

PART ONE

FIRST AID

A note to my readers: My book will have four parts. In addition to this first part, there is a second part that answers the question of why we suffer, a third part that explores some deeper issues, such as how we should think about Scripture and what Scripture establishes about the relationship between God's providence and our suffering, and a fourth part that links our suffering to our growth in faith, hope, and love. A final chapter considers how we will regard this life's suffering in the afterlife.

The book's endnotes are intended for those who wish to think more deeply about some point in the main text. Don't read them during your first time through the text.

CHAPTER ONE

WHEN THE STARS DISAPPEAR

*“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.”**
(Job 14:1)

“Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.”
(John 16:33 NLT)

The telephone rang about nine on a Sunday morning while we were getting ready for church. I heard the answering machine take a message. As we headed for the garage, I hit the “Play” button. A familiar voice said, “Dr. Talbot, this is Graham. Are you there?”[†] After a couple of seconds of waiting, I heard him say, “Hmm,” and then hang up.

It was September. Graham had graduated from Wheaton College in May and then headed overseas for some graduate study to prepare him for a Ph.D. in Philosophy. He became a philosophy major after taking one of my intro courses in the fall of his freshman year. We had talked a great deal that year. I was encouraged by the depth of his Christian commitment, cheered by his quick humor, and pleased with his sharp, active mind.

For a couple of years after that class, we lost contact. Then I bumped into him at the start of the final term of his senior year. He said he would really like to talk. Over lunch, he described the depression that had dogged him for years. He had begged God to lift it. But nothing had changed. And so now he was tired, deeply depressed, and uncertain. How could he believe that Christianity was true if God hadn’t answered his desperate prayers?

* All biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

† I have changed my student’s name and some details of his story to protect his parents’ privacy.

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

We arranged to talk regularly. He told me he had been in counseling for several years. I had known other chronically depressed students, and so I knew how profound their suffering could be.[‡] He was grateful when I offered to talk with his parents, which I started doing right away.

Often, when I'm dealing with depressed and potentially suicidal students, I ask them to promise they will try to call me at anytime, night or day, if they are desperate. Graham had promised, but that Sunday morning he hadn't sounded distressed. I found myself thinking perhaps he was back in the States temporarily and just wanted to get together for lunch.

Monday afternoon I came home from a meeting to find another message, this one from Graham's father. They had received word from England that Graham had been killed when he was hit by a train. I called them. They had tried to reach the authorities, but it was the middle of the night in England and so they hadn't yet been able to learn anything more. I kept my fears to myself. But when I got home the next day, Graham's dad had left another message: The English authorities thought Graham's death was a suicide.

As I pieced it together, it became clear that Graham had kept his promise. Given the time difference between the train station and Chicago, he had called me less than an hour before he stepped in front of the train.

Calamitous Suffering

A calamity is “an extraordinarily grave event marked by great loss and lasting distress and affliction.”¹ By this definition, Graham's death has been a calamity.

[‡] *Profound suffering* involves experiencing something so deep and disruptive that it dominates our consciousness and threatens to overwhelm us, often tempting us to lose hope that our lives can ever be good again. Both acute calamities (such as losing a child to suicide) and chronic conditions (such as the day-by-day care of a severely disabled child or Graham's seemingly never-ending struggle with depression) can produce profound suffering.

Calamities, like earthquakes, start in cores of tragedy that have waves of suffering radiating out from them. For onlookers, the sufferers' lives may soon seem fairly normal again. But for the sufferers themselves there may be deep inner fault lines that, if they are Christians, may outline shattered faith. The upheavals involved can be so great that it can seem that life can't ever be good again.

These fault lines often reveal themselves in a series of insistent, unanswered questions. Graham's parents keep asking these:

How could God allow this to happen to our son? We know God is all-powerful and governs everything, and so why didn't he alter this course of events?

As Christians we have always believed God is our heavenly Father who answers believing prayer. Yet we prayed and Graham prayed, believing God would help him overcome his depression, so why didn't God do that?

And why did God afflict our son with this burden in the first place, especially since he, as all-knowing, was always aware it would end in Graham's death?

"Why," they ask, "didn't God arrange things so that at least one of the three people whom Graham tried to call in his last hour would have answered the telephone and perhaps helped him find the strength to live another day?"

This book began in response to this calamity. When we stand alongside suffering believers, we face our own questions. In this case, I have asked repeatedly, Could I have helped Graham more? Could I have said anything to him that would have made his life more bearable? Were there ways I could have helped

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

him see that God was with him in his dark times even though God didn't take those dark times away? And how can I now comfort his parents? Are there ways to help them weather their profoundly disorienting grief?

A calamity like this reveals how little most of us have thought about what we should say or do in circumstances like these. Does profound suffering have stages that make different responses appropriate at different times? Is there an early stage in intense grief when we shouldn't say much, and the best we can do is pray that God will graciously help his grieving children keep their faith? Is it ever appropriate to tell sufferers what many of us have learned through our own profound suffering, which is that there will come a day when they will again feel some peace in spite of their calamity? Should we encourage them to anticipate a day when they will receive satisfying answers to all of their questions? And what should we say to nonbelievers? Can we assure them that God is in some way being good to them in and through their tragedies?

This Veil of Tears

I will address these questions as we proceed. But no matter how they are answered, all Christians need to come to grips with the potential breadth and depth of what we as Christians may suffer. Scripture does not encourage us to believe our lives as God's people will be pain free. It shows God's people have always been familiar with suffering. We can feel profound, life-depleting sorrow. Even David, whose very name means "beloved by God,"² could cry,

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress;
my eye is wasted from grief;
my soul and my body also.

6 | When the Stars Disappear

For my life is spent with sorrow,
and my years with sighing;
my strength fails . . . ,
and my bones waste away. (Ps. 31:9-10)

Graham's parents have undergone an almost inconceivable calamity yet, as Job observed, human beings often suffer in this sinful, rebellious world (see Job 14:1). Of course, there are different kinds and degrees of suffering. Not all of it involves experiencing hurts so deep and disruptive that its presence dominates our lives, and even deep and disruptive suffering may not shake our faith. Yet, as Henri Blocher observes, suffering often presents us with a *problem* in the original sense of that word—that is, it throws an obstacle across our paths, “something that blocks our view, for it resists our . . . efforts to *understand* it.”³

Readers of the books of Ruth and Job know that God's Old Testament saints sometimes suffered calamity, just as readers of the Psalms and Jeremiah know that some suffered lifelong affliction. And in spite of some Christian teachers' claims to the contrary, we should not expect it to be different for us as God's New Testament people.⁴ For we remain part of the creation that has been subjected to futility and that groans for its redemption (see Rom. 8:18-25), and Hebrews tells us that God disciplines those who are his children for their good (see Heb. 12:3-11).

We are also called to suffer for Christ's name.⁵ And so we should not be surprised that the apostle Paul opened 2 Corinthians by observing that he and Timothy were sharing abundantly in Christ's sufferings (see 1:5). In fact, their suffering had been so terrible that they had “despaired of life itself,” feeling they “had received the sentence of death” (1:8-9).

In short, we Christians should expect to suffer *more* than non-Christians, not less, since we will suffer in virtually all of the ways everyone does and we will also

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

suffer more specifically as Christians. “Here on earth,” our Lord told his disciples in his farewell discourse to them in John’s gospel, “you will have many trials and sorrows” (John 16:33 NLT). As the apostle Paul declared, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). Yet it is only through suffering that Romans 8:28 can come to mean all it should to us: “we know that for those who love God all things”—*all* things, even calamities like the one involving Graham and his parents—“work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

MY STORY

When I was seventeen, I fell about fifty feet off a Tarzan-like rope-swing, breaking my back and becoming paralyzed from the waist down. I spent six months in hospitals. Initially, I had no feeling or movement in my legs and no bowel or bladder control. I dropped from 200 to 145 pounds because I was so nauseated that I couldn’t eat. Once my back had stabilized a little and I had regained some leg movement, the doctors tried to help me regain more by having me crawl to breakfast each morning. At the time, I had a calcified stone lodged in my bladder that had formed around the catheter they had put in me for the first few weeks. The catheter had been removed, but the undetected stone remained. It was causing raging bladder infections that made me incontinent. And so as they put me on the floor each morning, I would wet myself and, because it was useless to change, remain soaked all day. When I left the hospital after the stone was finally detected and removed, I was able to control my bladder in most situations and walk awkwardly with a cane.

I am now in my sixties, and the consequences from my accident continue to multiply. Walking gets harder and harder, even with crutches, and yet I want to

stay on my feet in order to work my legs. I walk partly on muscle spasm, which raises my blood pressure, making it hard for me to find ways to exercise enough to stay in cardiovascular shape. I have to worry about things most people never even think about. In the last two decades, I sometimes have had sleep-robbing leg spasms. And in the last few years, my inability to do much walking has depleted the bone density in my hips to the point where, if I take a really serious fall, they may break.

I have thought about God's providence in this context for over forty years. And yet it is not primarily in terms of my paralysis that I have learned the most about human suffering. Those lessons have come in other ways. I know, like Graham, what it means to have prayed desperately for God to change some of the more distressing aspects of myself. I have had seasons of profoundly disorienting perplexity when night after night sleep fled from me because I was utterly unable to understand how God in his goodness could have been playing any part in what was happening to me.⁶ I have experienced hurts so deep and disruptive that they have dominated my consciousness, making me feel I could lose the Christian faith that has oriented me for almost my whole life. Like one psalmist, I have felt like a little owl alone in the wilderness, feeling that my days were disappearing like smoke and my heart was withering away like parched grass (see Ps. 102:3-11).

I am not one who jests at scars while never having felt a wound.

MY AIM

Although this book began in response to one particular calamity, it is written for all Christians who are puzzled or distressed by the griefs, troubles, sicknesses, trials, betrayals, persecutions, and afflictions we and our loved ones undergo, whether our suffering is acute and perhaps calamitous, or chronic in a way that threatens to

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

overwhelm us, or simply significant enough to make us wonder why we suffer. I hope it will remove some of the obstacles that suffering tends to throw across the path of Christian faith and hope. I want to help you, my fellow Christians, believe that our suffering is part of God's loving providence for us, his people, and that we shall ultimately see each piece of it as an *unsought gift* from him, no matter how difficult or perplexing it may sometimes now be. I shall argue this from Scripture as corroborated by personal experience. As Augustine said, "I feed you on what I am fed on myself. . . . I set food before you from the pantry which I too live on, from the Lord's storerooms."⁷

THE STORY OF A STORM, A SHIPWRECK, AND A POISONOUS SNAKE

In Acts, Luke records an event in the apostle Paul's life that helps us understand our experiences of profound suffering.

When God called Paul from being the church's persecutor to be a gospel preacher, Jesus showed him how much he would suffer for the sake of Jesus' name (see Acts 9:10-16). Acts 27-28 records one of the ways Paul suffered during a storm and shipwreck on the Mediterranean Sea. By this time, Paul was a prisoner being transported to Rome to appear before Caesar. Luke was with him. He details for us the hardships suffered during the storm, including the crew's having to throw the ship's cargo and tackle overboard, and everyone being so worried that they didn't eat for two weeks. Eventually the ship ran aground on a reef and everyone swam for shore after the Roman centurion in charge had persuaded his soldiers not to kill Paul and the other prisoners first to prevent their escape. Once safely on shore, Paul was bitten yet not harmed by a poisonous snake.

One lesson of this story is that God remains providentially in control of everything even when those involved lose all hope. For at one point in his story

Luke remarks that when “neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved” (27:20 NIV). In ancient times, sailors got their bearings by seeing the sun and the stars. So when the storm blotted out heaven’s lights, the condition of crew and passengers was indeed very grave. Yet Paul then stood up, telling everyone they should take heart because God had assured him in a dream that he would appear before Caesar and that in doing this for Paul he would also keep everyone else safe.

When the Stars Disappear

What happened to Paul and his companions in this storm can serve as a metaphor for what often happens to us when we suffer.⁸ As I explain more fully in Chapter Five, God has made us to be *needy* and ‘*wanty*’ creatures who are constantly on the hunt for various goods—for things like air, food, and water, shelter, safety, health, love, and happiness. Pursuing such goods requires our learning how to *lead* our lives so we can navigate through life in ways that are likely to secure what we want and need.

