralizing and exhausting. If you are anything like me, you may have the same exasperated questions—what do I do with my depravity and my stubborn sin that’s “ever before me” (Ps. 51:3)? What do I do with the monster inside? How do I fight these demons?

Since we can’t, as Hemingway says, “get away from ourselves by moving from one place to another,” we have to figure out how to deal with our worst enemy. Escapism won’t do; we need good theology and practical tools for combatting the monster within. Here are a few things I have learned along the way that have kept me in the fight.

- 1) ***I am, not was, the chief of sinners.*** In the last few letters of Paul, we get a window into his self-understanding in his later years. Twice in 1 Timothy, Paul uses the term "chief of sinners" in the present tense to describe himself (1 Tim. 1:15-16). Paul is not describing his past; he is speaking about his current state. Paul's statement is instructive for the following reasons. A) The normal Christian life is one long battle against sin because no one is exempt from this reality, none of us is alone. B) Christian maturity is about progressive recognition and radical ownership of our sin; it looks like daily repentance and coming to Paul's conclusion about ourselves. C) The term "chief" means the first, the foremost, the leader—the paradox here is that Paul was the foremost apostle, the master builder of the early church (1 Cor. 3:10)

and at the same time the frontrunner of sinners. This tension of good and evil lies inescapably within each one of us.

- 2) ***More light means awareness of more darkness.*** The other day I went for an early morning run on the beach well before sunrise. Off in the distance, I could see one small light on the beach attempting to beat back the darkness. From afar, the light highlighted the suffocating darkness all around; it demonstrated just how dark it was that morning. Walking with God functions the same way—as we draw near to the one in whom there is no darkness, he reveals the darkness around us (1 John 1:1-9). This helps explain the feeling of "going downhill" or "getting worse" as you pursue God—in reality this is the inevitable side effect of growing closer to "one who dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16).
  
- 3) ***Take heart, things are worse than you think.*** Scripture has no confidence in our ability to assess our plight as human beings. For example, Jeremiah says, "The heart is deceitful *above all things*, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Scripture often makes sweeping statements like the following: "*Every* intention of the thoughts of [man's] heart was *only evil continually*" (Gen. 6:5), and "*None* is righteous, no, *not one*; *no one* understands; *no one* seeks for God. *All* have turned aside; together they have become worthless; *no one* does good, *not even one*" (Rom. 3:10-12). Things are far worse than we realized. When we work backward from God's solution to our plight, this fact is confirmed. As Alfred Poirer states, "In response to my sin, the cross has criticized and judged me more intensely, deeply, pervasively, and truly than anyone else ever could." The cross is a devastating statement about my badness. While such a diagnosis does not sound like good news, it is for two reasons. First, a terminal diagnosis removes any confidence in ourselves to make things better; it undercuts any attempts at self-justification and takes

the pressure off ourselves to find a solution. Second, the right diagnosis is necessary for the proper treatment. Tylenol and a good night's rest are of no use to the cancer patient. To receive the good news of the cross, we must accept the bad news first. We must agree with the condemnation of the cross before we can relish in the forgiveness of the cross. In other words, there is only one type of person God rescues—the ungodly, the sick, the broken, the lost, the sinner (Rom. 4:5, Mark 2:17, Luke 4:18, 5:32). Take heart, things are worse than you think, and the gospel is better than you ever imagined.

- 4) ***Understand and embrace the function of shame and guilt in your life.*** Choking is a natural reflex when our windpipe is blocked. We don't have to think about it—we just do it. It's a built-in safety mechanism for our survival. When we are choking, we do everything possible to get air; sometimes we rush to others to help free our airways. Guilt and shame function in the same way—they are the gag reflexes of sin. When we experience them, they are intended to drive us to safety and help. We often sabotage the function of shame and guilt by beating ourselves up, getting paralyzed with discouragement, running from God, and hiding from others. God embedded these natural responses in our consciences as a safety mechanism, so that we would rush to the cross for air and find our breath through repentance. Don't shun shame and guilt; instead, let them lead you to the gospel again and again.
  
- 5) ***Remember your baptism.*** When it comes to battling sin, we must begin with what Christ has done for us before we move to what he commands us to do. This is Paul's logic in Romans 6. For eleven verses he unpacks our union with Jesus and its implications for our sin before he says anything about fighting sin. For example, he states:

*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. (Rom. 6:3-6)*

Paul continues this line of discussion for another six verses before writing, “Let not sin *therefore* reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions” (Rom. 6:12). Note the flow of Paul’s thought: baptism is this powerful reality that communicates our oneness with Jesus in his death and resurrection, which means that we are *now* dead to sin and filled with new life. In other words, the gospel radically changes our entire relationship to sin—we become new creatures, and sin no longer has dominion over us. Out of this reality, we are called to fight the sin that still attempts to have control over us.

- 6) ***The Spirit fiercely indwells us.*** From what we have said so far, it is evident that when the Holy Spirit takes up residence within us, he steps onto a battlefield. Thankfully, he is a fierce warrior who comes to wage war on our behalf. Galatians 5:17 frames the indwelling work of the Spirit in terms of conflict: “The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other.” Elsewhere, Paul gives us the fuel for the battle by reminding us that “the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11). It’s his powerful and fierce presence within that makes all the difference, for it is



“by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13). Apart from him, the battle would be hopeless. Instead, we have great hope as the Spirit works ongoing repentance, faith, trust, and perseverance in us. He brings us back to the gospel again and again and again. He sustains our faith when it feels like it’s crumbling. He exposes our sin when we plunge into darkness and drags us back into the light. He strengthens, trains, and sensitizes our consciences to the commands of God. He creates impulses, hunger, and desire for the things of God, the people of God, and the Word of God. He prays for us, weeps with us, grieves over us, fights for us, and fulfills in us what God intends for us. His presence within us signals that we are never alone in this battle against sin.

- 7) ***Drown the old man in tears of repentance.*** Martin Luther, champion of the Protestant Reformation, thought a lot about our battle with sin as Christians. He articulated the central rhythm of repentance and trust for the Christian journey when he penned the first of his now famous Ninety-five Theses: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Our entire lives are marked by a battle against the “old man” and the sinful tendencies and desires that reside within us. We are called to fight our “flesh” to the death, daily. Luther believed that repentance is the primary weapon in our battle against sin. He used the metaphor of drowning to capture how we put our sinful selves to death; we drown the old man in tears of repentance, and we give sin no breathing room by owning it and turning from it. This is the same logic of 1 John 1:1-9, where we learn that the four most dangerous postures toward sin are 1) believing we aren’t sinners or that our sin is not that bad, 2) keeping our sin in the dark from God and others, 3) failing to confess our sins

boldly and regularly, 4) not trusting the sufficiency of Christ's work on our behalf to deal with our sin.

- 8) ***Be ruthless with yourself.*** Paul calls believers to “put to death the deeds of the body” through the Spirit (Rom. 8:13). Jesus calls his followers to “cut off” the hands, feet, and eyes that are engaged in sinful activity (Mark 9:43-49). These and many other texts point toward an important life reality: we are at war with ourselves and violence is the only way to treat the sin within. In John Owen's words, “Be killing sin or sin will be killing you.” This means identifying the line of temptation and living as far away from it as possible with relationships, technology, power, and finances. The shortest trip in the world is from temptation to sin (James 4); therefore, we must do everything in our power to destroy the road between them. Road demolition shows up in different ways; it may mean not using certain social media platforms, removing certain people from your contacts, refusing to have the opposite gender in your vehicle, being radically transparent with a close friend, sharing all your technology passwords with your spouse, or turning down a job. Temptation and sin are relentless in our lives—our response must be equally ruthless.
- 9) ***Confess your sins to one another.*** Sin despises light and loves darkness. Battling sin means pressing into the light over and over again (1 John 1:5-9). One key way in which we do this is confession of sin not only to God but to one another. James 5:16 states plainly, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* captures the gift and importance of this practice. I think it's worth quoting at length here:

*You can hide nothing from God. The mask you wear before men will do you no good before*

*Him. He wants to see you as you are, He wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and your brothers, as if you were without sin; you can dare to be a sinner... The misery of the sinner and the mercy of God—this was the truth of the gospel in Jesus Christ. It was in this truth that His church was to live. Therefore, He gave his followers the authority to hear the confession of sin and to forgive sin in His name. 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld' (John 20:23). Christ became our brother to help us. Through Him, our brother has become Christ for us in the power and authority of the commission Christ has given to him. Our brother stands before us as the sign of the truth and the grace of God. He has been given to us to help us. He hears the confession of our sins in Christ's stead and he forgives our sins in Christ's name. He keeps the secret of our confession as God keeps it. When I go to my brother to confess, I am going to God.*

**10) Live in the Lord's Prayer.** The Lord's Prayer was one of the greatest gifts Jesus left his disciples. Understood appropriately, it is a battle prayer and a battle plan for the warfare we face as believers. The petitions in the Lord's Prayer are critical battle themes. Name, kingdom, and will are war zones for us. We uphold our name above all others, we are interested in building our kingdom and reign, and we are committed to our wills being done. Praying for the hallowing of God's name, the coming of his kingdom, and the doing of his will dethrones us, places us before him as creatures, and is a confession of his kingship and worth over against our love affair with ourselves. The four themes that follow reveal that we are indeed in great danger. The themes of daily bread, forgiveness, temptation, and deliverance from evil show us

what we are facing in life. The Lord's Prayer is a model of biblical realism. I need daily bread, I need daily forgiveness, I need daily leadership away from temptation, and I need daily deliverance from evil. What does all this say about me? It says I am a creature, a sinner, and a son or daughter. As one who recognizes that God is "in heaven," I affirm his transcendence and my creatureliness. As one who affirms I am given to temptation, wrongdoing, and evil, I acknowledge I am a sinner in need of mercy and divine support. And as one who boldly calls him "Father," I rest in his adoption of me, my belonging to him, and his gracious imminence. Take this prayer in hand and go to war.



## Where to Go when the World is Upside Down

John Calvin described the Psalms as an “anatomy of the soul.” He discerned rightly that every season, experience, and emotion of the soul finds a voice in that book. Psalms give expression to the things deep within our souls that we struggle to communicate. Whether we are overwhelmed with sorrow or bursting with joy, the Psalms enable us to come before God with appropriate expressions of faith.