Taking a particular tack on life in order to pursue our wants and needs requires us to get our bearings, much as the sailors in Acts needed to see the sun and the stars in order to navigate the Mediterranean Sea. A large part of getting our bearings involves our coming to believe two different kinds of stories: a particular story and a general one. The *particular* or *personal story* is about what our individual lives mean. Each of us needs to believe a story that orients us to the particular people, places, and things around us, describing where we have come from, where we are on our life’s journey, and where we can go so that we can project ourselves into hopeful futures where we think we can get whatever it is that we want and need.⁹ The *general story* answers questions about what human life means. For instance, are we the product of blind cosmic forces who don’t exist for

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

any reason or have we been created by God to fulfill some specific purpose? Is human life just about making money or pursuing our own personal happiness? Or is it about serving others or believing and obeying God? Metaphorically, these two kinds of stories are among the stars that guide us, helping us navigate over life's otherwise uncharted seas.

But suffering tends to challenge these stories and thus shake our confidence. Even mild suffering can make me doubt my personal story, which assumes that in a few hours I will be relatively pain free. And profound suffering may threaten to blot out completely the light of the stars that are guiding us. For it can make us doubt the general story we have accepted about what human life means. For instance, Graham's parents have found themselves doubting their long-term belief that God is our heavenly Father who answers believing prayer. Losing their bearings so thoroughly means losing hope they can move forward in any meaningful, satisfactory way.

Yet, as Luke's account of Paul's and his shipmates' suffering portrays, even if we lose our bearings we shouldn't conclude that God has lost his. God is provident over life's storms.¹⁰ He spoke the sun and stars into existence to illumine and guide us (see Gen. 1:14-19). And he has given us biblical stories like this one to help keep our faith and hope in place.

Paul suffered three other shipwrecks, including one involving a night and a day adrift on the open sea. He was imprisoned, repeatedly flogged and beaten as well as stoned. He had been in danger from rivers and robbers as well as from Jews and Gentiles and false Christians. He knew many cold and sleepless nights and hungry and thirsty days. On top of it all, he was constantly anxious for all of the churches.¹¹ Yet precisely because of what he had learned through all this suffering,¹² he could confidently declare, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

For how will he “who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, . . . not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31-32). These convictions enabled him to believe God when God assured him he would save him and his shipmates. Though the light of this world’s sun and stars had disappeared, Paul kept his bearings by believing what God told him in that dream.

Indeed, even before God had shown Paul the remarkable providence of saving him and his shipmates from this terrible storm, Paul was already urging his New Testament readers to trust in the good news God had called him to preach. This is the story of the ultimate triumph we shall know in Christ, the triumph of God’s keeping us in Christ’s love and thus ultimately delivering us from all bad things. We can hear Paul’s faith in this story resounding in the letter he wrote to the Roman Christians not long before his arrest and his perilous trip over the Mediterranean Sea. It comes out in his attitude towards suffering,[§] in his trust in God’s perfect providence,^{**} and in his unshakeable confidence that nothing—absolutely nothing!—can separate Christians from the love of God in Christ:

Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?

No! Assuredly not! For “despite all these things,” Paul declared, “overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us” (Rom. 8:35-37 NLT).

Of course, sometimes these great declarations don’t seem to ring true.

[§] “[W]e *rejoice* in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame” (Rom. 5:3-5).

^{**} “[W]e *know* that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love [him] and [who] are called according to his purpose for them” (Rom. 8:28 NLT).

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

Sometimes we can be so overwhelmed by what has befallen us that we cannot understand how God could possibly be working through it for our good. How can *this*, we find ourselves asking, be coming from a loving Savior's hand? Sometimes, as it was for Graham as well as how it is now for his parents, it can seem as if our suffering is so bad, so catastrophic, that we cannot imagine how it can ever be part of any "overwhelming victory" that will one day be ours through Christ. And so sometimes our suffering does indeed threaten to destroy all of the beliefs and hopes that are part of the Christian story we have been using to guide us on our earthly ways. Sometimes the stars of faith and hope disappear.

Perhaps you are puzzled right now by your own suffering or someone else's. Perhaps you are in the midst of some great or long-lasting storm of suffering that threatens to blot out heaven's lights and thus tempt you to lose all hope that you will ever see good again. If this is so, then may this book's message play a part like the one the apostle Paul's message played when he stood and told his despairing companions right in the midst of their storm that God had given him a word guaranteeing he would deliver them. Paul proclaimed a message of hope in the midst of hopelessness. He urged the hopeless to hope in the God whom he knew would not promise what he would not do. And God did as he said, for God *is* sovereign over all of life's storms. He never loses his bearings, no matter how bad things may seem. He can *and ultimately will* see his people safely through even the worst storms, and when—whether in this life or in the one to come—those storms finally begin to subside and the sky begins to clear, we have his word that we will look up and once again see the sun and the moon and the stars, and then realize that our loving heavenly Father has been with us all along our way.

CHAPTER TWO

SUFFERING SAINTS *God's Saints May Suffer Terribly*

*So [Naomi and Ruth] went on until they came to Bethlehem.
And when they came to Bethlehem, the whole town was stirred because of them.
And the women said, "Is this Naomi?"
She said to them, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very
bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty.
Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has
brought calamity upon me?"
(Ruth 1:19-21)*

*After this Job opened his mouth and cursed the day of his birth.
And Job said: "Let the day perish on which I was born, and the night that said, 'A man
is conceived.' . . .
Let the stars of its dawn be dark;
let it hope for light, but have none, nor see the eyelids of the morning,
because it did not shut the doors of my mother's womb,
nor hide trouble from my eyes."
(Job 3:1-3, 9-10)*

*O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived;
you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. . . .
Cursed be the day on which I was born!
The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed!
Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, "A son is born to you." . . .
Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow,
and spend my days in shame?
(Jeremiah 20:7, 14-15, 18)*

One of the worst aspects of suffering is the way it tends to isolate us. When great storms of suffering overtake us, our sense of loneliness can become overwhelming. As the clouds close in, we may lose sight of everything but our suffering, making it loom larger and larger. With profound suffering, it is not unusual to feel as if no

one else has ever suffered as much.

Suffering should prompt Christians to turn to the Scriptures, yet it won't if we feel they aren't likely to have much to say about what we are going through.¹ A careful reading of Scripture shows, however, that no matter how awful our suffering may be, some of God's saints having suffered as much. The seas of suffering are not uncharted seas. Initially, this may be discouraging. Misery loves company, but mere company isn't good enough. Sufferers need to know more than that others have suffered, too. They need to know how to maintain their faith and hope even in the midst of profound suffering. And they need assurance that God will carry them through. So Chapter Three will glean some breathing lessons from the Psalms. And then Chapter Four will revisit the stories of the three Old Testament saints featured in this chapter in order to show how God delivered them.

But first this chapter will tell the stories of these three saints when they were suffering profoundly. Suffering has been near the center of a biblical outlook almost from the start. It has never surprised God, and so it shouldn't surprise us.

A STORY FROM RUTH: NAOMI'S DISFIGURING GRIEF

The events recounted in the first chapter of the book of Ruth clearly constitute a personal calamity. Because of a famine in Judah, Elimelech took his wife Naomi and their two sons to sojourn in Moab, where he died and the sons took Moabite wives. Naomi's sons then died before producing children, and so she was left a childless widow in a strange land. In ancient times this was perilous. And, in fact, Naomi expressed her hopelessness in trying to stop her daughters-in-law from returning with her to Bethlehem (see 1:8-13).

As was customary with God's Old Testament people, Naomi took her suffering to be divinely ordained, which she expressed in terms of "the hand of the

LORD [having] gone out” against her, the LORD having “brought [her] back empty” to Bethlehem, the LORD having “testified against” her, as well as “the Almighty [having] brought calamity” upon her (vv. 13, 20-21). These phrases—and particularly the last two²—suggest she also believed that God was punishing her for some sin. Depending on how we construe the Hebrew, the women of Bethlehem’s surprised “Is this Naomi?” upon her arrival back in her home village may suggest that Naomi’s calamity had weighed so heavily on her that she was almost unrecognizable (1:19). In any case, given the significance of personal names in the ancient Near East, Naomi’s reply, “Do not call me Naomi” (which means *pleasant*); “call me Mara” (which means *bitter*), “for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me” (1:20), shows she felt bitterness would characterize the rest of her life. For the entire time period covered in Ruth, Chapter 1, the woman whose name meant *Pleasant* lost all hope her life would ever be pleasant again.

We can’t know Naomi’s mental state as she asked for a name change. Yet in spite of the role she took God to be playing in her suffering, she may not have been doubting his goodness or leaning towards disobedience.³ If she wasn’t, then her life shows that even profound suffering does not inevitably undermine a believer’s faith or lead to rebellion.

JOB’S STORY: HIS DEATH WISH

Yet sometimes suffering shakes a believer more deeply. For instance, Job’s suffering prompted him to curse both the night he was conceived and the day he was born (see Job 3:1-3). He asked God why he had ever brought him out of the womb, and declared it would have been better if he had never existed (see 10:18-19). We make claims like these when what is happening to us seems so bad that we

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

think there is no hope our lives can ever be good again.* And, indeed, Job declared he would “never see happiness again” (7:7 NIV).

In fact, Job reached the point where he just wanted to die:

Why is light given to him who is in misery,
 and life to the bitter in soul,
 who long for death, but it comes not,
 and dig for it more than for hidden treasures,
 who rejoice exceedingly
 and are glad when they find the grave?

Why is light given to a man whose way is hidden,
 whom God has hedged in?

For my sighing comes instead of my bread,
 and my groanings are poured out like water. . . .

I am not at ease, nor am I quiet;

I have no rest, but trouble comes. (3:20-24, 26; see also 6:8-9)

It is important to recall the full context of these words: God himself considered Job “blameless and upright” (1:8; 2:3), despite his imperfections. He had blessed Job with immense wealth and ten children.† Yet in one day Job lost his wealth and children (see 1:13-19). Initially, this horrific turn of events threw Job into intense yet worshipful mourning: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name

* For instance, adolescents sometimes declare, “I wish I had never been born!” even though onlookers can often see how shortsighted they are being.

† As Job himself described it, “the Almighty was . . . with me, . . . my children were all around me, [and] . . . my steps were washed with butter” (29:5-6).

of the LORD” (1:21). But then he fell prey to an excruciatingly painful and disfiguring disease that covered him with “loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head” (2:7). He became so repulsive that his wife advised him to curse God and die (see 2:9).⁴ In fact, he was so disfigured that the friends who came to comfort him did not immediately recognize him (see 2:12). And when they finally began speaking to him, they increased his suffering by assuming it proved God was reproofing him for sin.⁵

In this horrid situation, Job struggled to find words to express his feelings. He declared that if his calamity could be weighed, then it would weigh more than the sand of the sea (see 6:2-3). He said God’s arrows were in him, poisoning his spirit, and all of God’s terrors were lined up against him (see 6:4). This led him to pray that God would just kill him (see 6:8-9). Each moment of human existence began to look hard and hopeless, especially the sleepless, terror-filled nights—

Has not man a hard service on earth,
 and are not his days like the days of a hired hand?
 Like a slave who longs for the shadow,
 and like a hired hand who looks for his wages,
 so I am allotted months of emptiness,
 and nights of misery are apportioned to me.
 When I lie down I say, ‘When shall I arise?’
 But the night is long,
 and I am full of tossing till the dawn. . . .
 When I say, ‘My bed will comfort me,
 my couch will ease my complaint,’
 then you scare me with dreams
 and terrify me with visions. (7:1-4, 13-14)

The fact that God would not let him catch his breath filled Job with such bitterness that life itself became detestable (see 9:13-21). Consequently, he declared that he would prefer strangling and death (see 7:15). It seemed that every comfort except the comfort of death had been denied him.

Like Naomi, Job took life's joys and sorrows as God-given (see 1:21; 2:10) and thus believed that God was responsible for his suffering. From these truths, it was only a short misstep to conclude that God was not being good to him. He seems to have taken that step somewhere in the first cycle of exchanges with his three friends, probably when he began addressing God in the second person:

Am I the sea, or a sea monster,
 that you set a guard over me? . . .
 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?
 If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of mankind?
 Why have you made me your mark?
 Why have I become a burden to you?
 Why do you not pardon my transgression
 and take away my iniquity? (7:12, 15-21a; cf. 10:1-22)

At the least, it seems, Job felt God was being unduly strict with him.⁶

EPISODES FROM JEREMIAH'S LIFE STORY: HIS ASSAULT ON GOD

It can get worse. Job seems to have felt that God was being overly strict with him, but he seems never really to have doubted God's fundamental righteousness.

Consequently, as bitterly as he complained, he seems to have believed that if he could appear before God then he would get a fair shake (see Job 23:1-10).⁷ The circumstances surrounding Jeremiah's suffering, however, led him to malign God's character and, at least temporarily, abandon his faith and renounce his calling.

Telling Jeremiah's story takes some time, but the lessons we learn will make it worthwhile.

Jeremiah's Life

Jeremiah's suffering was much worse than Naomi's or Job's. Theirs occupied intervals in otherwise pleasant lives. His was virtually the only reality he knew. God had consecrated Jeremiah to be a prophet from before his birth and then, while he was still only a teenager, had given him a message that ran against all that his countrymen wanted to hear (see Jer. 1:5-10, 13-19). God also commanded Jeremiah to stand apart from his people, forbidding him to marry (see 16:1-2)⁸ and prohibiting him from mourning with his countrymen or showing them any sympathy (see 16:5). He was not to pray for them (see 7:16; 11:14; 14:11) or to feast, eat, or drink with them (see 16:8). Instead, he sat alone, filled by God with indignation at their sins (see 15:17), all because his life as well as his words were to foreshadow the sort of desolate barrenness that God was going to visit on his apostate people.

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

As could be expected, Jeremiah's countrymen reacted with insults, ridicule, ostracism, threats, plots, and persecution. In his entire book, only four people help Jeremiah. Everyone mocked him and constantly laughed at him (see 20:7); indeed, he became "a household joke" because he could not stop himself from preaching his message of doom even while God delayed its fulfillment (17:15-16 with 20:8 NLT). As he put it, "I am hated everywhere I go" (15:10 NLT). In addition, the people of his home village, including his brothers (see 12:6), threatened him and secretly plotted to kill him (see 11:18-19, 21; 18:18, 22-23). At one point as the weight of his mission bore down on him, he pled with God, "LORD, don't terrorize me!" (17:17 NLT).

His Curse

These incidents are recounted in Jeremiah's "confessions," a series of laments he made in which he complained to, pleaded with, and sometimes even attempted to incriminate God as he expressed his confusion, anger, bitterness, and anguish over fulfilling his prophetic calling.⁹ Jeremiah's distress and anxiety grew until they climaxed in the crisis of faith recorded in Chapter 20 when, after he had delivered one of his most graphic predictions of disaster for the kings and people of Judah and Jerusalem, Pashhur the priest attacked him and had him tortured.¹⁰ Afterwards, Jeremiah lamented God's having called him to be a messenger of judgment like this:

Cursed be the day
 on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me,
 let it not be blessed!

Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father,
 “A son is born to you”
 Let that man be like the cities
 that the LORD overthrew without pity;
 let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,
 because he did not kill me in the womb;
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb forever great.
 Why did I come out from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame? (20:14-18)

These curses are worse than Job’s because Jeremiah knew that God had set him apart and appointed him as a prophet from before his birth. Consequently, in cursing his birth he was cursing his prophetic call. Moreover, Jeremiah cursed his birth by cursing a person—a human being made in God’s image—and he cursed this person for not doing what God himself prohibits: that is, murder another human being.¹¹ In contrast, Job “never sinned by cursing anyone or by asking for revenge” (Job 31:30 NLT).

His Doubts about God

In rejecting his call, Jeremiah was certainly, like Job, denying that God was being good to him. Yet he also seems to have doubted God’s goodness much more radically.

These doubts seem to stem from how Jeremiah had understood his original call. When the LORD first called him, Jeremiah had replied that he was too young

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

to know what to say. But God had told him that his age didn't matter, "for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak" (1:7). God had also commanded Jeremiah not to fear anyone because he would be with Jeremiah to deliver him (see 1:8). He had said, "Get yourself ready! Stand up and say to them whatever I command you" (1:17 NIV), adding, "And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you . . . to deliver you" (1:18-19). God had even warned Jeremiah, "Do not be terrified by them, or I will terrify you before them" (1:17 NIV).

This warning was probably in Jeremiah's mind as he obeyed God's instructions recorded in Chapter 19. God told Jeremiah to buy a clay jar and then take some of the civic and religious leaders of Judah out to the valley of the Son of Hinnom at the entry of the Potsherd Gate.¹² He was then to declare that God was going to bring a disaster on Jerusalem that would make "the ears of everyone who hears of it . . . tingle" (v. 3). The valley would become known as the Valley of Slaughter because God's people had forsaken him and profaned the valley with offerings to foreign gods and child sacrifice. The LORD would frustrate all of his apostate people's plans,¹³ cause them to fall by the sword at the hand of their enemies, and let the birds and beasts feed on their dead. He would make Jerusalem a horror to everyone passing it, a place remembered for the fact that its inhabitants had succumbed to cannibalism. Jeremiah was then to smash the jar in front of the priests and political leaders, declaring, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel, so that it can never

be mended. . . . Thus will I do to this place . . . and to its inhabitants, making this city like Topheth” (19:10-13).[‡]

Jeremiah then returned to the temple’s court in Jerusalem and proclaimed, “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, behold, I am bringing upon this city and upon all its towns all the disaster I have pronounced against it, because they have stiffened their neck, refusing to hear my words” (19:14-15).

This horrific prophecy predicted Jerusalem and Judah would suffer the covenant curses pronounced by Moses in Deuteronomy (see especially Deut. 28:25-26, 36-37, 53-57). It indicted the whole nation and all its leaders. But rather than causing God’s people to repent, it prompted them to hate God’s true prophet even more and provoked Pashhur—the temple’s chief overseer—to attack Jeremiah and then have him tortured (see 20:1-2). When Jeremiah emerged from the torture the next morning, he lashed out at God:

You deceived me, LORD, and I was deceived;
you overpowered me and prevailed. (20:7a, b NIV)

No other biblical saint attacks God’s character so brazenly. In the psalms, God’s saints often complain to him about situations that they know he controls and which he thus could, if he would, alleviate,¹⁴ yet while the psalmists question what God is or isn’t doing (see, e.g., Pss. 13:1-2; 44:23-24; 119:84), none of them defame him.¹⁵

Any claim to be sure of what Jeremiah meant by his words would be foolish, but at the very least they seem to refer to God’s initial promise to deliver him from his opposition. It seems that in the shock and pain of Pashhur’s mistreatment of him, Jeremiah came to believe that God had broken that promise. Apparently,

[‡] Topheth was probably a local overcrowded cemetery.

Jeremiah had thought that God had promised that no one would ever lay a hand on him. As he had carried out his prophetic calling, he had become increasingly aware of how much enmity his message produced, and so at least once before he had regretted his birth and questioned God's dependability (see 15:10-18). But God had then rebuked him and called him to repentance, reiterating his initial promise and even adding that "I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless" (15:21). Jeremiah had heeded that rebuke and soldiered on, even when it meant delivering the horrific prophecy recorded in Chapter 19. As he did so, he must have worried about the reaction the prophecy might bring. And yet he obeyed God, probably holding God's warning from 1:17 in mind. Then Pashhur hit him and had him tortured, and what Jeremiah thought God had promised vanished like smoke in the wind. Torture is terrifying. A man being tortured certainly does not see himself as a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls against his opponents. He does not feel he is being delivered from the hands of the ruthless.¹⁶

Jeremiah's words indict God in a way that Job never did. Job's suffering fostered false beliefs about his future and God's posture towards him, but Jeremiah's ordeal incited him to malign God's character.

His Frustration in Ministry

In the moment's intense pain and psychological shock from having been beaten and then rung out on the rack, Jeremiah apparently began seeing his whole life story as one long misery resulting from God having unfairly prevailed upon him in his youth. He accused himself of gullibility when he allowed God to entice him

into his life of prophecy,[§] which had led to his current intolerable situation:

Now I am mocked every day;
 everyone laughs at me.
 When I speak, the words burst out.
 “Violence and destruction!” I shout.
 So these messages from the LORD
 have made me a household joke.
 But if I say I’ll never mention the LORD
 or speak in his name,
 his word burns in my heart like a fire.
 It’s like a fire in my bones!
 I am worn out trying to hold it in!
 I can’t do it!
 I have heard the many rumors about me.
 They call me “The Man Who Lives in Terror.”
 They threaten, “If you say anything, we will report it.”
 Even my old friends are watching me,
 waiting for a fatal slip.
 “He will trap himself,” they say,
 “and then we will get our revenge on him.” (20:7c-10 NLT)

Because no one was taking his prophecies seriously, Jeremiah tried to renounce his prophetic office. Yet, as at the start of his ministry, he found he could not stop speaking. As Jeremiah said in the just-quoted passage, “But if I say I’ll never

[§] As the NLT translates 20:7a: “O LORD, you misled me, and I *allowed myself* to be misled.”

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

mention the LORD or speak in his name, his word burns in my heart like a fire. It's like a fire in my bones! I am worn out trying to hold it in! I can't do it!" He was acting as if he had Tourette Syndrome, shouting out his message in a way that prompted everyone to jeer him. Yet even then he could not hold his message in.

Jeremiah's isolation prompted all sorts of rumors about him, some of them no doubt linked to his singleness.¹⁷ His unfulfilled prophecies emboldened people to spit God's words back at him. After Pashhur's mistreatment, Jeremiah had said, "The LORD does not call your name Pashhur, but Terror On Every Side. For thus says the LORD: Behold, I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends" (20:3-4). Now the very words that the LORD had commanded him to speak were being cast back on him. But the cruelest cut may have involved knowing that even his old friends had lost patience with him. He had prophesied for a long time, with none of his predictions having come true,¹⁸ and so they suspected he was a false prophet. So they were waiting for him to prophesy something clearly untrue, which could then lead to his execution (see Deut. 18:20-22), and thus they would be rid of him.

Jeremiah may have shared their suspicions. He had been prophesying "terror is on every side" for many years (6:25), envisioning a divine judgment descending on Judah and Jerusalem that would be so horrible that it would amount to a divine unmaking:

I looked on the earth, and behold, it was without form and void;

and to the heavens, and they had no light.

I looked on the mountains, and behold, they were quaking,

and all the hills moved to and fro.

I looked, and behold, there was no man,

and all the birds of the air had fled.

I looked, and behold, the fruitful land was a desert,

and all its cities were laid in ruins

before the LORD, before his fierce anger. (4:23-26)

When he preached these words, it seems that Jeremiah thought that at least one enemy tribe from the kingdoms of the north was already on its way, as the verb tenses of the following phrases seem to indicate:

Declare in Judah, and proclaim in Jerusalem, and say,

“Blow the trumpet through the land;

cry aloud and say,

‘Assemble, and let us go

into the fortified cities!’

Raise a standard toward Zion,

flee for safety, stay not,

for I bring disaster from the north,

and great destruction.

A lion *has gone up* from his thicket,

a destroyer of nations *has set out*;

he *has gone out* from his place

to make your land a waste;

your cities will be ruins

without inhabitant. (4:5-7)

Indeed, the coming destruction appeared so imminent that it gave Jeremiah something like a heart attack:

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

Oh, my anguish, my anguish!

I writhe in pain.

Oh, the agony of my heart!

My heart pounds within me,

I cannot keep silent.

For I have heard the sound of the trumpet;

I have heard the battle cry. (4:19 NIV)

Yet the predicted invasion had not materialized, raising the suspicion that Jeremiah was indeed a false prophet.¹⁹

His Complete Disorientation

By the time of the events reported in Chapter 20, it was clear that Jeremiah could continue believing in his mission only by radically rethinking how it was going to play out. He had always been uncomfortable proclaiming doom (see, e.g., 15:10 and 17:16 NLT, NIV). Pashhur's mistreatment had made the joys and delights that Jeremiah had reaped from studying God's words, believing his promises, and being God's person (see 15:16) seem inadequate to counterbalance the accompanying griefs and sorrows. Indeed, he seems to have at least temporarily believed that the pain and ignominy of his ministry were simply too great to bear. He had once seen God as a fountain of living waters (see 2:13), but now it appeared that God was perhaps no more than a deceitful brook, full in spring but dry as summer came (see 15:17).

Jeremiah's doubts about God and his prophetic mission threw him into a full-blown identity crisis. His disorientation wasn't prompted merely by the lack of

success attending his prophetic work; the intensity of his suffering was tempting him to abandon his faith and the beliefs and values that had always oriented him. He was “no longer at one with his office and his tasks” and thus unable to tell a coherent story about his life.²⁰ As he stopped trusting God, the stars disappeared, darkening his life and his future.