The Psalms teach us that worship is a God-given, God-inspired, God-instructed, and God-aided activity. God has given us psalms of lament, imprecation, thanksgiving, and celebration. He has given us a voice to engage him no matter what comes our way.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that psalms can be divided into three categories that correspond to the rhythm we often experience in life. He suggests that we often find ourselves moving through these three places:

- A place of orientation, in which everything makes sense in our lives;
- A place of disorientation, in which we feel we have sunk into a pit and the world is upside down;
- A place of new orientation, in which we realize that God has lifted us out of the pit and we are in a new place full of gratitude and awareness about our lives and our God.

How many times have you found yourself in a place of orientation only to have it shattered by some painful event? That movement into disorientation is so painful and confusing that it's hard to make up from down in that space—and yet we all know it so well. We all know the move into a new orientation as well: it's not a return to orientation but learning to live differently.

These categories are helpful because they are accurate and they connect to real life and to the rhythm we have all experienced. Recognizing that the Psalms are filled with resources for each of these places and seasons is incredibly practical for how to journey through each of them. The Psalms are filled with examples of celebration when we are oriented, lament when we are disoriented, and gratitude when we are reoriented.

This is important because faith must live before the face of God, not just the parts of life that look put together and are going well but also the parts that are awful and that we don't want anyone to know about. Faith is a two-sided conversation, a real dialogue with God when the lights are on and joy fills our hearts and when the lights are off and pain is our only companion. Faith engages God on the mountaintop and in the pit. The location means little. Authenticity before God means everything.

The Psalms are a language guide to this two-sided conversation, enabling us to speak with God about all of life. When life is a wreck, God gives us raw, bold, shocking lament to voice the unspeakable things that sit in our hearts. When life is good, he gives us strong, joyful praise to communicate the gratitude that we feel. Lean heavily into this book—there are resources for you in every season and on every leg of the journey.

## A Remedy for Bitterness

The biblical figure Joseph was favored by his father, hated by his brothers, and sold by his flesh and blood into slavery. He was wrongly accused of immorality, unjustly imprisoned for integrity, and left to rot in a prison cell. He was forgotten by the cupbearer, remembered by God, and exalted by Pharaoh. He gave food to the hungry, grace to his offenders, and honor to God. He was proud in his early years, humble in his middle years, and stately in his older years (Gen. 37-50).

Joseph had every reason to be a bitter individual. Can you imagine being sold by your own family and then forced into a life of slavery? What about being falsely accused of a crime and then imprisoned for around thirteen years in the prime of your life? It is hard to grasp the trauma and pain that Joseph experienced.

After many years, Joseph was again brought face-to-face with his brothers. Amazingly, he gave them grace and forgave them for what they did. It was not easy; the story seems to point to the conflict raging within Joseph. His position of authority would have enabled him to exact vengeance on his brothers. But he refused revenge. Instead, he pardoned the offenders and absorbed the pain.

What enabled Joseph to give grace? How could he do this after so much suffering? Throughout his life, Joseph pointed to his source of strength multiple times, and it's a source that may surprise us. Joseph's forgiveness was rooted in the sovereignty of God. Isn't God's



control of all things a strange place to draw this type of strength? Wouldn't God's sovereignty make Joseph more bitter? After all, wasn't God ultimately responsible for Joseph's suffering?

Joseph doesn't see it that way:

*So Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come near to me, please.' And they came near. And he said, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.'"*  
(Gen. 45:4-8)

Joseph's grace toward his brothers came from the conviction that God put him in Egypt. Three times in these verses, he emphasizes to his brothers that God sent him there. He viewed his brother's wicked plan as the means through which God worked out his plan. Notice how the people who wronged him fade away in light of his belief in God's control. His beef was with God, and I would guess that there were many late-night wrestling matches with God that brought him to this place of calm trust.

After Jacob died, the brothers were fearful that Joseph would exact revenge on them. As they approach on their knees to beg for mercy, Joseph surprises them with his tearful response: "Joseph said to them, 'Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.' Thus, he comforted them and spoke kindly to them" (Gen. 50:19-21).

Again, Joseph turned to his faith in God's sovereignty. He knew his place, and he let God have his. He did not attempt to sit in the Judge's seat nor transgress his creaturely boundaries. He also believed that all the horrible things that happened to him were orchestrated by a God of good intentions. He even grasped that all he went through was for the benefit of the very people that had wronged him so terribly. Joseph waged war on his bitterness, and his weapon was God's sovereignty.



## Meeting God in the Dark

Can darkness reveal? Gregory of Nyssa thought so. A theologian from 300 A.D. and one of the Cappadocian Fathers along with Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory played a significant role in the formation of the Nicene Creed. He also wrote some significant theological works on the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the person of Christ, and the attributes of God.

Gregory of Nyssa was also known for his unique contribution to theology. He was one of the first to explore the theme of darkness as it related to God. Anthony Meredith suggests that he was the first theologian to assert that “darkness is an appropriate symbol under which God can be discussed.”

Phillip Kariatlis’ article, “Dazzling Darkness” also discusses Gregory’s thoughts. He states, “That which set St. Gregory apart from other fathers in general and the Cappadocians, in particular, was the innovative approach to his understanding of the vision of God expressed in terms of darkness rather than the prevailing light imagery. Hence, instead of presenting the Christian life as a transformative journey towards increasing luminosity, St. Gregory put forward a vision of a person’s ascent towards God in terms of increasing impenetrable opacity.”

Gregory coined some very intriguing phrases as he wrestled with the paradox of God revealing himself in darkness. He liked to speak of God’s “luminous” and “dazzling” darkness. He used the language

of “seeing that consists in not seeing” to describe faith’s engagement with the darkness of God.

So where does Gregory come up with this stuff? What would lead him to develop a theology that utilizes the imagery of darkness so heavily? Here are some of the key texts that support this line of thought.

*The people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was. (Exod. 20:21)*

*“These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly at the mountain out of the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and he added no more. And he wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me.” (Deut. 5:22, cf. 4:11, 5:23, Heb. 12:18)*

*Then Solomon said, “The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.” (1 Kings 8:12, 2 Chron. 6:1)*

*Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. (Ps. 97:2)*

*He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. He rode on a cherub and flew; he was seen on the wings of the wind. He made darkness around him his canopy, thick clouds, a gathering of water. Out of the brightness before him, coals of fire flamed forth. (2 Sam. 22:10-13, cf. Ps. 18:9, 11, 28)*

These passages describe God as standing on, dwelling in, and being surrounded by darkness. Darkness, like light, functions to communicate things about God. He cloaks himself with darkness and at the same time reveals himself through it. As Samuel

Terrien states, "Total darkness is a symbol both of the divine presence and the divine hiddenness."

It was St. Augustine who said God is "most hidden, yet most present." Theologian Karl Barth agreed with Augustine and suggested that "one must know the darkness of Sinai and Calvary, and must have faith to know the God who is above us and his hidden nature. To approach 'the thick darkness' in the New Testament is to find God most of all in the cross of Jesus Christ. I find it more than symbolic that at the historic moment of Jesus' death 'darkness came over the whole land' (Matt. 27:45). If the holy means the hiddenness of God, nowhere did He more hide Himself than in the cross of Christ."

The cross is the pinnacle of the light/darkness paradox in Scripture. Here the light of the world is cloaked in darkness. Both Paul and John consider Calvary's darkest moment the greatest expression of God's brilliance and glory (2 Cor. 4:4-6; John 7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31; 17:1, 4, 5). At the cross, we truly encounter a "dazzling darkness."



## Praying to God against God

Seething in prayer, Job questions, “Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands?” (Job 10:3). In pain, the psalmist wrestles, “Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious?” (Ps. 77:7-9). Rigor and authenticity mark the interaction in these examples. Although such prayers may strike us as irreverent, they show us honest faith. Prayers like this are built on a covenant foundation, and they show us what real two-way interaction with God can be.

In humility, the Triune God chooses to bind himself to humanity. He ties us to himself by granting us his image and obligates himself to us through his promises. God’s covenants are expressions of freedom and kindness. He comes to us, gives himself to us, and makes us his own. In covenant, God invites us to a real relationship. This includes engagement in the highs and lows, the mountain and the pit, times of joy and sorrow, in calm and in anger.

Like the examples above, covenant conversation is unafraid to call God to account. This genre of prayer is marked by “you said” language as it puts divine promises before God who cannot lie (Exod. 32:11-14, Num. 10:11-15, 14:17-19). Often, we find ourselves in situations where our reality does not coincide with God's promises. Over time, a chasm of dissonance grows in our souls as our experiences contradict God's word. What do we do in these spaces?



Scripture models the rigor of covenant engagement. It invites us to engage God in our confusion and hurt. More specifically, it shows us how to take the promises of God and hold him accountable. Walter Brueggemann captures this dynamic as he considers the prayers of Moses:

*Moses prays back to Yahweh using Yahweh's self-characterization; in reiterating that self-announcement, Moses reminds Yahweh of who Yahweh has resolved to be, and summons Yahweh back to Yahweh's self-resolve. In substance, the petition...addressed to Yahweh is, "Be your true self." He quotes Exodus 34:6-7, taken to be God's utterance; thus, Moses is able, because he knows the textual tradition, to pray the text back to God and to call God to account. (Emphasis added.)*

Martin Luther called this "praying to God against God." At times, this is exactly what faith looks like; it refuses to lie down and rushes to God to hold him to his word.

## The Youthfulness of God

Human beings are made in the image of God; this is an inescapable reality for every living person. It is equally true for the infant in the womb, the teenager in adolescence, and the elderly woman in hospice care. The image of God is something that encompasses the entire lifespan and permeates everything about us. When considered this way, the developmental process becomes a creative way God reveals things about himself. For example, children teach us profound things about the nature and heart of God.

Theologian G.K. Chesterton observed the ability of children to rejoice in the ordinary and monotonous. In his book, *Orthodoxy* he spells this out:

*Because children have abounding vitality because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, "Do it again"; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, "Do it again" to the sun; and every evening, "Do it again" to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may*

*be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.*

For Chesterton, the image of God in children reflects divine freedom, enjoyment, and the strength to embrace repetition. When Jesus speaks about children, he focuses on humility and uncomplicated trust (Matt. 18:4). In my children, I have observed wonder and awe over simple things. When my daughter saw stars for the first time, she was astounded. For weeks she would ask, "Do you remember the stars?" She was adamant about going outside every evening to look at them. Her awe in the stars was humbling to me, someone who so easily passes over their beauty.