Yet even in that dark moment, Jeremiah seems to have temporarily rallied in believing that God would keep his promise and vindicate him (see 20:11-13).²¹ But then he cycled back into life-cursing despair, abandoning all hope that his life and prophetic ministry would end well—“Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and *to end my days in shame?*” (20:18, NIV).

And so, as the events recorded in Jeremiah 20 drew to a close, it appeared to Jeremiah as if he had been caught in a double bind: Fulfilling his prophetic office seemed to involve unbearable emotional strain, yet attempting to abandon it proved impossible. Both ways forward appeared fraught with ceaseless suffering. And thus we see the strains of being God’s messenger of judgment taking its full toll on Jeremiah, and we see what seems to be the complete collapse of his faith and hope and strength.

CHAPTER THREE

BREATHING LESSONS *How To Survive Great Suffering*

*And even if I summoned [God] and he responded, I'm not sure he would listen to me.
For he attacks me with a storm and repeatedly wounds me without cause.
He will not let me catch my breath, but fills me instead with bitter sorrows.*
(Job 9:16-18 NLT)

*I am worn out waiting for your rescue, but I have put my hope in your word.
My eyes are straining to see your promises come true.
When will you comfort me?
I am shriveled like a wineskin in the smoke, but I have not forgotten to obey your decrees.
How long must I wait?*
(Psalm 119:81-84a NLT)

If we have found our chief delight in listening to God's word, resting in what we have taken as his promises and trying to do his will, then Jeremiah's predicament may be especially poignant. For we, too, may have suffered a calamity that drained all of the joy and certainty from Christian living, making everything seem meaningless at best. And then we, too, may have been tempted to lash out at God because he seemed to have forsaken or betrayed us.

A few years ago when my walking worsened, I began seeing a physical therapist. Often when she asks me to do something difficult and I'm straining really hard to do it, she'll say, "Breathe!" Of course, I'm not the only one who needs to hear that. Women in labor and athletes in training often need to be urged to breathe.

Sufferers often need the same reminder. For thinking God has forsaken or betrayed us involves losing our perspective, which stifles us, like forgetting to breathe. In particular, we can forget to breathe in the words God has breathed out

to tell us who he is and what he has—and hasn't—promised.*

At one point, Job lost all perspective, accusing God of keeping him from catching his breath (see 9:18). Yet as awful as his situation was, his story finally conveys that what he really needed to hear was “Breathe! Don't panic! Slow yourself down! Don't take everything to be as it seems. Don't rashly conclude that things can never get better. And, above all, don't conclude that God has forsaken you.” In other words, Job needed some breathing lessons.

When we suffer, we may, too. So here are some, culled from Scripture.

LAMENT IN THE PSALMS

Many of us have been encouraged to read the Bible primarily as a how-to manual that tells us how to live immediately satisfying lives. These unrealistically upbeat versions of Christianity hold that life unfolds more smoothly once we accept Christ and start obeying the Bible's directives for godly living. They often portray those directives as promises that ensure prosperity to those who follow them.

Scripture proclaims that whatever God promises is true because he never lies (see Tit. 1:2). But what does God promise? In our eagerness to avoid suffering, we can be like children who think their parents have promised something when they have not. This can dispose us to think God has broken a promise when we suffer. But God has never promised that his saints won't suffer. In fact, our Lord warned his disciples that everyone would hate them because of him (see Mark 13:13).

The Scriptures are rife with saintly suffering. In addition to Old Testament cases like Naomi's, Job's, and Jeremiah's, the New Testament records much Christian suffering, including Stephen's martyrdom (see Acts 6-7) and Paul's litany of afflictions, trials, woes, and weaknesses in 2 Corinthians (see 1:3-11;

* “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16).

11:23-12:10). Peter also mentioned the many griefs his readers experienced so that their faith could be proved genuine and thus worthy of receiving “praise and glory and honor” at our Lord’s return (see 1 Pet. 1:6-7). Scripture even emphasizes that sometimes God’s saints can’t make sense of the suffering they see (see Eccl. 7:15; 8:14-17; Job 21; Jer. 12:1-4).

Yet we can read these passages without appreciating them. And so we may be as astonished as Job when we suffer. To assume that Christians won’t suffer—or, at least, won’t suffer profoundly—becomes, then, a breathtaking error.

The psalmists can help here, for they often had similar expectations. Then suffering would strike, sometimes taking their breath away. But then they did something remarkable. They breathed in God’s words so they could then cry out to him, praying for mercy as they breathed out their sorrows, perplexities, and complaints. So the psalmists kept breathing by filling their spiritual lungs with God’s words and then telling him about the feelings it would have been spiritually harmful for them to hold in.

Many psalms express such sorrows, perplexities, and complaints. They are called the *psalms of lament*, and they outnumber every other kind of psalm, making up over a third of the Psalter.

Suffering should prompt us to pray, and so it shouldn’t surprise us to find so much perplexity and distress expressed in a book often called “the prayer book of the Bible.”¹

Studying these laments helps us breathe in at least two ways.

Breathing Lesson #1: Pray

As prayers, the laments make direct, personal contact with God.² Prayer may be wordless, as when the Holy Spirit helps us pray by interceding “with groanings too

deep for words” (Rom. 8:26; cf. Ps. 77:4). Yet it usually involves words and addresses God as “you”.

If prayer makes direct, personal contact with God, then it is a bit misleading to call Psalms the Bible’s prayer book, for almost a third of the psalms don’t address God. They address us, urging us, for instance, to praise God for his mighty deeds and excellent greatness.³

Yet this throws the laments into greater relief. For of the remaining 106 psalms that actually involve prayer, about 59 are personal or community laments.⁴ These laments outnumber all of the other prayer psalms by about a fifth. They arose from a sense that something in life was wrong, that something was out of tune with the way the psalmist, as a believer, thought, wished, and felt life should be. This could be sickness or old age (see Pss. 88:15 NLT; 71:9, 18), psychological distress,[†] spiritual anguish (see Pss. 39; 51:1-3; 130:1-3), or opposition by enemies and evildoers (see Pss. 3:1-2, 6:7; 7:1-2). It often involved some combination of these (see Pss. 71; 102). Noting the range of experiences the psalmists lamented helps us to anticipate something of the range of suffering we, as God’s present-day people, may also face. Noting their emotional urgency helps us breathe.

These prayers are emotional. The psalmists don’t just *say* they are suffering; they seek words that express their distress. These words help us feel their anguish, countering our tendency to think our suffering is unique. Even if we don’t find our exact griefs in the Psalms, we find anguish at least as deep.

They also possess an urgency the other prayer psalms lack. In all but ten of them, God is invoked directly in the psalm’s first few words: “LORD, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline me in your wrath” (Ps. 6:1 NIV). “O LORD, I call upon you; hasten to me! Give ear to my voice when I call to you!” (Ps. 141:1).

[†] Perhaps grief (see Ps. 31:9) or loneliness (see Pss. 25:16; 102:6, 7) or emotional exhaustion (see Pss. 6:6 NIV; 69:3 NLT).

“Save me, God! The water is already up to my neck!” (Ps. 69:1 JB). Suffering prompted the psalmists to run to God like toddlers run to their parents when they are frightened or hurt.

Of course, the mere fact these laments outnumber every other sort of prayer in the psalms doesn't prove the psalmists suffered often. Perhaps they knew long stretches of life that were relatively trouble free.⁵ Perhaps the psalms include so many laments simply because the psalmists prayed more when they were suffering. But I think there is more to it than that. After Psalm 1 has introduced the entire book of Psalms and Psalm 2 has irrevocably tied the fortunes of God's people to the house of David,⁶ the first words of Psalm 3 are “O LORD, how many are my foes!” This is the first of a string of five Davidic laments.⁷ In fact, 39 laments mention David in their titles. Surely this is significant. God had sought out David as someone after his own heart (see 1 Sam. 13:14). Even being specially chosen by God, then, didn't protect him from a great deal of suffering.⁸

The author of Psalm 71 also noted that God had made him “see troubles, many and bitter,” which had taken him down into “the depths of the earth” (v. 20 NIV). And Psalm 90—a lament bearing the title, “A prayer of Moses, the man of God”—includes lines like these:

all our days pass away under your wrath;
 we bring our years to an end like a sigh.
 The years of our life are seventy,
 or even by reason of strength eighty;
 yet their span is but toil and trouble;
 they are soon gone, and we fly away. (vv. 9-10)

Slow, repeated, prayerful readings of these laments remind us that a life of faith is often puzzling or distressing.⁹ They make godly suffering less startling, thereby helping us catch our breath.

Breathing Lesson #2: Pray Properly

These laments also show us *how* to breathe. Prayerful lamenting is an act of faith. Indeed, these psalms are little portraits of faithful praying.

Faithful praying has a rhythm that encloses our suffering in hopeful stories. Here are its five most crucial beats.

1. Remember

Biblical faith involves our responses to God's initiatives.¹⁰ After God created our first parents, he took the initiative in giving them a mandate and a commandment.¹¹ He told Abraham to leave his country, his relatives, and his father's household and go to a land he would show him (see Gen. 12:1). He heard Abraham's descendants groaning under Egyptian bondage and asked Moses to deliver them (see Exod. 2:23-3:10). He sought out David as a man after his own heart, commanding him to be a prince over his people (see 1 Sam. 13:14). In these and countless other cases, God's Old Testament people were to listen and then respond faithfully.¹²

Faithful lamenting starts by remembering what God has already done. The psalmists caught their breath by reminding themselves that their help always came from God. "If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence" (Ps. 94:17). This reminded them of who God is:

The king is not saved by his great army;
 a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
 The war horse is a false hope for salvation,

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

and by its great might it cannot rescue. . . .

Our soul waits for the LORD;

he is our help and our shield. (Ps. 33:16-17, 20)

And this led them to pray that God would help them again: “To you, O LORD, I call; my rock, be not deaf to me, lest, if you be silent to me, I become like those who go down to the pit. Hear the voice of my pleas for mercy, when I cry to you for help” (Ps. 28:1-2).

They reminded themselves that God was the Maker of heaven and earth. “I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth” (Ps. 121:1-2; cf. 124:1-3, 8). Remembering he had spoken everything into existence, they inhaled the assurance that his plans could not be frustrated and he would accomplish all he intended, no matter what others planned (see Ps. 33:6-11). They remembered he had frustrated Pharaoh and then cleared out the nations occupying the Promised Land so they could flourish. These things proved his saving strength (see Ps. 80:8-11, 19). They proved nothing was too hard for him.¹³

When David felt threatened, he reminded himself that his times were in God’s hands. Nothing could happen to him that God had not foreseen and ordained (see Pss. 31:15 and 139:16 NIV). When he despaired because of his sin, he remembered God’s unfailing love and abundant mercy (see Ps. 69, and especially vv. 5-6, 13, 16, 19-20). When he couldn’t understand why God did not immediately vanquish the wicked, he recalled God’s former wonderful deeds and thus reassured himself that “the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice” (Ps. 9:7). God would, then, take note of the trouble and grief the wicked were causing in order finally to end their terror.¹⁴ When another psalmist

felt threatened in old age, he recalled God’s care for him from before his birth and God’s countless saving acts—and thus regained his confidence that God would bring him honor and comfort again.¹⁵

The psalmists summed up their trust in God in terms of knowing his name: “Those who know your name trust in you” (Ps. 9:10 NIV). “May the LORD answer you in the day of trouble! May the name of the God of Jacob protect you! . . . Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God” (Ps. 20:1, 7). Knowing God’s name means understanding his nature as he has revealed it in his words and deeds.¹⁶ It means remembering that his *steadfast love* “extends to the heavens” and his *faithfulness* “to the clouds,” that his *righteousness* “is like the mountains of God” and his *justice* is “like the great deep” (Ps. 36:5-6; cf. 89:14). This God has saved and will continue to save (see Pss. 136:10-24; 36:6; 109:21; 130:7; 138:8; and 143:12).

Breathing in these truths prompted David—as it should also prompt us—to breathe out his distress to God whenever he was troubled: “O God, save me by your name, and vindicate me by your might” (Ps. 54:1). “[S]pread your protection over them, [O God,] that those who love your name may exult in you” (Ps. 5:11; cf. Jer. 9:23-24).

2. Pray Honestly

In Psalm 91, God himself affirmed the psalmists’ faith:

“Because he holds fast to me in love, I will deliver him;

I will protect him, because he knows my name.

When he calls to me, I will answer him;

I will be with him in trouble;

I will rescue him and honor him.

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

With long life I will satisfy him
and show him my salvation.” (vv. 14-16)

The laments arose from having breathed in this promise. They never merely vented the psalmists’ feelings. They always addressed God as the One who had promised to deliver those who love him and call upon him.

Some of the laments merely called God’s attention to a troublesome situation, confident he would respond as promised:

LORD, how many are my foes!
How many rise up against me!
Many are saying of me,
“God will not deliver him. ”
But you, LORD, are a shield around me,
my glory, the One who lifts my head high.
I call out to the LORD,
and he answers me from his holy mountain. (Ps. 3:1-4 NIV)

Some of them breathed out more desperate appeals: “Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry come to you! Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress! Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call!” (Ps. 102:1-2).

Others, noting some apparent discrepancy between the psalmists’ situations and God’s promise, expressed some perplexity: “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1). Others breathed out deeper perplexity:

Each day I beg for your help, O LORD;

I lift my hands to you for mercy.

Are your wonderful deeds of any use to the dead?

Do the dead rise up and praise you? . . .

O LORD, I cry out to you.

I will keep on pleading day by day.

O LORD, why do you reject me?

Why do you turn your face from me? (Ps. 88:9-10, 13-14 NLT).

Yet still others moved from mere perplexity to frank complaint. For instance, at one point David felt overwhelmed by the treachery of a once-close friend, and so addressed God like this:

God, hear my prayer,

do not hide from my petition,

give me a hearing, answer me,

I cannot rest for complaining.

I shudder at the enemy's shouts,

at the howling of the wicked;

they bring misery crashing down on me,

and vent their fury on me.

My heart aches in my breast,

Death's terrors assail me,

fear and trembling descend on me,

horror overwhelms me.

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

And I say,

‘Oh for the wings of a dove
to fly away and find rest’.

How far I would take my flight,
and make a new home in the desert! (Ps. 55:1-7 JB)

God had promised David rest from all his enemies, and so David felt justified in complaining, even while he trusted God to hear him and respond appropriately:¹⁷

I . . . appeal to God
and [the LORD] saves me;
evening, morning, noon,
I complain, I groan;
he will hear me calling.

His peace can ransom me
from the war being waged on me.
How many are ranged against me!
But God will hear me.

Sovereign from the first, he will humble them

For my part, I put my trust in you. (Ps. 55:16-19, 23 JB; cf. Pss. 64, 142)

A few of these laments even breathe out outright protest:

God, have you finally rejected us,
 Raging at the flock you used to pasture?
 Remember the people you long since made your own,
 your hereditary tribe whom you redeemed,
 and this Mount Zion where you came to live. . . .

Respect the covenant! We can bear no more

Do not let the hard-pressed retreat in confusion,
 give the poor and needy cause to praise your name. (Ps. 74:1-2, 20-21 JB)

All of these responses were biblically faithful because they arose from having breathed in God's promise.

The psalmists were extremely sensitive to shame and disgrace, and so when they felt God had unjustifiably disgraced them they protested: "But you have rejected us and disgraced us You have made us the taunt of our neighbors, the derision and scorn of those around us. You have made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. . . . All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten you, and we have not been false to your covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from your way" (Ps. 44:9, 13-14, 17-18). This was so exasperating that these petitioners risked theological incorrectness in order to give breath to their true feelings: "Wake up, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Get up! Do not reject us forever."¹⁸

They dared such transparency because they knew God knew what was festering in their hearts (see Pss. 44:21; 139:1-4; cf. Heb. 4:13). They knew they would damage their relationships with him by trying to hide the truth, so they spoke what they felt. And thus they coach us always to keep calling on God, to

keep addressing him, even if that means complaining or protesting. In short, we must keep breathing.

This shows that biblical faith is not mere mindless acquiescence.¹⁹ Read Psalms 44, 88, and 89, noting how bleakly each ends. These psalmists expressed their troubles, perplexities, and complaints to God as honestly as they could.²⁰ Their faith involved a remarkable freedom to bare their hearts to him. These laments—along with many others scattered throughout the Old Testament—should encourage us to do the same.

3. *Be Thorough*

We are not only free to bare our hearts to God when we are suffering; we *need* to cry out to him. God promises to answer *when we call* (see Pss. 91:15; 50:15). As David learned, silence (even well-intended silence) can make things worse (see Pss. 39:2; 32:3). We should tell God all our troubles (see Ps. 142:1-2, 5-7 NLT).²¹

The New Testament reiterates this. Paul reminded the severely persecuted Thessalonians that Christian suffering is common and then exhorted them to “pray without ceasing,” presumably to keep Satan from unsettling them because of their suffering.²² James asked, “Is anyone among you suffering?” and then said, “Let him pray” (James 5:13). And our Lord told a story meant to encourage us always to pray and never lose heart (see Luke 18:1-8). Indeed, we shall see in Chapter Six that God has increased human suffering in order to prompt us to look up, listen, and then speak to him.

Praying the laments helps us understand our own suffering. Praying Psalm 102 gave me words that articulated my own distress.[‡] Once David made his initial plea for God to hear and answer him in Psalm 55, he breathed out his feelings in

[‡] See Chapter One, p. 8.

detail, thus modeling the advice he gave to others in verse 22: “Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you.” Expressing our troubles to God helps us cast them more fully on him (cf. 1 Pet. 5:6-7).

Sometimes we must practice these breathing lessons to work through our perplexities. When God revealed to Jeremiah his own family’s plot against him, Jeremiah lamented: “You are always righteous, LORD, when I bring a case before you. Yet I would speak with you about your justice: Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” (Jer. 12:1 NIV with 11:18 and 12:6). Jeremiah wasn’t doubting God’s perfect righteousness, but he was puzzled how it applied in such cases. This prompted him to pray.²³

Sometimes the psalmists found themselves voicing more open-ended questions: “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).

Sometimes they fired volleys of questions at God, probably implying that his apparent neglect was intolerable: “How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Look on me and answer, LORD my God.”²⁴

The psalmists often needed imagery to express their feelings adequately. For instance, Psalm 22 includes this vivid raft of images:

My enemies surround me like a herd of bulls;
 fierce bulls of Bashan have hemmed me in!
 Like lions they open their jaws against me,
 roaring and tearing into their prey.
 My life is poured out like water,

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart is like wax,

melting within me.

My strength has dried up like sunbaked clay.

My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead.

My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs;

an evil gang closes in on me.

They have pierced my hands and feet.

I can count all my bones.

My enemies stare at me and gloat. (Ps. 22:12-17 NLT)

Here David likened his enemies to dangerous, wild animals (vv. 12-13, 16) and fleshed out his psychosomatic reactions with similes of physical dissipation and degradation (vv. 14, 17).²⁵

They often complained of being near death, whether by drowning (see Ps. 69:1, 14-15) or sinking in the mire (see Ps. 69:2, 14) or by having been cast into the depths of the earth, the grave, or the Pit (see Pss. 88:3-6; 130:1). It seems it was only through using such language that they could begin to express how claustrophobic their suffering felt. They conveyed their feeling of being pressed or pursued to the point of exhaustion by likening their enemies' attempts to destroy them to their hiding traps, setting nets, and digging pits (see Pss. 142:3; 35:7; 57:6). This darkened their futures and made their ends feel imminent. Experiences like these ultimately ran deeper than words but they needed to try to express them, nonetheless.²⁶

4. Speak Directly to God

In Chapter Twelve we will explore the proper limits regarding how we ought to address God. Here is one of those limits: The psalmists' laments are always personal. They didn't talk *about* God in their suffering; they always spoke directly *to* him.²⁷ No psalm of lament complained about God by referring to him in the third person—in other words, they never gossiped about him. They always complained directly to God, addressing him as “you.”²⁸ This made their sincere, deliberate complaints acts of faith. For their complaints appealed to the special, personal relationship they had with him and then showed him the respect of addressing him as the righteous, faithful person he was and trusting he would act accordingly.

We must do the same.

5. Remember Again

When suffering overwhelms us, it is easy to despair. Yet, amazingly, with only one possible exception, the psalmists were never so overwhelmed by their suffering as to lose all hope.²⁹ This is because after they breathed out their troubles to God, they breathed in again. They reminded themselves of God's character, his promises, his previous wondrous acts for Israel, and his record of individualized care. By focusing on facts that made them confident their God would ultimately put things right, they countered their feelings with history and theological truth. Faithful lamenting begins and ends with remembering.

We can watch David breathing in Psalm 22. He first exhaled with the plaintive cry,

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,
and by night, but I find no rest. (vv. 1-2)

Then he inhaled by recalling God’s holiness and his previous deliverance of Israel:

Yet, Holy One, you
who make your home in the praises of Israel,
in you our fathers put their trust,
they trusted and you rescued them;
they called to you for help and they were saved,
they never trusted you in vain. (vv. 3-5 JB)

He then exhaled again, breathing out some of the existential horror of his own situation—

Yet here am I, now more worm than man,
scorn of mankind, jest of the people,
all who see me jeer at me,
they toss their heads and sneer,
“He relied on [the LORD], let [the LORD] save him!
If [the LORD] is his friend, let Him rescue him!” (vv. 6-8 JB)³⁰

—only to inhale the history of God’s goodness to him, which then became the basis of a plea:

Yet you are he who took me from the womb;

you made me trust you at my mother's breasts.
On you was I cast from my birth,
and from my mother's womb you have been my God.
Be not far from me,
for trouble is near,
and there is none to help. (vv. 9-11)

He then exhaled once more, breathing out his raft of images.[§] Those images then formed the content of his primary plea—

But you, LORD, be not far from me.
You are my strength; come quickly to help me.
Deliver me from the sword,
my precious life from the power of the dogs.
Rescue me from the mouth of the lions;
save me from the horns of the wild oxen. (vv. 19-21 NIV)

Then, right in the midst of all this careful breathing, David went from pleading, to vowing to praise God, to actually praising him:

I will tell of your name to my brothers;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you:
You who fear the LORD, praise him!
All you offspring of Jacob, glorify him,
and stand in awe of him, all you offspring of Israel!

[§] See pp. 44-45, above.

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard, when he cried to him. (vv. 22-24)

David's perspective changed abruptly. For the rest of the psalm, he took his pleas as answered, focusing on praising God for answering them. As he did so, his sense of deliverance through God's overruling providence became so strong it broadened out into a prediction that

All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.
For kingship belongs to the LORD,
and he rules over the nations. (vv. 27-28)

Indeed, David declared, all humankind would bow before the LORD, and his righteousness would be proclaimed to a people yet unborn (vv. 29-31).

Psalms 22 is extraordinary in many ways, but it is quite ordinary in its movement from complaint through plea to confident praise. This is standard with the Psalms' personal laments.³¹ At some point each psalmist quit lamenting and complaining, quit asking and pleading, and began praising. This shift is often marked by words such as "Yet you" or "But you" or even in some contexts "But I." These words signal a shift in the psalmist's perspective from doubt and alarm to trust and peace.³² The immediate cause of the psalmists' new confidence is usually

unclear, although occasionally they state what prompted it. Once, halfway through a psalm and right before expressing his confidence, David quoted God as having spoken: “‘Because the poor are plundered, because the needy groan, I will now arise,’ says the LORD; ‘I will place him in the safety for which he longs’” (Ps. 12:5). Usually, however, God seems to have enabled the psalmists to hope again simply through their faithful remembrance of their grounds for hope. In any case, they come to trust God again.

FINAL LESSONS

So what do these psalms finally teach us?

First, their frequency assures us that David and the other psalmists regularly found God willing to hear and respond to their complaints and pleas. For suffering people learn not to waste their breath complaining to imaginary persons or to those who won’t listen or respond. “Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed. *O you who hear prayer, to you shall all flesh come*” (Ps. 65:1-2; cf. Ps. 40:1-3).

Second, their constant use in the church’s prayer life testifies that God has regularly and unmistakably met his suffering saints as they have made these laments their own.³³

Third, the all-but-invariable arc from complaint through plea to confident praise means we as God’s saints should always be looking beyond our suffering. Over time, David learned that God would always rescue him because God had heard and answered him again and again.

Blessed be the LORD,

for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

I had said in my alarm,

“I am cut off from your sight.”

But you heard the voice of my pleas for mercy

when I cried to you for help.

Love the LORD, all you his saints!

The LORD preserves the faithful

Be strong, and let your heart take courage,

all you who wait for the LORD! (Psalm 31:21-24)

Because God faithfully delivered his Old Testament saints, they loved him and resolved to call on him as long as they lived:

I love the LORD, for he heard my voice;

he heard my cry for mercy.