When my children were young, I was also amazed by their inclusive posture toward others. They were warm and welcoming to everyone, not yet conditioned by stereotypes and cultural baggage. Their arms were wide open to the world. They also modeled such a carefree existence—when playing they demonstrated how to engage in the moment with wonderful indifference to the past or future.

All of these observations instruct us about the youthfulness of God; they show us something unique about his character and heart. Pay close attention to what God may be saying about himself through those made in his image at every stage of their journey.

## The Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday

What is the significance of the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday? While not of interest to the Protestant tradition, this question has been thoroughly investigated in the Catholic tradition. Scripture doesn't say a whole lot about that day other than the placement of soldiers at the tomb (Matt. 27:63-64) and the disciples' observing the Sabbath (Luke 23:56).

Andreas Kostenberger suggests that "Jesus' followers were doing on Saturday what they were doing on Sunday when Jesus appeared in their midst: meeting together behind closed doors for fear of the Jewish leaders." This is a safe deduction. Catholic theologians pick up on this and argue that Holy Saturday was a day of great consternation and disillusionment, an agonizing moment in time.

This one day in the Holy Week is an invitation to sit in the in-between, to not have answers, to be shaken, to be uncertain, to hurt. Shelly Rambo believes that Holy Saturday has the "potential to testify to events and experiences of radical suffering as Holy Saturday signifies a way of honoring and acknowledging the impact of death by refusing to claim newness before its time." Holy Saturday affirms that much of life is lived between death and resurrection, despair and hope.

Rambo also believes that Holy Saturday is the "overlooked day between the 'bad news' and the 'good news,' between death and

resurrection. Holy Saturday is a necessary site from which to acknowledge the impossibility of life ahead. Holy Saturday refuses the triumphalism of Christian resurrection that...elides the impact of death.”

Saturday must precede Sunday; while painful, this truth is also liberating as it normalizes the disciples’ and our agony behind closed doors. At the same time, it provides hope; Sunday is always coming—it's certain.

## Nevertheless

Ever face a tough time and wish for a map to guide you? Psalm 73 charts a path through some difficult terrain. The psalmist travels into the pit of doubt and despair as he observes the prosperity of those around him who want nothing to do with God. He is trying to do right with his life and is struggling, but those who are indifferent about God seem to be flourishing. He takes this to heart and feels like turning against God.

If you read the psalm, you will see the psalmist engage God with bitter accusations and honest pain. As he is working through these grievances before the face of God, he realizes important truths and experiences a shift in his heart. Consider how he describes it.

*When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (Ps. 73:21-26)*

The whole mood of the psalm shifts from despair to hope with one word: *nevertheless*. It is the gospel hinge of this text. It is a word of triumph and grace that overwhelms all the junk that precedes it.

How glorious that God allows us to speak such a word in the face of our stumbling and doubt. When the psalmist utters this word, he is acknowledging that God will never leave him but will stick with him through any darkness and doubt.

*Nevertheless* is a word that needs to make its way into our vocabulary. We defy despair and affirm hope when we utter it over our failures. When we speak it, we affirm that God is devoted to being with us precisely in our most shameful moments. This word belongs in the slums of our lives—it should never be far behind the actions we want so desperately to stay hidden.

I lost my temper with my family again...nevertheless. I cannot feel God, he seems to have disappeared...nevertheless. I fell into an old addiction and feel trapped again...nevertheless. I am full of envy because my neighbor is better off than I am...nevertheless. My marriage is falling apart...nevertheless. I have been failing in my walk with God...nevertheless. I have questioned your existence lately...nevertheless. I have been like a beast toward you, God...nevertheless.

Grace and loyalty mean that God stays even when we leave. It means that he is faithful when we are faithless. It means that he stays true to his promise when we doubt its validity. To declare "nevertheless" over your shameful moments is to proclaim that God is unfailing in his loyal love.

## Daring Confidence in Unshakable Promises

God is honest. When he speaks, we can trust his every word. Rest assured; it is “impossible for God to lie” (Heb 6:18); he simply “never lies” (Titus 1:2). He is unlike us in this way. “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Num. 23:19).

This means that every biblical promise is solid and trustworthy. A God who keeps his every oath is a God who is worthy of our trust. As Luther puts it, “Faith is a living, daring confidence in God’s grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times.” Daring confidence is always rooted in solid promises.

I want to introduce you to a rich concept in the Greek language that serves to highlight a specific angle on the promises of God: “emphatic negation.” Now, I know you aren’t asking for a grammar lesson, but just stay with me—it will be worth it. In the New Testament, there are occasions where an author intentionally places two different words for “no” together to emphasize impossibility.

Greek Scholar Daniel Wallace defines this grammatical concept as “the strongest way to negate something in Greek.” This coupling of two negatives serves to “rule out the idea of even being a possibility.” Modern English has similar ways of creating emphatic negation: consider Winston Churchill’s famous call to his nation in WWII, “This is the lesson: never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing, great or



small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.”

The following are a few examples of emphatic negation. Consider the richness of what God promises he will never, never do.

*All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. (John 6:37)*

*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. (John 10:28)*

*Blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin. (Rom. 4:8)*

*Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” (Heb. 13:5)*

*For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (1 Pet. 2:6)*

These are mighty promises, each one worthy of meditation and application. It is words like these that invite daring confidence and faith. What happens to someone who believes that God has forever refused to hold his sin against him? What about someone who trusts that God will never allow him to perish or be taken out of his hand? How would we be impacted if we rested in the reality of a God who will not shame us at the last judgment and will never forsake us?

My guess is we would follow Luther and stake our lives on this truth-telling God a thousand times over.

## A Book for the Disillusioned

The Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes is uncomfortable. On the surface, it seems to challenge the fundamentals of biblical faith with bold statements about the meaninglessness of life, the absence of God, and the dominance of injustice in the world. Some have called the book an embarrassment to Christianity.

However, discomfort may not be the best gauge for assessing the message of a biblical passage. If anything, our uneasiness may point to veracity rather than error. Ecclesiastes is comfortable with the mess of life; it's we who are not. By utilizing paradox, the author explores the tension we all experience. Take these two verses as examples.

*Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. (Eccles. 1:2-4)*

*There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? (Eccles. 2:24-25)*

Toil is worthless, or toil is valuable—which is it? Life is meaningless or infused with opportunity for enjoyment, which one?

Ecclesiastes is an unfiltered discussion of life under the curse and an affirmation of God's good purposes in life.

Biblical scholar A.B. Caneday suggests that Ecclesiastes brings together the “bold assertion of the meaninglessness of life ‘under the sun’ and resolute affirmation that life is to be celebrated joyfully.” This paradox is held together skillfully in the book because the author of the book was “a godly sage who could affirm both the aimlessness of life ‘under the sun’ and the enjoyment of life precisely because he believed in the God who cursed his creation on account of man’s rebellion, but who was in the process, throughout earth’s history, of redeeming man and creation, liberating them from the bondage to decay to which they had been subjected.”

The book of Ecclesiastes is a breath of fresh air we need in our lungs, a wise voice we need in our ears. Its candor will resonate with our pain and assault our delusions. It pulls no punches as it speaks about the confusion, brokenness, frustration, and pain we experience in this life. When life doesn’t make any sense, reading this book will remind us that we are not alone and ever so gently hold out real hope and peace as we journey through the chaos.

## Broken Bread for Broken People

In the gospel of Matthew, the story of the Last Supper is sandwiched between two narratives of betrayal. The text that precedes the Last Supper is the story of Judas selling out Jesus (Matt. 26:14-25). The text that follows tells of the certainty that all the disciples will fall away and betray Jesus (Matt. 26:30-35).

It is striking that Jesus knows exactly what is coming and still he invites his disciples to the table. This is a powerful and intentional demonstration of God's hospitality. Jesus shows us exactly whom he wants at his table: the broken and needy. Or, in other words, you and me.

The only way for the disciples to sit at the table with God is through the broken body and shed blood of Jesus; there is no other way. At this meal, we see the heart of God and behold his embrace of rebels and sinners. In Christ, he has provided all that is necessary to dine with him. The Last Supper for Jesus leads the way to the sinner's first supper with God.

Theologian Gilbert Ostdiek is intrigued by this idea as he reads the Last Supper narrative:

*Why would the early communities for which the gospels were written have chosen to include this less than flattering portrait of the first disciples in their accounts of the supper? Scholars commonly hold that the four gospels*

*were written not simply as transcriptions of historical events, but as faith accounts told in such a way as to help the different communities reflect on the meaning of these events for their lives. The admission of broken and weak disciples to the table of the Lord is a thread that runs through each of the biblical accounts of the last supper, though altered to fit the circumstances of each community. These memories are enshrined precisely because the later disciples experienced themselves as did the first, prone to fail and in need of the strength and forgiveness this holy meal provides. The Lord's Supper celebrates and proclaims the presence of Jesus to the broken.*

John Calvin makes a similar point when he states, “Let us remember that this sacred banquet is medicine to the sick, comfort to the sinner, alms to the poor.” A broken body for a broken people—this is how God makes us whole. Wherever you are or wherever you have been, there is a seat at the table for you.

## Talking with God When You Hate Life

Certain stretches of existence are nearly unbearable. Life has a way of kicking us in the teeth regularly, but sometimes the assaults feel more aggressive, unrelenting, and disheartening. In these seasons, hope is a stranger, and God seems impossible to find. If you are anything like me, you may have wondered at such times: Where is hope? Why can't I find God anywhere? Can I press through another day?

Christianity is impotent if it cannot speak the language of agony fluently. This is why so many churches feel plastic and unhelpful—they are not bilingual. They speak the language of joy but cannot speak pain. If we based our assessment of Christianity on these churches alone, it would be easy to walk away from it all. However, when one looks to the Book, we see something very different.

Take the example of "steadfast" Job (James 5:11), who is commended by God for his rugged faith in unspeakable suffering (Job 42:7). Here we see bilingual faith. The book of Job is a linguistics of pain, a manual instructing us in the speech of sorrow and anguish. Stretching across forty-two chapters, the book provides the longest biblical lament ever recorded.

Job is unflinching in his complaint: "I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul" (Job 7:11). On at least two occasions, Job looks at his life and "loathes" it (Job 7:16, 10:1). Job speaks his pain to God—creature to Creator. What a gracious invitation we find here

as God welcomes us to converse honestly with him in our most bitter moments.

When the Word of God put on flesh, we witnessed fluency in the language of suffering like never before. The Man of Sorrows knew the dialect of forsakenness (Isa. 53:3, Matt. 27:46), and the lament psalms found fulfillment in his life and death (Luke 24:44). The God of the cross is good news to us—news not only of salvation, forgiveness, and hope, but news of solidarity, realism, and fellowship in suffering. The cross confirms God's message to Job—I will meet you in your pain.

## Doubt: The Unlikely Companion of Faith

Doubt is rarely placed in the category of a healthy posture by any community of faith. This makes sense if doubt is only the opposite of faith. Many scriptural examples point us in this direction and encourage us to move away from doubt (Matt. 14:31, Mark 11:23, James 1:6).

But, rather than being one-dimensional, the biblical material on doubt is far more complex. Take for example the story of “doubting Thomas,” the disciple who had to see Jesus after his resurrection to believe. He said, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe” (John 20:25).

Jesus’ response to Thomas is telling: “Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:26-28).

Doubt was no detour for Thomas; it was a stepping stone. His doubt played an essential role in his journey to faith. Why, after all, does the gospel of John include this story? To encourage us, doubters that we are, that Christ is compassionate toward us and wants to help us in our wavering.

Further, maybe this story is showing us that Paul Tillich is on to something when he writes, “Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is



one element of faith.” Or to use the words of Herman Hesse, “Faith and doubt go hand in hand, they are complementary. One who never doubts will never truly believe.” Doubt has been given a role in our lives.

It’s important to recognize that Thomas was not alone; many saw Jesus after his resurrection and still doubted him (Matt. 28:17). Other letters in the New Testament acknowledge this reality among believers and issue a call to “have mercy on those who doubt” (Jude 1:22). In other words, doubt has always been part of the landscape of faith.

In “The Benefit of Doubt,” theologian Peter Enns asserts this about the role of doubt in the life of faith: “Doubt is not the enemy, but a gift of God to move us from trusting ourselves to trusting him. Doubt feels like God is far away or absent, but it is actually a time of ‘disguised closeness’ to God that moves us to spiritual maturity. Doubt is not a sign of weakness but a sign of growth. Doubt forces us to look at who we think God is. It makes us face whether we really trust Him, or whether we trust what we have made God to be.”

If doubt is a regular companion in your life, take heart, you are not alone. The battle cry of the Christian is not “I have unfaltering faith,” but “I believe; help my unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Maybe Alfred, Lord Tennyson, has it right: “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”

## God Is Not a Workaholic

We live in a world in love with productivity, a culture that assigns value by what we can accomplish and how much we can do. When was the last time someone told you they felt rested and balanced in life? “Busy” is the standard response to how life is going, and we may feel guilty about any other response.

We know how to work, but we don’t know how to rest. We are equipped to produce, but not great at simply being. How we frame our thinking on work, rest, and human value is critically important. Our thoughts need to start with God and work backward from there.

To do that with the theme of work and rest, we must go back to the beginning. Genesis 1-3 are arguably the most important chapters in the Bible as they lay the groundwork for everything to follow. Notably, in these chapters we see God working and resting. A vision of God at work is not all that surprising, but God at rest—that should make us pause.

In *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, Walter Brueggemann says, “The divine rest of creation has made clear that God is not a workaholic, that God is not anxious about the full functioning of creation, and that the well-being of creation does not depend on endless work. This performance and exhibit of divine rest thus characterize the God of creation, creation itself, and the creatures made in the image of the resting God.”

The truth of the resting God is a game-changer that must alter the way we think and operate. In six days, the God of the Bible establishes the baseline for work-ethic. On the seventh day, he models work stoppage and invites all of creation to rest. Walter Brueggemann captures how this one act communicates volumes to us about what God values:

*At the taproot of this divine commitment to relationship rather than commodity is the capacity and willingness of this God to rest. The Sabbath rest of God is an acknowledgment that God and God's people in the world are not commodities to be dispatched for endless production... The fact that our God is a Sabbath keeping God ensures that restfulness and not restlessness is at the center of life.*

That God values relationship over productivity is liberating. His refusal to be a workaholic is an invitation for us to do the same.

## When God Wounds

The famed preacher Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was once asked, "What does a person look like who has truly met God?" He replied, "They walk with a limp." His response was inspired by the strange tale of God and Jacob physically wrestling through the night (Gen. 32). Called the "the magnificent defeat" by some, the story turns on an important paradox.

We read that Jacob "prevailed" over God and was declared the winner of the bout (Gen. 32:25, 28). And yet, Jacob expresses relief that he saw God's face and was "delivered" (Gen. 32:30). Which was it? Apparently, both. God's defeat becomes Jacob's win. Jacob's win comes through painful transformation, and Jacob's transformation is God's win.

This "crippling grace," as Kent Hughes calls it, results in a limp, a changed name, and a new way of life for Jacob. Walter Brueggemann says the "new name cannot be separated from the new crippling, for the crippling is the substance of the name." Jacob's new brokenness is central to his transformation, and his woundedness is a mark of God's presence in his life.

This story teaches that pain and blessing are not mutually exclusive. The math of faith is not so simple—pain does not always equal God's absence. Pain may be, at times, the chosen vehicle of blessing. We must be attuned to the strange ways God works in our lives.

This strangeness means recognizing that encountering God may be very different than we expect. When God shows up, sometimes there's a whirlwind, sometimes there's lightning, and sometimes there's a wrestling match. The outcome of these encounters may also surprise us, for certainly a dislocated hip and a permanent limp were the last things Jacob anticipated.

The story also shows us that transformation is gritty and sweaty. Change happens when God wrestles with us in close quarters, when he encounters us in the raw, earthy, painful situations in life and works his life-changing power. This type of change is not comfortable; it hurts, dislocates, and ensures that we do not leave the same.

The final thing we must take from this story is the gospel. Where else do we see God's loss as our gain, his defeat as our victory? In the cross of Christ, we see the wrestling God at it again. There he is prevailed over so that we might know his triumph. In Jesus, God loses so we can win.

## What You Won't Find in God's Heart

Your heart dictates your character. Hence, the call to guard your heart with diligence and care since “everything you do flows from it” (Prov. 4:23, NIV). The contents of your heart are the most important thing about you. When it comes to God, it is no different. It is critical to know what's in his heart.

Thankfully, the contents of his heart are no secret since he has chosen to share them with us. In a powerful moment between God and Moses, we see God disclose his heart to us: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful, and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6).

Consider when Jesus, who reveals God to us, tells us that he is “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29). We see God's heart, as Jesus defends the weak, serves the broken, and eats with the outcast (John 8:7, Matt. 9:1-8, Mark 2:13-17). We grasp a heart of forgiveness, compassion, and kindness as Jesus gives himself at the cross (Luke 23:34, John 19:25-26). In Jesus, we know the heart of God.

Challenges come, however, when our experiences contradict what we know is in the heart of God. The loss of a loved one, a battle with cancer, the abuse of a child, a painful divorce, the foreclosure on a home...such experiences challenge our belief in the heart of God, especially if we believe he is in control.

Believing that God is on the throne and all things are under his control becomes a painful affirmation when we encounter the inevitable suffering that we all face. What about his heart of compassion and kindness in our loss? Where is his love in our pain or his mercy in our brokenness?

Knowing what's in God's heart when experiencing pain can be confusing, which is why it's just as important to know what is not in his heart when we face hardship. Just as there are contents in God's heart that are always there, there are things that are always absent.

Listen to this passage that speaks to this absence: "Though he cause grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not afflict from his heart or grieve the children of men" (Lam. 3:32-33).

Matthew Poole, a theologian from the 1600's, skillfully explains the significance of this passage: "For he does not willingly, or as the Hebrew has it, 'from his heart,' bring affliction or grief to the children of men. Christians conclude that God's heart was not in their afflictions, though his hand was. He takes no delight to afflict his children; it goes against his heart. It is a grief to him to be grievous to them, a pain to him to be punishing of them, a sorrow to him to be striking them."

What God is up to in our pain is often a mystery, but we can know with confidence what is and isn't present in his heart as we go through it.

## Unseen Footprints

Where do you go when there is no relief in a painful season of life? Psalm 77 makes it clear that comfort is a stranger to the author as he experiences a season of sorrow and spiritual fatigue. If you have ever been in this place or are there now, the authenticity of this psalm will be refreshing and instructive. As readers, we are invited to sit with this man in his pain and learn how to move through such seasons in three key movements: cries, questions, and remembrance.

### **Cries**

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*I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, and he will hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints. You hold my eyelids open; I am so troubled that I cannot speak. (Ps. 77:1-4)*

A hoarse voice, weary arms, bloodshot eyes, and a tired soul—this is what godliness looks like when you are hammering through the hard stuff in life. This man is pursuing God, and his pain will not stop him. Famed preacher Charles Spurgeon captures the faith in this cry to God:



*Asaph did not run to man but to the Lord, and to him he went, not with studied, stately, stilted words, but with a cry, the natural, unaffected, unfeigned expression of pain. He used his voice also, for though vocal utterance is not necessary to the life of prayer, it often seems forced upon us by the energy of our desires. Sometimes the soul feels compelled to use the voice, for thus it finds a freer vent for its agony. It is a comfort to hear the alarm bell ringing when the house is invaded by thieves.*

The psalmist is transparent as he describes his feelings about God. The thought of God causes pain to well up within him, and all consideration of him evokes moaning and fainting. This is a hard place to be, but a real place. There are seasons where our experience of God enhances our distress. Spurgeon also pinpoints this dynamic well:

*He who is the wellspring of delight to faith becomes an object of dread to the psalmist's distracted heart. Alas, my God, the writer of this exposition well knows what thy servant Asaph meant, for his soul is familiar with the way of grief. Deep glens and lonely caves of soul depressions, my spirit knows full well your awful glooms!*

The psalmist shows us that the first movement through pain is authentic cries to God.