Because he turned his ear to me,

I will call on him as long as I live. . . .

For you, LORD, have delivered me from death,

my eyes from tears,

my feet from stumbling. (Ps. 116:1-2, 8 NIV; cf. 71:20-22)

And so they complained expectantly and thus faithfully: “I believed, even when I spoke: ‘I am greatly afflicted’” (Ps 116:10). As we pattern our prayers on these psalms and then find that God hears us, we are meant to learn the same lesson.³⁴

Finally, their sheer brevity helps. As we shall see, we must read four chapters in the book of Ruth and 41 chapters of Job before learning of Naomi’s and Job’s relief. We will see Jeremiah regain his confidence halfway through his book,

although he was never free of suffering. Yet in the psalms, relief usually comes in less than a page. Of course, nothing can guarantee that in our suffering we won't panic or despair. Yet praying these laments, and thus experiencing through them the short distance from complaint through plea to confident praise, can help us breathe. They are meant to assure us that, no matter how dark things seem, God is with us.

And so it must have been for our Lord when, as he hung on the cross, he took the opening cry of Psalm 22 upon his lips (see Matt. 27:46). Surely he would have been conscious, to a degree unmatched by any of us, of that psalm's arc. He would have applied each part to himself, including its final triumphant predictions, and so he was helped to breathe and thus endure unprecedented and forever unparalleled suffering so that he might know the joy that lay ahead (see Heb. 12:2 with 2:12). No doubt a lifetime in the psalms had taught him, as it should teach us, how to choose faithfulness and hopefulness again and again.

Learning these lessons can help us breathe when we are suffering. They help us keep true perspective.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE REST OF THEIR STORIES *God's Steadfast Love for Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah*

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David.

(Ruth 4:13-17 NIV)

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.

(Romans 15:4)

Suffering challenges our settled perspectives, making us question their truth. At its worst, this is deeply disorienting. We saw this in Chapter One. Graham's parents' insistent, unanswered questions about God's apparent indifference to his struggle and death have left them profoundly disoriented, making it extremely difficult for them to find a hopeful (and thus livable) Christian perspective. My seasons of disorienting perplexity involved nothing as horrible, and so my loss of perspective was never as great. Paul's companions felt yet another kind of disorientation in the storm on the Mediterranean Sea. Losing all sense of where they were, and fearing what the wind and waves might do to their ship, they lost all hope they would live.

We orient ourselves by means of stories. Our particular or personal stories locate us in time and space.* The longer ones start in the relatively distant past: "I

* See my remarks about stories near the end of Chapter One.

was born in Warren, Ohio, in 1950, and lived there until I was seven. We then moved to Seattle, where my father was an engineer at Boeing. When I was 17, I suffered a paralyzing accident.” They stretch through the present: “I decided last evening that when I got up this morning, I would spend all day working on this chapter, which I’m now doing.” And they extend into the future: “I hope to have this book finished sometime next year.” These generalities can be made more specific: “I started late this morning, around 7 a.m. Since then, my writing has been interrupted twice by a couple of important e-mails. But I’m still encouraged by the progress I seem to be making.”

These stories are the stuff of ordinary human life. They are so common that we often don’t realize when we are living one. Suppose, for instance, it’s early morning. You feel a twinge of hunger. You think about how you want to satisfy it. You decide you’d like a glass of orange juice. So you get up, walk to the kitchen, get a glass out of the cupboard, put it on the counter, walk over to the refrigerator, open its door, spot the orange juice carton, reach for it, pull it out of the fridge, walk back to the counter, shake the carton, open it, pour some juice in your glass, close the carton, put it back in the fridge, turn back to the counter, pick up your glass, and (finally!) take your first sip. Congratulations! You’ve just finished a very short story.

We also embrace some big, general story that tells us what human life means. Christians embrace the big Christian story, situating their personal stories within that big story and thus orienting themselves according to its overall storyline. Scripture opens with two chapters recounting creation and closes with two more foretelling a consummation of all things. So *Creation* and *Consummation* are the Christian storyline’s bookends, its beginning and end. They portray paradises of divinely ordered blessedness yielding unalloyed pleasures to the human beings inhabiting them.

In between, we find *Rebellion* and *Redemption*. Our first parents forfeited Creation's initial blessedness when they rebelled against God's command not to eat the forbidden fruit, thereby plunging the whole world into sin, suffering, and death. Millennia later, our Lord became incarnate so that he could redeem us from sin. We now hope for his return, which will usher us into the Consummation of his everlasting presence and deliver us from all suffering. More on these themes later.

Orienting ourselves by stories involves using their storylines to put our lives in proper perspective. This gives us meaning and purpose. Deciding to go to the kitchen to get a glass of orange juice gives you a purpose that means you must now engage in a series of acts to fulfill that purpose. This includes getting up, walking to the kitchen, getting out a glass, opening the fridge, spotting the orange juice carton, pouring out some juice, and finally lifting the glass to your lips. Each act derives its meaning from its part in helping you fulfill your purpose. You keep it all in proper perspective by being aware of where you are in the series that began with deciding to go to the kitchen to have a glass of orange juice and will end with lifting the glass to your lips.¹ In other words, you know where you are and what you are doing in terms of a storyline that stretches from a beginning to an end.

Deciding to go to the kitchen involves having specific expectations, such as expecting to find orange juice in the refrigerator and believing you can get there. But suppose you suddenly remember there isn't any orange juice. You won't get up to go to the kitchen then. Or suppose that on your way you encounter water dripping from the hallway ceiling. Stopping to investigate will interrupt your story. It may even change it into a different story that doesn't end by your drinking orange juice in the kitchen.

Longer stories increase the chances that something will interrupt our getting from their beginnings to their ends. This is especially true with our lives' more

significant stories. Suppose a high schooler decides to embrace the storyline that is meant to end in her becoming a primary-care physician. A lot could interrupt that story. She might just change her mind, deciding she would rather be a research biologist. Or she might take a trip that exposes her to a new culture and makes her want to live an entirely different kind of life. She could (as happened to me) suffer a paralyzing accident that would alter her thinking.

Her embracing that storyline may also include unrealistic expectations that invite disillusionment and disorientation. For instance, she needs to consider the costs involved in her getting from its beginning to its end. This includes her needing to understand the educational commitments she must make. Suppose she never considers the stiffer competition she will face in college, requiring her to study much harder. The shock of realizing this and then facing the unexpected prospect of so much hard work could disillusion her, prompting her to reconsider her high school decision.

Her progress to her goal of being a primary-care physician could also be disrupted by her running out of funds to pay for her education or her suffering a serious illness or her getting married and having a baby.

Embracing the big Christian story means taking its perspective as giving our entire lives their overall purpose and meaning. Because the Christian storyline stretches forward into everlasting life and addresses our eternal destiny, no storyline can be longer or more significant. And few stories are as susceptible to interruption.

As with other significant stories, unrealistic expectations concerning the Christian storyline invite disillusionment and disorientation. For instance, Graham's parents were orienting themselves by a widespread, yet highly unrealistic storyline about Christian life. This storyline portrayed their all-powerful, all-knowing heavenly Father as unwilling to let one of his children suffer and die

in the way Graham did, especially if they as his parents petitioned him with earnest, believing prayer. My disorientations involved my being unable to imagine how God could be working for my good through some very disturbing events.² I couldn't find a perspective on them that made satisfactory sense to me. I was unsure, in other words, what kind of story I was in.

With their pattern of progressing from complaint to plea to confident praise, the psalms of lament can help us continue embracing the Christian story. They teach us to adjust our expectations as we learn that God's *hesed*[†]—his *steadfast love and kindness* to his people³—will not always be manifested in easily understandable ways. They show that God does not always shield his saints from danger and anguish, yet his *hesed* guarantees he will be kind to them in the end.⁴ And thus prayerfully reading these psalms can help us be more realistic about the Christian storyline by helping us to keep breathing in the words God has breathed out for us. They remind us who he is and what he does and doesn't promise. They help us hope realistically.

But what happens if we don't find the psalmists' arc from complaint through plea to confident praise plausible? Or what if we despair along our way? Or what if we just don't like the particular story we are part of and rebel against it?

Here is where we need to finish Naomi's, Job's, and Jeremiah's stories. For their stories show that God's steadfast love may still be at work for us, even when we lack eyes to see.

THE REST OF THEIR STORIES

We saw in Chapter Two that even great saints like Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah lost

[†] The little dot under the *h* with a transliterated Hebrew word means the consonant is pronounced as the *ch* in *Bach*. So *hesed* is pronounced *che-SED*.

perspective when they were suffering profoundly. They thus became unsure what kind of story they were living. Even worse, this led them to lose hope and begin believing false stories. Yet Scripture shows this involved their mistaking appearances for reality. For when all was said and done, God rescued them.

The Rest of Naomi's Story: God Restores Her Life's Pleasantness

Ruth's final chapter highlights the immense contrast between how things may appear in the midst of great suffering and how we may see them as we emerge from it. Throughout most of the time covered in Ruth's first chapter, Naomi felt what was happening to her was so irreversibly bad that her name needed to be changed from *Pleasant* to *Bitter*. Yet Ruth's fourth and final chapter reveals that Naomi's inability in the midst of her suffering to hope her life could ever be pleasant again was no measure of God's ability to work out everything for her good. When Naomi took Ruth's infant Obed into her arms at the story's end, her life was being restored by the same God who had made it so bitter. It was no irony to call her *Pleasant* again.

The dialogues between Naomi and the women of Bethlehem highlight this. In Chapter 1, she declared to them, "Do not call me [Pleasant]; call me [Bitter], for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me [Pleasant], when the LORD has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" (vv. 20-21). Having lost husband and sons, her life was decimated by death and emptiness. Yet when Obed was born the prospect of her enjoying a full life reappeared, leading those women to exclaim to Naomi that he would restore her life and care for her in her old age (see 4:15). Moreover, they noted, she was already experiencing the great pleasure of Ruth's love: "For . . . your daughter-in-law . . . loves you and has been better to you than seven sons!"⁵

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

God's part in restoring Naomi brackets the story. Chapter 1, verse 6, states that God ended Israel's famine, prompting Naomi to rise, leave the place where she was staying, and take to the road leading back to Judah (see 1:6-7).⁶ And thus began (although she didn't know it then) the story of her restoration. God's activity is not mentioned again until we read "the LORD gave [the previously barren Ruth] conception, and she bore a son" at 4:13. So God's "gracious provision of fruitfulness for field and womb" opens and closes the story of his *hesed* to Naomi.⁷

In between, God accomplished his *hesed* through his people's *hesed*. Naomi's, Ruth's, and Boaz's steadfast love and kindness to each other animate the story. Each knew it was not all about them. So even in the depths of her grief and hopelessness, Naomi was concerned for her daughters-in-law, urging them to return to their mothers' households because she felt it would be better for them (see 1:8-13, 15). Ruth's loyal and loving reply—

"Don't ask me to leave you and turn back. Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you live, I will live. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD punish me severely if I allow anything but death to separate us!" (1:16-17 NLT)—

exemplifies her *hesed*.⁸ And from the very start, Boaz was kind to Ruth as part of his being loyal, kind, and loving to his kinswoman Naomi.⁹

These saints are never portrayed as praying for themselves, highlighting the fact that those who practice *hesed* think more of others than they think of themselves.¹⁰ Their *hesed* also appears primarily in action rather than in words or feelings.¹¹ For instance, Ruth doesn't talk much. She just *does* what is loving—

among other things, demonstrating her *hesed* for Naomi in marrying Boaz rather than preferring someone younger.¹² Yet God honors those who practice *hesed* and repays their kindness to others with kindness to them.¹³ And thus Naomi's selfless, steadfast love for Ruth became the vehicle for her own restoration. More generally, when we are suffering profoundly we need to know that it is often only as we concentrate on relieving the suffering of others that we ourselves find full relief.

All of this gets nicely wrapped up in a crucial verbal *inclusio*.[‡] At 1:20-21, Naomi had said, "Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has *brought me back empty*." Then at 4:15 when the Bethlehem women exclaim that Obed will be "a restorer of life and a nourisher of [Naomi's] old age," the phrase the ESV translates as "restorer of life" is literally translated as "he who causes life *to come back*." In each case the italicized words translate the Hebrew word *shuwb*, which thus forms the *inclusio*.¹⁴ Since God gave Ruth conception and thus ultimately provided the child who was restoring Naomi's life, both Naomi's desolation and restoration are attributed to God.