## **Questions**

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*Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love forever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion? (Ps. 77:7-9)*

Cries give way to questions, raw inquiries that reveal the authentic relationship between God and the psalmist. The writer

knows that he can engage God with honesty and that his faith welcomes hard questions. He targets the faithfulness of God, desperately wanting to know if God has forgotten himself and his promises. Has God lost track of his own character? Have his promises slipped his mind?

The psalmist's bold questions represent a well-established tradition in Scripture. When things don't make sense, the people of God don't sit in silence. When Abraham realized that God was going to wipe out Sodom and Gomorrah, he refused to be quiet, instead saying, "Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" (Gen. 18:25).

Likewise, when grappling with Israel's bondage in Egypt and his seemingly impossible task to deliver them, Moses questions God: "Why have you done evil to this people? Why did you ever send me?" (Exod. 5:22-23). When David was going through it, he asked God, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?" (Ps. 13:1-2).

This tradition of bold questions culminates in the cross where Jesus refuses to die in silence; instead, we hear loud cries and questions through his last breaths: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). For the psalmist and for us, the second movement through pain is to engage God with honest questions.

## **Remembrance**

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*Then I said, "I will appeal to this, to the years of the right hand of the Most High." I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your wonders of old. I will ponder all your work, and meditate on your mighty*

*deeds.... Your way was through the sea, your path  
through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen.  
(Ps. 77:10-12, 19)*

Everything changes when the psalmist quiets his voice, lowers his hands, and focuses his memory. This psalm turns on remembrance, for with recollection comes hope. The psalmist recalls the Red Sea deliverance that followed the mass exodus from Egypt. He remembers how the Egyptians had the Israelites hedged in at the Red Sea with no visible sign of escape. He brings to mind the parting of the waters and the pathway through a hopeless situation. It's memory that confirms that God was present when he seemed most absent and that his "footprints were unseen."

It is the "unseen" activity of God in a hopeless situation that creates hope, his indiscernible "footprints" that cause the psalmist's heart to take courage. Why is this? How does this work? When we feel that our situation is dire, dark, and without hope, we look around and cannot see the footprints of God anywhere. Memory, however, pulls us back to similar scenarios and helps us recognize his invisible footprints. In other words, it's remembrance that forms the final move through pain as it anchors us in the way that God has worked in the past and will continue to work in our present.

## Compassion as Rebellion

Pain is a constant in human existence. This regularity necessitates a response, which in time becomes habitual. We develop a particular posture toward pain and a way of handling life when it hurts. These mechanisms for coping, making meaning, and supporting others have great potential for help or harm.

Responses that work to ignore, deny, minimize, and numb pain are at best unhelpful. More likely than not, approaches with these hidden or explicit intentions end up compounding our pain.

Pain must be looked directly in the face. It must be experienced and it must be resisted. In other words, it must be engaged with compassion. Compassion is that posture that refuses to back down from pain (Matt. 20:29-34).

Compassion does not run, it does not deny or minimize, and it does not numb. Compassion is courage in the face of pain; it is a passionate unwillingness to leave others alone in their suffering (Matt. 9:35-36, 2 Cor. 1:3-4). Walter Brueggemann says it best:

*Compassion constitutes a radical form of criticism, for it announces that the hurt is to be taken seriously, that the hurt is not to be accepted as normal and natural but is an abnormal and unacceptable condition for humanness.*

Compassion is rebellion. It refuses to lie down to pain. It wades right into the heart of suffering and wages war. It seeks to absorb and shoulder the pain of another. It inserts kindness, love, and patience into the darkest of places.

Pain will not be rendered impotent until the return of the King. Yet, he has not left us without weapons for the battle, the greatest of which is compassion (Eph. 4:32, Col. 3:12, 1 Pet. 3:8). Arm up warriors—our families, friends, and the world around us desperately need compassion.

## After Darkness, Light

*Post Tenebras Lux* was a motto of the Protestant Reformation. It referred to the breaking forth of gospel light that had been largely veiled throughout the Middle Ages. The motto captures a profound truth about God's mode of operation. Darkness is often, if not always, the prelude to God's noon-bright grace.

From the first page of Scripture to the last, God is conquering darkness with light. In the beginning, he speaks piercing light into the void. When God wraps up history, his presence eclipses the sun and gives light to the new earth. In between the beginning and the end, we find God's light consistently following darkness and overcoming it. In the kingdom of God, darkness will never have the final word.

*But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me. Rejoice not over me, O my enemy; when I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me. (Mic. 7:7-8)*

*Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Ps. 30:5)*

*Light dawns in the darkness for the upright; he is gracious, merciful, and righteous. (Ps. 112:4)*

Darkness is certain in this life, painfully inevitable. For the people of God, light is just as sure. The night will always bow to the day, death will ultimately be swallowed by resurrection. Every experience of light conquering darkness now is a foretaste of when the darkness will be no more. That day is coming...may it come soon. If you are walking in the darkness, hold tight, light is coming.

## At the End of Safety

*Pain* and *change* are two words that regrettably belong together. My life and yours confirm this verbal wedding. When I point to the worst and most impactful moments in my life, my finger touches the same event. In my journey, the transformation I want normally comes from things I do not want, and the things I would never have chosen to go through are those that have left me different....and yet I still wouldn't choose to walk those paths again, ever.

I suppose this is how transformation works. We don't choose it; we are far too weak. Change assaults us. It does not ask for permission; it does not listen to our feeble objections. No, its author cares far too much about giving us what we truly need (John 21:18-22). We are divinely placed into the transformational rhythm of death and resurrection (Gal. 2:20). True change always entails conformity to the pattern of Christ: Good Friday, then Easter morning. These are two days that painfully, but thankfully, belong together.

In his collection of essays *Nobody Knows My Name*, writer James Baldwin makes a profound point about the devastation that often accompanies transformation:

*Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety. And at such a moment, unable*



*to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or dreamed that one possessed. Yet, it is only when a man is able, without bitterness or self-pity, to surrender a dream he has long cherished or a privilege he has long possessed that he is set free – he has set himself free – for higher dreams, for greater privileges.*

Paul recalls a similar experience: “For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead” (2 Cor. 1:8-9). At the end of his rope, Paul found hope and freedom—he encountered the God who raises the dead.

At the end of safety is indeed where true change happens.

## The Comforting News of a Weeping God

“Can you help me with my tie?” he asked. He had just walked into the funeral home for his 21-year-old son’s memorial service. It wasn’t a lack of knowledge that drove that question, it was the crippling power of loss. I will never forget his moist eyes and quivering hands as I helped him with his tie and we shared that impossible moment. How do you put your own son in the ground? How do you deal with such unspeakable pain? What do we do when we face loss?

Loss requires grief—there is no way around this. Through years of doing grief counseling and experiencing my own losses, I have observed four common strategies for dealing with loss and pain. I use the fitting acronym DAMN to remember them: denying, avoiding, minimizing, and numbing. Every one of these strategies sidesteps the reality of our pain, but when it comes to grief, “the only way out is through.” And “through” is the direction taken by the biblical authors as they provide robust guidance for facing loss.

The cornerstone of a gospel-centered approach to grief comes from the shortest verse in the Bible: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). These two words communicate three things: 1) God grieves; 2) God grieves with us; 3) God invites us to grieve with him. Contrary to some theological traditions, grief is not off-limits and faithless, it is essential to an authentic journey with God.

The New Testament asserts that hope is ever-present in our grief without denying the legitimacy of its presence in our lives (1 Thess

4:14). The resurrection never cancels the cross; grief and hope coexist in the life of the believer, and must both be given a proper place. "Jesus wept" is an affirmation; it legitimizes human grief and invites us to meet him in that place. The tears of Christ tell the story of divine entrance into our sorrow.

Scripture not only commends grief and assures us of God's presence there, but it also provides robust models and tools for engaging it. The honesty, relatability, and utility of Scripture when facing real loss speak to its self-authenticating nature. The Bible is truly sufficient for our every need.

When it comes to the gospel and grief, we start with the man of sorrows and follow his lead. He was not exempt from "loud cries and tears" (Heb. 5:7), he grieved on many occasions (John 11:28-37, Matt. 26:36-46, Mark 3:5), and his mouth was familiar with lament (Matt. 26:26-30, 27:45-50). His practice of grief was grounded in his biblical literacy; he was applying the tradition he belonged to (and authored!). He was well versed in the book of Job, the Psalms, and the Prophets, all of which contain an abundance of grief resources. Perhaps most poignant among these is the book of Lamentations, by the prophet Jeremiah.

Lamentations is the grief manual of the Old Testament, written in response to a brutal exile where the Israelites lost family members, friends, homes, jobs, and their place of worship. Distribute the sufferings of Job to an entire community, and you have the book of Lamentations. Into this anguish the prophet speaks. He recognizes the limitations of prose for processing pain, instead turning to poetry which is built to push the limits of human language.

Three of the four chapters of Lamentations are Hebrew acrostics. Literally from A to Z, Jeremiah walks his hurting people through the alphabet of grief. He shows us that pain expressed is pain relieved. Physical wounds need thorough cleansing to heal, and it is no different with the ailments of the soul. Lamentations teaches us to put language into the service of our grief, to exhaust letters, nouns, and verbs as we process our losses before God.

The choice of words and metaphors used throughout Lamentations is shocking and raw, leading us to the important truth that biblical mourning is unfiltered. Jeremiah has no time for niceties; he is writhing in pain. This is not theological exposition; it's heart expungement. Jeremiah is concerned with giving full vent to the contents of his heart and inviting sorrowing Israel to do the same, hence the choice of poetry. If you feel like God is a bear lying in wait for you, or a lion who has ripped you to shreds, or an archer who has launched arrows into your heart, don't express anything less—call it what it is (Lam. 3:10-12).

This book calls us to fearless grief. The presence of this book in the canon is a testament to the kindness of God. This is God's word to us about how God would have us communicate with him in our pain. It gives us a voice and reminds us that though we may lose everything else, we still have our voice. Silence exacerbates pain. The Hebrews knew this and fought with all their might to keep speaking no matter their suffering.

We see sorrow refusing to be silenced in Israel's cries to God in oppressive Egypt, in the shrill voice of Job, and in the exiled expressions of the prophets. But we discern this most clearly in the carpenter outside the Jerusalem wall, the man truly stripped of everything but his voice. The cry of forsakenness from that tree boldly refuses silence and epitomizes the message of Lamentations. It's this weeping Savior that invites us to honest grief. It's his cross that assures us that he will bring us through those dark valleys and walk with us every step of the way.



## When God Makes Breakfast

Not just anyone sits at your kitchen table. Only the people with your last name or the people you have invited there will enjoy a meal at your table. It is a big deal for someone to cross the threshold of your doorway and sit down with you for dinner—it's one of the strongest ways we communicate relational investment and hospitality.

With that in mind, consider this stunning passage of Scripture: “Later, Levi invited Jesus and his disciples to his home as dinner guests, along with many tax collectors and other disreputable sinners” (Mark 2:15). Jesus is God in the flesh, revealing the heart, nature, and intentions of God. When you read this verse through that lens, everything changes.

As we've said, whom you eat with says a lot about you as it is an intimate gesture and invitation into your life. God chooses to eat with the broken, the outcast, the rejected, the lost, and the sick. All the stories of Jesus sitting around the table in the New Testament communicate profound hospitality. Whether dining with outcasts, multiplying loaves for the hungry, or serving the last supper with disciples about to betray and deny him, his welcoming posture is unchanging.

This is again beautifully portrayed by Jesus after his resurrection. His disciples had abandoned him to the cross and denied him in his moment of greatest need, and what does he do? He pursues them. In the story, the disciples had been fishing all night, and at dawn a man shows up on the shore and tells them where to cast their nets. Peter's

gut tells him that it might be Jesus, and he throws himself overboard and begins swimming to shore while the rest of the disciples begin to row in that direction. As they get closer to shore, they see a flicker in the distance, a fire. The narrative then reads:

*When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Bring some of the fish that you have just caught.” So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” Now none of the disciples dared ask him, “Who are you?” They knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and so with the fish. This was now the third time that Jesus was revealed to the disciples after he was raised from the dead. (John 21:9-13)*

I am so thankful for this divine gesture, this incredible act of hospitality and kindness. These disciples who had abandoned the Lord, denied him, failed him, and sinned against him, he comes to them. And he comes again and again as this was his third visit. I’m so glad he keeps coming to visit.

Jesus gathers wood, he starts a fire, he catches a few fish and begins to cook. On a cross just days before, the resurrected Christ now says, “Come and have breakfast.” What an invitation, what an act of hospitality. Make no mistake—this is the heart of God. Come, my broken and frail disciples; I love you dearly. Sit with me, eat with me. Let’s be together. Do you see? This is his posture toward you and me. Our sin, failure, and brokenness are no barrier; Christ invites us to breakfast. There is actually a place at the table for me and for you.

## The Safest Community

Relational safety is one of the greatest, yet rarest, gifts in life. We've all felt the sting of betrayal from those we believed were safe. To be stabbed in the back requires closeness—that's why it hurts so badly. It's another matter altogether to take a gunshot wound from some stranger miles away. We were made for relationships, and yet they are always risky endeavors. To be in relationship is to risk.

Theology lies at the root of relationships. It all starts with the Triune God since the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit embody genuine relationships. God himself is the icon of true community, the blueprint for all relational interaction. The relationships between the three persons are marked by total trust, loyalty, and love. In the divine community, trust has never been breached, and betrayal is non-existent. Vulnerability and transparency are common and without risk. This is the safest community.

Many have suggested that the "image of God" in Genesis has relational and communal dimensions. It's hard to disagree with this assertion; we were made for relationship, and this is anchored in the God who made us as image-bearers. We were made to know the wonder of a safe community, a place with no anxiety, no posturing, no self-justification, no fear—just peace, love, comfort, joy, and the freedom to simply be.

The fall, which has been more aptly described as a rupture, introduced tremendous risk into our relational dynamics. It



destroyed our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with each other. Instead of safety, we experience fear and danger with each other.

Redemption is all about healing the rupture that has torn us and our world apart. The cross and resurrection speak of the God who was wounded so that we might be healed. This gospel displays a deeply relational God who comes to reconcile all that has been divided. It is his suffering that creates a way back to him and makes fellowship with the Triune community possible once again.

Everyone aches for a safe community. By mimicking the way the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to one another, we bend this vertical fellowship horizontal. We provide pockets of safety for others. Pockets, which are foretastes of our hope: perfect security with God and man on the New Earth.

## Divine Transparency

Meaningful, enduring relationships are always marked by transparency, openness, and vulnerability. If the Triune God is the blueprint for all relationships, we might expect to find some of these dynamics within that community. Sure enough, we do. Here are three texts that briefly touch on these overlapping themes.

*For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:10-11)*

Astonishingly, this passage gives us a glimpse into the Triune relationship. The Spirit searches and explores the thoughts of the Father. He journeys the heights and depths of God himself. The language is relational. The Father is welcoming, open, and transparent. The Spirit responds to the openness of the Father with investigative energy. The Spirit is privy to the thoughts of God and knows them all.

*Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the*

*mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26-27)*

The Father has an intimate knowledge of the Spirit's mind. Unintelligible groanings to us are clear to the Father because he knows the thoughts of the Spirit. The unity of will and purpose between the Father and Spirit is foundational to this mutual understanding. The text is relational once again. This divine knowing is something that seems to require openness on the part of the Father and Spirit. Though completely equal in omniscience, there appears to be some mechanism of divine sharing that facilitates this knowledge.

*All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27)*

Exclusive knowledge of the Father belongs to the Son. Exclusive knowledge of the Son belongs to the Father. This text brilliantly displays the intimacy of the Godhead. God alone knows God. The Father gives the Son total access and vice versa. Revelation—a gracious introduction of the Father through the Son by the Spirit—is the only way one comes to know God.

All three of these texts hint at openness, transparency, and vulnerability in Trinitarian interaction. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit willingly allow the other respective persons into the fullness of themselves. They truly see one another and are seen by one another.

Another way of getting at this mystery is the doctrine of perichoresis, which has been defined as "co-indwelling, co-inhering, and mutual interpenetration." Alister McGrath writes that it "allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a 'community of being,' in which each

person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them."

This doctrine is rooted in Scripture that uses the language of "in" when discussing how the Father, Son, and Spirit are connected. For example, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:11). This is intimacy, openness, and vulnerability at its very best. Striving for this type of relationship is essential for the rugged journey of life, a lifeline for the call to endure.



## When God Is the Problem

Life is hard. It leaves us breathless, exhausted, and frequently disillusioned. In these places of disorientation, we often reach for God. The psalmists regularly called out to Him to "not forget," "to remember," and "to come near." They linked their problems to God's absence, and they believed God's presence would assuage their sorrow and relieve their exhaustion.

But you and I know it's not always that simple. Sometimes, even the thought of God is painful. The psalmists confirm, "When I remember God, I moan; when I meditate, my spirit faints" (Ps 77:3). This was Job's experience. He grieved God's presence, was hurt by his attention, and ached for him to leave him alone:

*I loathe my life; I would not live forever. Leave me alone, for my days are a breath. What is man, that you make so much of him, and that you set your heart on him, visit him every morning and test him every moment? How long will you not look away from me, nor leave me alone till I swallow my spit? (Job 7:16-19)*

God's presence was no source of comfort for Job; it terrified him. For Job, God's relentless nearness left him gasping for air—"He will not let me get my breath" (Job 9:17). Have you been here? I have, more than once, and I find courage in Job's boldness.

When you find yourself in Job's position, fill your mouth with his words. His words are for our encouragement, endurance, and hope (Rom 15:4). We need the book of Job in our arsenal. He shows us a rugged faith and ferocity that is demanded by the painful journey we must traverse.

Walter Brueggemann has it right: "We may give Job our attention precisely because he refuses all the pious conventionalities and will speak from the core of his hurt and from his deep, unrestrained sense of not being taken seriously." His authentic faith is key to understanding the thrust of the book (Job 42:7) and essential for navigating the challenges we all face.

Job gives me hope, normalizes my disillusionment, brings pain into the orbit of faith, mentors me in honesty, and pushes me away from a fragile faith that cannot weather the storms of life. When you can't catch your breath, I commend Job as a faithful companion and guide.

## A Remedy for Fear

If there is one thing that should strike fear in a heart, it is the certainty of divine judgment and the potential of eternal punishment. In a sane person, every other fear bows to this great terror. Accountability in the face of an all-knowing and holy God is a sobering reality.

The gospel of God is tremendous news as it drives to the heart of this deep concern. Judgment day is ripped out of the future and brought into the present when Christ goes to the cross in our place. The cross is the courtroom, the verdict is condemnation for Jesus and righteousness for us. This is the gospel: He was our substitute; judgment has happened and we have a right standing with God.

Love motivated this saving work, a divine love that dispels all fear and replaces it with joyful confidence. Hear what John says about the matter in his first letter:

*So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not*



*been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us.  
(1 John 4:16-19)*

The goal of God's love is to instill confidence for the day we dread most. John helps us see that fear is the barrier to this type of confidence. Here God sends out his love like a warrior, and John is clear about the outcome: when love attacks, fear runs.

God is in the business of liberation, and love is his weapon. Consider this, if he is willing to set us free from the fear of judgment and hell, how much more will he provide release from all other fears? It's his love that will conquer the greatest to the least of what makes us tremble.

This is why John articulates the need to be "perfected" in our knowledge of God's love for us. The idea of perfection here is one of development, maturity, or completion. As we grow into our grasp of God's love in Christ, our confidence also increases. This is why we must press hard into the gospel of the bleeding God.

## Only a Suffering God Can Help

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian in Germany during the rise of Hitler. Pressured to align with the Nazi agenda, he refused and took his ministry underground. He labored hard over the question of what a Christian should do in the face of evil, pain, and sorrow. His conclusion: we are called to be “contaminated by responsible action” as we step into the pain and grief of this world. He understood that God has met us in our sorrow and that we should meet others in that same way.

Think with me on how God has met us in the darkest of places. From one angle, the storyline of Scripture is a story of grief. We are born into grief, and grief is not something we only enter into when a loved one dies; it is what we enter into at birth. Grief is always linked to loss—consider then the magnitude of humanity’s loss. We are born east of Eden, separated from God, alienated from others, enslaved to our sin, and heading to hell.

After the fall, we know vertical and horizontal, internal and external fragmentation. We have lost so much. We may not be able to articulate the heaviness of living in a cursed world, but we feel it. We are grieving.