And so it seems Naomi was right in taking God to have ordained her suffering even if she was wrong to think it was so terrible that not even he could make her life pleasant again. Moreover, from our New Testament perspective we can now see that God intended Naomi's suffering to serve a far greater purpose than anything she could know in her lifetime. His providence throughout the events reported in the book of Ruth show that God in his power and faithfulness was doing far more than any of its participants could ever have asked or imagined. For out of Naomi's desperate plight God brought Obed, who fathered Jesse, who fathered David, the great forefather of our Lord. Here, then, is one instance of the

[‡] An *inclusio* is a literary device—in this case, the repetition of a particular word—that puts bookends on both the beginning and end of some meaningful unit of text.

truth that “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” (Romans 15:4). Naomi’s story is not all about Naomi. It is not even (as perhaps Ruth’s author thought) all about David. It is ultimately about God’s providential provision of our Lord.

Job Comfortably at Home Again

The book of Ruth shows that while Naomi temporarily lost hope that God would be good to her, she didn’t lose hope altogether—or at least not for long.¹⁵ Job’s despair ran deeper. Although the first two chapters of his book reveal that it was God’s great regard for Job’s righteousness that prompted his miseries, Job himself didn’t know this.¹⁶ And as those miseries continued, Job came to believe God was being wrathful to him, hated him,¹⁷ and had even—figuratively speaking—gnashed his teeth at him (see 16:9; cf. 19:11 and 30:21). Except for one remarkable exception,¹⁸ Job’s prolonged suffering seems to have regularly obscured his horizon of hope. In fact, his very poignant expressions of dashed hopes and personal hopelessness outnumber his expressions of hopefulness by at least eight to one.¹⁹ At one point, his suffering led him to lament that his days were “swifter than a weaver’s shuttle and [came] to their end without hope,” which then led him to the utterly despairing conclusion that his eye would “*never again* see good” (7:6-7).

Why did Job despair so deeply? Partly because of his social situation. Naomi’s grief was always leavened by human kindness. Ruth declared her irrevocable love and loyalty to Naomi as they paused on the road leading back to Bethlehem, and no hint of censure taints the welcome the women of Bethlehem gave them, despite the fact that Naomi and her family had forsaken Bethlehem during a famine and she was returning with a Moabite widow.²⁰ Boaz’s generosity

to Ruth for Naomi's sake included his interpretation of Ruth's advances towards him at night on the threshing floor (see 3:1-14). Later, as he finalized his plans to marry her, the onlookers prayed that God would bless the previously barren Ruth with offspring (see 4:9-12).

Contrast Job's situation. After his children died, he was afflicted with sores so loathsome that people shunned him.²¹ He headed out of the city to sit on an ash heap, where he scraped his sores with pieces of broken pottery. His wife urged him to curse God and die (see 2:8-9). His spirits would have lifted when his three friends arrived, who at first responded appropriately (see 2:11-13). But they soon took offense at his words of grief and confusion,²² presuming his suffering was punishment for sin. They then drove their perspective home mercilessly.²³

Job's first exchange with Eliphaz made him feel he needed to warn his friends they were treading on dangerous ground, ground that involved their withholding *hesed* from him: "Anyone who withholds kindness [*hesed*] from a friend forsakes the fear of the Almighty. But [you] . . . are as undependable as intermittent streams, as the streams that overflow when darkened by thawing ice and swollen with melting snow, but that stop flowing in the dry season, and in the heat vanish from their channels." He likened his seeking comfort from them to desert caravans that would confidently turn off from their routes seeking water, only to find none and then perish in the wastelands. "Now you too have proved to be of no help; you see something dreadful and are afraid" (see 6:14-21 NIV).

It seems these four friends had pledged to support each other through thick and thin.²⁴ And so Job expected kindness and sympathy from the other three. Finding only condemnation aggravated his grief.²⁵

Job's despair was fed by his and his friends' demand for explanation. If his friends could explain Job's suffering in terms of hidden but egregious sin, then they could hope they wouldn't suffer similarly. And Job, of course, wanted to

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

know why the God whom he had always worshiped and obeyed was treating him so harshly.²⁶ Both parties needed to realize that we cannot always explain human suffering and that to insist on explaining particular instances of it can fuel falsehood and despair.

Job's friends needed to learn that a person's suffering may have nothing to do with that person's sin (cf. John 9:1-3) and, indeed, that God may ordain a saint's suffering for no discernible reason (see Job 2:3; 9:17). We know from Job's prologue that for Job to have known what prompted his suffering would have defeated its purpose: his exemplary fear of God was being probed to see if it would survive the removal of all of the advantages that had accompanied it (see 1:8-12; 2:3-6). He passed that test (see 1:20-22; 2:9-10). Yet God continued afflicting him.²⁷ Why? We are never told.²⁸

Snatching at an explanation for his continued suffering, Job jumped to the conclusion that "God has wronged me" (19:6 NIV). This led God to manifest his displeasure by appearing in a whirlwind to challenge Job: "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them" (38:2-3 NLT). Job was presuming he had an adequate understanding of God's ways (see 38:4).²⁹ He thought he was seeing everything more or less whole and complete, when in fact his knowledge even of his own story was only fragmentary. God's questions were meant to help him realize this: Where was Job at Creation? Was he with God as God laid the earth's foundation? Did he know who marked off the earth's dimensions or who kept the sea within its proper boundaries as it burst into existence? Was he sovereign over the morning? Had he seen the gates of death? Could he control the rain? Did he hunt with the lions or provide the raven its prey? Did he give the warhorse its courage and strength?³⁰

God concluded this series of questions with one more: “Will the one who contends with the Almighty correct him? Let him who accuses God answer him!” (40:2 NIV). Awed by God’s appearance in the whirlwind and convinced now of his ignorance, Job replied: “I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say” (40:4-5 NLT). But the whirlwind continued and God persisted: “Would you discredit my justice? Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (40:8 NIV). These words may have been provoked by Job’s final speech, where it seems he was so convinced he was right that he could force God to vindicate him:

Oh, that I had one to hear me!

(Here is my signature! Let the Almighty answer me!)

Oh, that I had the indictment written by my adversary!

Surely I would carry it on my shoulder;

I would bind it on me as a crown;

I would give him an account of all my steps;

*like a prince I would approach him.*³¹ (31:35-37)

This bold declaration is surrounded by a series of self-imprecatory curses where Job affirmed his utter moral purity (see 31:1-34, 38-40).³²

We know from Job’s prologue that he was indeed “a blameless and upright man” who feared God and turned away from evil (2:3; cf. 1:1, 8). And so it wasn’t wrong for him to insist on his innocence. But it was wrong for him to think he could appear regally before God and successfully contend against him. And so God challenged Job’s assumption that he could do anything to save himself:

“Have you an arm like God,

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

and can you thunder with a voice like his?
 Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity;
 clothe yourself with glory and splendor.
 Pour out the overflowings of your anger,
 and look on everyone who is proud and abase him.
 Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low
 and tread down the wicked where they stand.
 Hide them all in the dust together;
 bind their faces in the world below.
Then will I also acknowledge to you
that your own right hand can save you.” (40:9-14)

God alone can do these things. Thus he alone is Lord over history. Job lacked God’s power, as well as his majesty, dignity, glory, and splendor. Consequently, he couldn’t force God to vindicate him. If justice was to be done, then God would have to do it.

God’s speeches reiterated that he is both Creator and Lord. Consequently, his perspective on things is vastly different than ours, at once perfectly detailed and comprehensively panoramic.³³ As the world’s Maker and Sustainer, he alone knows the story of the world’s beginning, middle, and end. In other words, he alone fully knows and completely rules over the natural and moral worlds.³⁴

At the end of God’s speeches, Job finally understood:

“I know that you can do all things;
 no purpose of yours can be thwarted. . . .
 Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,

things too wonderful for me to know. . . .

My ears had heard of you

but now my eyes have seen you.

Therefore I despise myself

and repent in dust and ashes.” (42:2-3, 5-6 NIV)

Job’s despair had arisen because he had settled on an explanation of his suffering too quickly. He had thought he could only make sense of what was happening to him by concluding God was being unfair. Hadn’t he always shown *hesed* to everyone around him? And wasn’t he right, then, to expect *hesed* from them? Wasn’t there reason to hope his righteousness would ultimately be rewarded?³⁵

There was, but he had been expecting his rewards too soon. God sovereignly delayed them for reasons Job could not even guess at.

Job’s deep despair drives home how hard it can be for even the most godly among us to keep perspective and thus avoid acquiring false beliefs in the midst of great suffering. Yet his despair was unwarranted. He thought he knew the inevitable end of his story—that his eye would never again see good—when only God, as the world’s Maker and Sustainer, knows such things. And, in fact, Job’s final chapter shows him comfortably at home again. Moreover, even though Job had hastily declared that God had wronged him, God in his steadfast love considered Job’s words as a whole, declaring them to have been right (42:7). So it is possible to be faithful in the midst of profound suffering even when in our perplexity we actively question what God is doing. And God in his *hesed* may even forgive our settling on a false explanation.

Scenes of a Faithful, Hopeful, and Bold Jeremiah

Jeremiah's words in Chapter 20, verse 7, seem to imply that he was even more deeply affected by the events climaxing in his clash with Pashhur than Job was by the aggravations accompanying his prolonged illness. Jeremiah's words can be read in a way that avoids portraying his suffering as having led him to believe God had deceived and overpowered him,³⁶ but such a reading seems strained at best. Moreover, it seems Jeremiah was not merely tempted to doubt God's goodness to him. His words seem to imply that he temporarily believed God was not good, period. Job's suffering tempted him to adopt false beliefs about his future and God's posture towards him, but Jeremiah's ordeal prompted him to believe falsehoods about God's very nature.³⁷

Nothing in his book shows Jeremiah deliberately reorienting himself after his crisis. Yet the words that follow his despairing cry, "Why did I come out from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?" are simply these: "This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD" (Jer. 21:1).

This word, however, did not come to Jeremiah immediately. His accusations and curses in Chapter 20 probably took place sometime between 609-605 B.C., while the events recorded at the beginning of Chapter 21 probably took place around 588.³⁸ Yet whenever this new word came to him, Jeremiah proclaimed it boldly. His desire to renounce his prophetic office had vanished,³⁹ even though he was imprisoned for proclaiming this new word. Yet he did not despair.⁴⁰ In fact, he went on to proclaim the LORD's promise of a hope and a future to the Babylonian exiles (see 29:4, 10-14), and he even redeemed a field from a kinsman in order to show that he believed God's word that Israelites would someday again buy houses, fields, and vineyards in Israel (see 32:1-25).

Virtually all of what is found in Jeremiah 21-45 can be assigned dates in the last twenty years of Jeremiah's ministry, after his mistreatment at Pashhur's hand.

Chapters 21, 29, and 32 portray him as having recovered his faith, hope, and strength. What accounted for this? We aren't told. Yet the same Jeremiah who reacted so negatively to the events recorded in Chapter 20 began fulfilling his prophetic tasks again.

The books of Ruth and Job present us with complete stories, stories that progress from their beginnings through their middles to their ends. Naomi's and Job's lives come full circle. Both stories end happily. And so they teach us that predictions about how a suffering saint's story will end are uncertain at best.⁴¹ They show that the quality of a saint's future is not entirely dependent on whether he or she can, while suffering, faithfully muster up true beliefs. In fact, it doesn't even depend on whether that saint can avoid believing a false story. For in spite of her believing otherwise, it was in the end still fitting to call Naomi *Pleasant*, and Job received again the proper reward for his righteousness when the LORD blessed his "latter days . . . more than his beginning." His eye again saw good.⁴²

Jeremiah's story is incomplete. Near the end of his book we read, "Thus far are the words of Jeremiah" (51:64b). Nothing more is said about him. We are not even told that he died. His story just breaks off. And his book does not end happily. Yet Jeremiah regained his hope and faithfully completed his prophetic task in spite of his ongoing suffering. And so his story teaches us that a saint's future may not even depend on whether he can keep himself from rebelling against his story or restrain himself from uttering what are near-blasphemies. In Jeremiah's case, the quality of his future ultimately hinged on nothing other than the reality of God's steadfast love for him. Because of his *hesed* for Jeremiah, "the God who gives endurance and encouragement" restored Jeremiah's hope (Rom. 15:5 NIV), even though he never gave him earthly peace, security, or happiness.