Pain is humanity’s common ground—the air we breathe. Sorrow is the norm, loss the expectation, suffering the status quo. All creation groans and quakes, grieving under the weight of sorrow and the pain of sin. The ache for redemption is almost audible.

The sorrow of this world runs deep. It is like the depths of the ocean; when you press down into it, it is a vast, rugged world all its own. A sorrow that without Christ would know no end—an eternal grief, an everlasting loss, an existence without hope and comfort for all eternity.

Into this heavy darkness enters the God of all compassion. When Paul considers the compassion of God, he breaks forth into praise: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of mercies and God of all comfort!" (2 Cor. 1:3). Blessed be the Triune God who does not leave us languishing in sorrow, but engages this world of pain with fierce compassion and mighty gentleness.

God engages us with compassion and comfort that reaches the very depths of the sorrow this world knows. He gets up underneath it, shoulders it, and provides the redeeming comfort humanity needs. The Triune God of the universe is compassionate: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### ***The Compassion of the Father***

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When the Father opens his mouth to speak of his heart, what comes out? "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (Exod. 34:6-7). Compassion is the first word that comes out of his mouth.

The Old Testament is filled with references to the compassionate and comforting presence of God to his hurting people. "Comfort, comfort my people says your God" (Isa. 40:1). This is the consistent and steady message of God. "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted" (Isa. 49:13).

The classic story of the Prodigal Son is another window into the compassionate heart of the Father. The story mentions that when the

son was far off, the father saw him and "felt compassion" (Luke 15:20). He rose to his feet, ran to him, and embraced him. This was unheard of for a father in the first-century context. Compassion compelled the Father to run to the hurting and lost.

### ***The Compassionate Wounds of the Son***

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Compassion comes walking in the incarnation. In Jesus, we see what compassion looks like, tastes like, smells like, and sounds like. In *The Emotional Life of our Lord*, famous Princeton theologian B.B. Warfield explores all the emotions we witness in the life of Jesus. Importantly, he notes that the emotion most often expressed by Jesus was compassion. The Greek word translated as "compassion" speaks literally of a sensation in the guts. To engage with compassion is to engage a suffering world from the gut.

Jesus was moved by compassion when he encountered various situations:

- A man with leprosy (Mark 1:41),
- The death of a widow's son (Luke 7:13),
- Two blind men (Matt. 20:34),
- Hungry crowds (Matt. 15:32, Mark 8:2),
- A demon-possessed boy (Mark 9:22),
- Harassed and helpless sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34).

These examples show that Jesus was moved by compassion when encountering bodily ailments, individuals who were outcasts, death and loss, individuals assaulted by Satan and his cohorts, physical needs, and spiritual lostness.

In Jesus, we see compassion. It looks like a tear-stained face that aches over death. It tastes like fire-seared fish in the mouth of men who had disowned him days earlier. It smells like broken bread and

poured-out wine. It sounds like a Roman hammer pounding nails into flesh and a rock rolling away from a rich man's tomb.

Jesus shows us compassion. He shows us that compassion

- is a posture that refuses to back down from pain;
- does not hide from suffering;
- runs headlong into the sorrow of others;
- does not deny, minimize, or numb pain—instead shouldering it;
- is not a mere emotion, but is a posture, a way of being in the world;
- is love when it meets pain.

Compassion is rebellion. It refuses to lie down to pain. It wades right into the heart of suffering and wages war. It seeks to absorb and shoulder the pain of another. It inserts kindness, love, and patience into the darkest of places.

This truth about Jesus has been deeply life-giving for me and, to be honest, has kept my faith intact on many occasions. This world desperately needs a compassionate God—a God with a tear-stained face, a man of sorrows, a God with dirty feet and bloody hands.

### ***The Compassionate Presence of the Spirit***

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The Holy Spirit is the Great Comforter. Compassion is integral to his character and activity because he comes to bring the comfort of Christ. It is his role to communicate the compassion of God through Christ to us.

He is deeply compassionate as he enters our sufferings with the comfort of God, sharing our pain and journeys with us through every hardship we face. If we have trusted Christ, we have never walked through anything without him. Since he took up residence within us, he has known our every grief. The pain beyond words, that hurt outside the scope of speech, he knows, he understands, he groans

over, and he communicates it to the Father for you. Where would we be without him?

The Triune God engages in our sorrow and brings us comfort through his gospel. He does not take away our pain, but he walks with us in it, serves us, loves us, and enables us to persevere through it. This is the movement of the Triune God toward the world—a costly compassion that brings comfort to a ruptured world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had it right—“Only the suffering God can help.”



## The Freedom of Being Small

Psalm 131 is a short psalm containing only three verses. And yet it is crammed full of great creation theology. With brevity, the psalmist captures the heart of what it means to be a creature before God. He presents a pathway to peace and an alternative to a frantic existence. Here is the psalm in its entirety.

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, hope in the LORD from this time forth and forevermore. (Ps. 131:1-3)*

The psalmist has embraced his human boundaries. He knows the limits of his capacity, ability, and influence. His words are an affirmation, an acceptance, as it were, of his very nature. It is as if he said, "I know I am a human being, and I embrace all that entails. I find peace within the confines of my humanity, for it is here that I rest in my Creator and relish in being his creature." It's not only ok to be small; it's the source of true freedom.

The psalm implies that the root of anxiety is the transgression of a creaturely boundary. It is occupying ourselves with things that belong to God that leads to restlessness and worry. We try to control



what we cannot. We attempt to change things beyond our power. We grasp for knowledge that is above us. We seat ourselves on the divine throne though our feet cannot touch the ground.

Commenting on this psalm, Joseph Alexander states, "The great and wonderful things meant are God's secret purposes, and sovereign means for their accomplishment, in which man is not called to cooperate, but to acquiesce." Operating beyond our bounds will inevitably run us down. It's like putting a four-cylinder engine in a semi-truck. Instead, rest comes from refusing to be anything but human.

The truth of this psalm also helps us to think realistically about the reach of our influence, the impact of our abilities, and the aspirations of our hearts. John Calvin has some helpful comments in this vein.

*In this [psalm] he teaches us a very useful lesson, and one by which we should be ruled in life—to be contented with the lot which God has marked out for us, to consider what he calls us to, and not to aim at fashioning our own lot, to be moderate in our desires, to avoid entering upon rash undertakings, and to confine ourselves cheerfully within our own sphere, instead of attempting great things... The question, therefore, was not whether the lot of David was mean or exalted; it is enough that he was careful not to pass beyond the proper bounds of his calling... Those who, like David, submit themselves to God, keeping in their own sphere, moderate in their desires, will enjoy a life of tranquility and assurance.*

Charles Spurgeon addresses this same issue from a different angle.

*It is well so to exercise ourselves unto godliness that we know our true sphere, and diligently keep to it. A man does well to know his own size. Ascertaining his own*

*capacity, he will be foolish if he aims at that which is beyond his reach, straining himself, and thus injuring himself. Such is the vanity of many men that if a work be within their range they despise it, and think it beneath them: the only service which they are willing to undertake is that to which they have never been called, and for which they are by no means qualified.*

As Spurgeon says, this psalm is "one of the shortest Psalms to read, but one of the longest to learn." Indeed, being human is the hardest thing for humans to do. It is this reality that made the incarnation necessary. The gospel is about making us human once again, for it puts to death our attempts to be more than human and releases us from all that makes us less than human. Sin within either works to exalt or degrade our humanity. God's grace engages both impulses, suffocating them and replacing them with new desires. These new creation impulses formed through the gospel are not exceptional—they are mundane. They are desires to be a human being, to trust the Creator and roam in the freedom of being a creature.



## Weakness Is an Invitation

We don't like weakness. We have strong-man contests in our culture. We exercise to Rocky's theme song. We celebrate first-place. We despise aging. We have a love-affair with strength, which translates into our faith. Weakness—moral and otherwise—has a way of pushing us away from God. It certainly does not serve as a confidence builder when approaching the holy God of the universe. Hebrews introduces us to a different perspective, an incarnational logic. Take a look.

*Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:14-16)*

The call in this passage is to "hold fast our confession" and to "draw near" to God with confidence that we might know the help of grace when in need. Note what grounds the call, forming the foundation of this confidence. Incredibly, it's how God engages our weakness. The "for" and "then" of the text drive us to the central confidence giver in the face of weakness—a sympathetic Savior.

We do not have a mediator who lacks understanding, a stand-between ignorant of suffering, or a high priest incapable of meeting weakness with grace. Instead, as the God-man, he is sympathetic, and the fruit of the incarnation and cross is understanding. As New Testament scholar Paul Ellingworth says, "Christ's earthly life gives him inner understanding of human experience, and thus makes him ready and able to give active help."

The very thing that drives us away from God should push us toward him. Our weakness is always met with grace and understanding from a Savior who desires to provide help. He does not engage our weakness with condemnation, but kindness.

Through Christ, even our weaknesses are transformed into an invitation to know his grace and mercy. They are the occasion for experiencing God's help.

## The Worst Thing Is Never the Last Thing

Hopelessness is all around us—inescapable. We see it in our families, we recognize it in our friends, and we discern it in ourselves. It's a fixture in this life, one that highlights our profound need for hope. Paul reminds the Christians at Ephesus about how they lived before trusting Jesus, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

That is the definition of hopelessness, which also gives us a clear picture of hope. The New Testament places God at the center of hope, which is why we read things like this: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom. 15:13). Hope originates with him and is provided by him.

His ability to work hope into impossible situations is expressed most clearly in the resurrection (1 Pet. 1:3, 21; Acts 23:6, 24:15). In theologian Frederick Buechner’s words, “The resurrection of Jesus means the worst thing is never the last thing.” Hopelessness will not have the final say. If death is the embodiment of despair, then the empty tomb is the final word on hope.

Paul captures the unmatched power of the resurrection when he speaks of the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). You see, Easter hope is designed for the most impossible of circumstances. In this verse, Paul likens the resurrection power to the creative power exerted when God

fashioned the world out of nothing. His point is that God specializes in transforming darkness into light, chaos into order, impossible into possible, and, of course, hopelessness into hope.

Practically speaking, we wage war on hopelessness by making Easter more than an annual celebration. When we allow Christ's resurrection to invade our most challenging circumstances, hope is sure to follow. Sometimes, even the hope of hope—it's very possibility—can still our anxious hearts.

## God, Help Me

Help. We may desperately whisper it under our breath, yell it at the top of our lungs in our cars, or just think it in our minds when things are dire. The word occurs 187 times in the Bible and is strewn through the whole storyline of Scripture. The stories of the Old Testament are filled with individuals needing help and asking for it. Friends, we are not alone. The Exodus event is one of the most significant saving moments in biblical history, but have you ever noticed the catalyst for such a saving action?

*During those many days, the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. (Exod. 2:23)*

The cry for help was the catalyst; when they lifted their voices, he heard them and he moved. It was no different when God's people were in danger in the wilderness, when they took the promised land, when they were threatened by other nations, when they were in exile, or any other time they were in need. They cried for help, and God answered.

The psalmists exhaust the vocabulary of help. They teach us that we are not alone, and they embolden us to call for his help. They create confidence in the reality that "there is none like God ... who rides through the heavens to your help" (Deut. 33:26). The psalmist



poses the question: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come?" (Ps. 121:1). The answer to this question will always lead back to God, but more specifically it will get us to Jesus.

The writer of the book of Hebrews knew this well, and in this one section he summarizes the work of Jesus Christ as helping us:

*Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted. (Heb. 2:14-18)*

This passage speaks of help in the face of death, in the face of Satan, in the face of sin, and in the face of temptation. It is a help that requires a birth, a death, and a resurrection. God helps us in Christ. He deals with our greatest needs and assures us he will help us with everything else.

If you have ever wondered whether God will help—*Does he care? Is he interested in helping me? Does he hear when I cry for help?*—the crib, the cross, and the empty tomb are God's definitive *yes*. He has helped us, and he will continue to help us. Don't be afraid to let that one word move from your heart to your mouth. He cannot resist the cry for help.

## The Sermon of the Seashore

*How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand! (Ps. 139:17-18, NLT)*

The thought of God's infinite involvement in the psalmist's day-to-day leads to worship—he is overwhelmed by God's thoughts toward him. They are too great, too many! They are like the sand on the seashore. Sit in this for a minute—God's thoughts toward us are beyond number.

A few summers ago, my family went to California for a vacation. We spent one week on the beach in San Diego. The golden sand went for miles; it was gorgeous and overwhelming. We camped on the beach, and there was sand everywhere you looked. Open the tent and there were piles of sand on the floor, in the sleeping bags, everywhere. Each morning we would wake up with sand in our hair and on our bodies—there was no escaping it. For weeks after we left, we still found sand in our car, in our bags, in our clothing, even in our ears.

My friends, God's thoughts toward us are beyond all the sand on every beach. Every grain is a preacher telling us about the greatness of his care for us. We need to camp out on his beach. We need to build sandcastles on his beach—let his kindness get stuck between our toes, let his mercy get lodged in our ears, and let his compassion and love cling to our hair. We need to go for long walks on this beach;

his thoughts toward us change us, and they lead to assurance, comfort, worship, and gratitude. We need to listen closely to the sermon of the seashore.

## Looking Death in the Eye

Rebekah Gregory was one of the victims of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing; she lost her leg and nearly her child through the tragic incident. In 2015, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev went on trial for the bombing, and Rebekah had the opportunity to go to court, look him the eye, and testify against him. After testifying, she wrote the bomber a letter. In the middle of the letter, she makes this statement:

*You have undoubtedly been my source of fear since April 15th, 2013. After all, you are one of the men responsible for nearly taking my child, and for the permanent image embedded in my brain of watching someone die. Up until now, I have been truly scared of you and because of this, fearful of everything else people might be capable of.*

It is not hard to imagine how fear gripped Rebekah and how it haunted her. Scripture tells us that there is a paralyzing fear that has gripped humanity since the fall in the garden. It is the fear of a great and ferocious enemy—that enemy is death. Death, that great monster that mercilessly devours everyone in front of him, that enemy from which there is no escape. That enemy that has ravaged our friends, our families, our brothers and sisters in the faith, our co-workers, our neighbors. That great enemy that has wounded us all and caused us to quake and tremble. That enemy that Paul says has

ruled the world like a dictator since Adam. Hebrews 2:15 says that fearing death has held humanity in “lifelong slavery.”

One of the most haunting chapters in the Bible is Genesis 5. It catalogues ten generations of Adam’s descendants. A deafening phrase runs throughout the entire genealogy: “and he died.” Seth lived 895 years and he died. Enosh, Mahalel, Jared, Methuselah...name the descendant, the story is the same. Death has overrun the earth and is taking out everyone in its path.

Death is a hard looming reality, is it not? A reality that brings us dread and enslaves us to fear. A fear not unlike Rebekah’s fear. Her letter continues.

*Up until now, I have been truly scared of you... But today, all that changed. Because this afternoon, I got to walk into a courtroom and take my place at the witness stand, just a few feet away from where you were sitting. (I was WALKING. Did you get that?) And today I explained all the horrific details, of how you changed my life, to the people that literally hold YOURS in their hands. That's a little scary right? And this afternoon before going in, I'm not going to lie...my palms were sweaty. And sitting up there talking to the prosecution did make me cry. But today, do you know what else happened? TODAY...I looked at you right in the face....and realized I wasn't afraid anymore. And today I realized that sitting across from you was somehow the crazy kind of step forward that I needed all along.*

Fear had gripped Rebekah and rightfully so, but she explains the way she moved forward and through her fear: by facing it. By looking at the bomber right in the eye, something changed, something broke. This is what the gospel is about, the destruction of fear.

Fear must bow to a broken, bloodied Savior, wrapped in burial clothes, who refuses to stay in his tomb. The gospel is about the

abolition of death and a Savior who invites us to join him in taunting our last and greatest enemy. It is about hope—invincible, unchanging, certain hope. It is about kindness, grace, and hospitality.

As we recently discussed, Hebrews 2:14-15 says that Jesus came to “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”

Jesus came not only to deliver us from death; he came to rescue us from *the fear* of death. He came to instill in us confidence and hope, hope that death will not have the final word, that death will be ultimately undone. Like Rebekah Gregory, we are called to look our enemy in the face and, more than that, to find our hope in the one who conquers death.



## The Discipline of Waiting

In the early 1900s, tradition has it that an ad was run in the paper that stated, "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in event of success."

British explorer Ernest Shackleton was forming a team to attempt a sea-to-sea crossing of Antarctica. Not long into their journey, their ship the *Endurance* was trapped in ice and had to be abandoned. For months, the crew camped on the ice before launching lifeboats for a treacherous seven-day sail to reach uninhabited Elephant Island.

Once reaching Elephant Island, Shackleton left twenty-two of his men with only two boats upturned to create shelter, only penguins and seals to eat, and a dark, oppressive winter to face. But he also left them a promise: "I will come back for you." Shackleton and five other crew members launched out in a tiny 22-foot boat on an 800-mile journey for help. Miraculously, they survived, and upon arrival at a remote whaling station on South Georgia Island, Shackleton immediately set plans to return for the rest of his men.

Four months, and three thwarted rescue attempts, later, the frozen castaways were huddled around a fire eating their daily portion of seal. They had been waiting faithfully, but they must have been wondering if their rescue would ever come, or if they'd ever eat another non-seal meal. Then, in the distance, one man saw it—the sea-going tug *Yelcho*. It was a day one survivor would call in his



journal the “day of wonders.” Abandoning their meal, the men rushed toward the shore, filling the air with cheers. When the *Yelcho* lowered a landing boat, the men could make out a figure in the distance—it was Ernest Shackleton.

“I hurried the party aboard with all possible speed,” Shackleton writes of that day, “taking also the records of the Expedition and essential portions of equipment. Everybody was aboard the *Yelcho* within an hour, and we steamed north at the little steamer’s best speed...not a life lost, and we have been through hell.”

As Christians, we are looking expectantly, anxiously to the rescue return of Christ. Jesus made some precious promises; among the most wonderful are the words that come from his mouth assuring us he will not forget about us here, but will return for us. Consider these three:

*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:18)*

*I will come again and will take you to myself. (John 14:3)*

*Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)*

We are a “waiting people,” living on Christ’s promise that “I am coming for you.” Hold fast, hold tight—I am going to return. Waiting forms our identity; it is that which we are called to do, and it’s how we survive.

*For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the*

*dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come. (1  
Thess. 1:9-10)*

In 1 Peter 1:13, we are called to this same waiting; indeed, Peter calls us explicitly to place all our eggs in this one basket: “Set your hope *fully* on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

This is one place where you can do that. Hope in people, hope in money, hope in health, hope in a career, hope in our abilities—all of these will ultimately come up empty. But hope in Christ, in his return and his promises—oh friends, this is a hope that will truly deliver and never disappoint.



## The Race That Begins with a Finish Line

Finish lines are crucial. They pull us forward, keep us moving, and give us hope for the next mile. The longer the distance, the truer this becomes. We run for the finish line; without it we might not run at all. But don't take it from me, just go for a jog and listen to your straining muscles and gasping lungs.

In the same way, we need the finish line in the journey of faith, which Hebrews likens to a long-distance event, calling us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1). It all makes sense when it is framed this way, doesn't it? The fatigue, the injuries, the excitement, the discouragement, the surges of motivation, the need for others, the desire to quit, and the need to keep pushing. No wonder we feel the way we do—our life is an ultra-marathon!

But here is where the race of faith is different: this endurance event starts at the finish line. If this sounds backward, that's because it is backward—the finish line in this race isn't at the end, it's at the beginning. The finisher's tape isn't in front of us; it's behind us, and it has already been broken. Let me explain.

As we “run with endurance,” we are to be “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). We run by training our attention on Christ, the one who has run the race for us and has finished his course. Jesus has won the race, and he has done it for us.

Recall some of the last words from Jesus' mouth on the cross. “He said, ‘It is finished,’ and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit”

(John 19:30). *It is finished* is an irreversible statement that points to an unrepeatable event. The *it* in *it is finished* is the race he ran for us, a race that dealt with our sin, removed God's judgment, and accomplished all that was necessary to bring us home to God. He ran a race we could not run; he won the victory out of our reach. Jesus finished the race for us before we ever started running.

Faith does not start with *do*, but with *done*. In other words, we trust in everything Jesus has accomplished for us, and then we move to everything Jesus has called us to accomplish for him. Reversing this order is dangerous. We don't run for the finish line, we run because of the finish line. So put your eyes on Christ, my friends, and run with endurance.