This is sobering and yet encouraging. For sometimes our hope wavers. Sometimes we may rebel against the story we have to live. Yet God in his steadfast

love may still be sustaining us, as Paul teaches us in 2 Timothy 2, when he repeated this “trustworthy saying”:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
 if we endure, we will also reign with him;
 if we deny him, he also will deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself. (vv. 11-13)

Even when our suffering prompts us to lose so much perspective that our faith and hope flicker and nearly die, God will remain faithful to us, as long as we don’t deny him. Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah didn’t deny him, and so all of their failings were forgiven them.

MAINTAINING PERSPECTIVE

The New Testament warns us against losing hope. It declares that our hope needs to remain strong and unwavering, because God is not pleased with those who shrink back.⁴³ Once we have embraced the big Christian story and begun to live its storyline, we must not let anything interrupt our continuing to live it. Its perspective must remain ours for the rest of our lives. As our Lord reiterated on several occasions, it is “the one who endures to the end [who] will be saved.”⁴⁴

Yet as Naomi’s, Job’s, and Jeremiah’s stories make clear, suffering can test our endurance. As the clouds of suffering rolled over them, they lost perspective. Things appeared so dark it seemed nothing good could lie ahead. And so their

hopes vanished. They even began believing falsehoods—most crucially, the falsehood that God was no longer manifesting his steadfast love to them.

We now know they were wrong. Their stories teach us that appearance is not always reality. What appears to be the story of a life may not be what it actually is. God was still working for their good.

This should give us hope even in horrific circumstances. By all means, let us strive to maintain our hope, for we know God is not pleased with those who shrink back. Let us practice the psalmists' breathing lessons. And let us remember stories like Naomi's, Job's, and Jeremiah's that show that things are not always as they seem. As Job's story teaches us, we cannot always know what God is doing because that could defeat his purposes. He may be working far beyond whatever we can ask or imagine.

And so even God's apparent indifference to Graham's suffering does not show that God abandoned him. We have no reason to believe Graham denied his Lord. And we do not know what God may have been teaching him. Could Graham have learned something through the calamity that was his life's end that will shine throughout the Consummation? If we have grasped the depths of Naomi's, Job's, and Jeremiah's suffering, then who are we to say that God must not ever work good for some of his saints in such fearsome ways?⁴⁵

Right now, Graham's parents are suffering profoundly. They have been tempted, at times, to rebel against the story they are living. But the end of their son's story may be resplendent with glories none of us now can see. Certainly we can now pray that at the Consummation they will lift their tearful, sometimes defiant eyes and say, "Oh, now we see!"

We must still address many issues and find answers to many questions. But keeping these Old Testament lessons in mind can help us breathe, endure, and keep our faith. Indeed, they were written to give us hope (see Rom. 15:4)

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER ONE

¹ *Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1971).

² “The name ‘David’ would appear to be connected with the Hebrew verbal root *d-w-d*, ‘to love.’ ‘David,’ then, would mean ‘beloved,’ presumably by Yahweh” (David F. Payne in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, revised [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], I.871).

³ Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: An Analytical Look at the Problem of Pain* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994), 9. Blocher’s book is about the problem of evil and not just about the problem of Christian suffering. He believes the larger problem is insoluble, which leads him to observe that “the *problem* of evil . . . torments the human mind. It is a ‘problem’ in the original sense of the word, that of an obstacle thrown across our path, something that blocks our view, for it resists our unremitting efforts to *understand* it.” There are theological, philosophical, and existential issues here, all of which we shall address in time.

I think the reasons why God has ordained particular Christians to suffer in particular ways may be beyond our ever finding out, although his utter and complete goodness in ordaining what he does will be apparent in the life to come (see Rom. 8:28 and 2 Cor. 4:17).

⁴ I am using the phrase “God’s Old Testament saints” to refer to God’s Old Testament people. As C. John Collins explains in reference to Psalm 4:3, the Hebrew word the ESV translates there as “the godly” is *hasid*, which is

the adjective form of “steadfast love” (Hb. [*hesed*]). This term, variously rendered “godly,” “saint,” “faithful one,” and “holy one” in the Psalms, refers to those who have genuinely laid hold of God’s steadfast love. (*ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008], 945)

The New Testament enlarges the class to include God’s New Testament people (see, e.g., Matt. 27:52 with Acts 9:13 and Rom. 1:7). I shall often refer to all of those whom God has redeemed as “the saints.”

⁵ See, e.g., 2 Timothy 1:8 and 2:3 with Philippians 1:29.

⁶ The psalmists report similar experiences. See especially Psalms 77:4 and 102:7.

⁷ Augustine, *Sermons*, Vol. 9 (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1994), 282 (Sermon 339, 4).

⁸ Scripture licenses this metaphor in passages like Ezekiel 32:7-8; Joel 2:1-2, 10; 3:14-15; and Zephaniah 1:14-17. The psalmists often likened their suffering to being in storms at sea, as we

shall see.

⁹ More technically, getting our bearings in life involves understanding our lives as including a set or series of *narratives*—that is, a set or series of stories that orient us to life by enabling us to perceive sets of events and actions as involving meaningful sequences. Some narratives are short (e.g., “When I went to the grocery store today, you’ll never guess who I saw! . . .”) and others longer (e.g., “My high school and college years were quite eventful. . .”). Christians and others who believe a personal God has created the world for a purpose believe he has a narrative that articulates how he will accomplish that purpose. They believe the story of their lives should track God’s narrative. I shall have a lot more to say about how narratives give our lives meaning as we go on.

Of course, my using the word *story* to refer to narratives does not imply that those narratives are untrue. I may, for instance, ask you, What is your life story? and expect you will (so far as you are able) tell me a true story about your life. In fact, you are obliged to tell as true a story as you can.

¹⁰ See Psalm 107:23-29, Jonah 1:4, and Mark 4:35-41.

¹¹ See 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10 for Paul’s first-person chronicle of his sufferings and afflictions, including his thorn in the flesh. Paul Barnett explores in detail the place of suffering in Paul’s life and ministry in his *2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

¹² See Romans 5:3-5 with 2 Corinthians 1:3-7.

CHAPTER TWO

¹ Why do we tend to feel this way? Part of the reason may be that we don’t really notice profound suffering until after we have experienced it. Until then, it is as if there is no such thing.

The existential unreality of profound suffering for many of us means it can challenge our faith when we first confront it. When 26 people—including 20 first-graders—were shot to death by a disturbed young man in Newtown, Connecticut, on December 14, 2012, his act seemed so evil that some pastors were asking, How could God allow this? Their tone showed they were doubting their faith. But then they were overlooking similar suffering in Scripture, such as Herod’s slaughter of at least as many innocent children in Matthew 2:16-18. Jeremiah predicted that slaughter, showing it was no surprise to God. And the fact that Matthew included it in his gospel means he didn’t think it told against Christian faith. Indeed, the first Christians took the prediction’s fulfillment by the actual tragic event to confirm that Jesus was God’s own Son.

² The ESV’s “The LORD has testified against me” means, as C. John Collins puts it, that Naomi was “interpreting her hard circumstances as God’s testimony against her sins.” Collins spells out the reasons for rendering the Hebrew this way in his article, “Ambiguity and Theology in Ruth: *Ruth 1:21 and 2:20*,” *Presbyterion* 19/2 (1993). The quotation is from p. 99.

The phrase, “the Almighty [*Shaddai*] has brought calamity upon me” confirms this rendering, since referring to God as *Shaddai* acknowledges him as creation’s all-powerful Ruler who repays human beings for the good or bad they do (see, e.g., Job 34:10-12; 37:22-24).

For more in support of this interpretation, see Frederic W. Bush's discussion of these two phrases in the *Word Biblical Commentary*, Vol. 9: Ruth, Esther (Dallas: Word, 1996), 93.

³ Many commentators interpret Naomi's claims at 1:13, 20-21 as involving her questioning God's goodness, but some do not. I side with the latter because (1) the fact that Naomi in her grief set out for Israel means that she still took the LORD to be her God (see 1:6-7); her heading for home suggests that she was not rebelling or running away from him. (2) Even in her desolation she commended the daughters-in-law whom she loved to the LORD's loving care (see 1:8-9). (3) Ruth would have been hesitant to identify so fully with Naomi, Naomi's people, and Naomi's God if either she or Naomi felt that Naomi's God was not good or was not to be obeyed (see 1:16-17). (4) Very soon after arriving back in Bethlehem Naomi invoked the LORD's blessing on Boaz with the observation that God in his kindness had not forsaken the living (including herself) or the dead (see 2:20). (5) If Naomi took her suffering to be just punishment for some sin, then she may very well have taken the Almighty to be righteous in afflicting her. Her awareness of her sin may have meant that she was also aware that she had no ground for complaint (cf. Ezra 9:10-15 for a potential parallel). Consequently, I take Naomi's statements in 1:13, 20-21 as her merely reporting, rather than her protesting or complaining about, what God had done to her.

Yet even if the majority of commentators are right, Naomi's complaints would not threaten the points I will make about her in the Chapter Four.

⁴ Job's symptoms suggest a kind of wasting disease like what strikes untreated AIDS patients, including festering sores and scabs (see 7:5; 30:30a), fever (see 30:30b), excessive thinness (see 17:7b; 19:20), gaunt, death-like eyes (see 16:16), and constant, gnawing pain (see 30:17b). His appearance made everyone abhor him (see 19:13-20; 30:10). Yet Job still didn't curse God, initially remaining resigned to receive whatever God might send him (see 2:10).

Job's story shows how profound suffering can overwhelm even one whom the Old Testament identifies as a great hero of righteousness (see Ezek. 14:14, 20).

⁵ Deuteronomy indicates that a disease like Job's could signify that God had cursed the sufferer (see 28:22, 35; Ps. 106:15).

⁶ The Hebrew word for *guard* when Job asked God, "Am I the sea, or a sea monster, that you set a guard over me?" is *mishmar*. That noun is related to the Hebrew verb *shamar*, which means *to keep, guard, observe, or give heed*. *Shamar* can be used positively, as Job himself used it at 29:2-3 when he said, "How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over [*shamar*] me, when his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness!" Or it can be used negatively, as Job usually did (see 10:14; 13:27; 14:16) because he was unaware that his suffering came out of God's having declared him to be unique, "a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (1:8 and 2:3).

It is useful for sufferers to remember that during his suffering, Job regularly attributed bad motives to God out of ignorance of what God was actually doing.

⁷ Some of Job's statements in Chapter 9 (see, e.g., vv. 3, 16, 19) may seem to suggest otherwise.

Yet a good case can be made that even these claims don't falsify the trust that Job exhibits in Chapter 23.

⁸ J. A. Thompson comments:

the call here to a life of celibacy is unique in the OT. In the ancient Near East, and therefore in Israel, a large family betokened divine blessing (Gen. 22:17; Ps. 127:3-4; etc.). Sterility and barrenness, on the other hand, were regarded as a curse (Gen. 30:1; 1 Sam. 1:6-8; etc.), and virginity was regarded as a cause for mourning (Judg. 11:37). An old Sumerian proverb curses celibacy. Hence it was altogether unusual for a young man in Israel like Jeremiah to remain unmarried The command to Jeremiah came in a peculiarly emphatic form. The negative used was *lō'* rather than the more usual *'al*. The use of *lō'* denotes something permanent and indicated that never, in any circumstances, was the prophet to marry. A similar usage occurs in the Ten Commandments. In a sense, Jeremiah was given his own special commandment. (*The Book of Jeremiah* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 403-404)

⁹ These “confessions” were probably expressed privately, for Jeremiah, like the Psalmist (see Ps. 73:15), was probably aware that to voice them publicly would tend to undermine others' faith. Gerhard von Rad observes that these passages

involve all the emotional conflicts brought on by [Jeremiah's] calling. We encounter here the whole gamut of human emotional problems: anxiety over shame, fear of failure, despair over one's ability to cope, doubts concerning articles of faith, loneliness, . . . disillusionment leading ultimately to hatred towards God. No feeling that can possibly come into a human heart is missing. (“The Confessions of Jeremiah,” in James L. Crenshaw, ed., *Theodicy in the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 97)

¹⁰ We are told that Jeremiah was struck or beaten and put “in the stocks” (20:2), but it is unclear exactly what the Hebrew word that the ESV translates as “stocks” means. If its meaning is tied to its etymology—*mahpeketh* comes from a root that involves something being wrenched or distorted—then it probably means that Jeremiah was tortured, which, along with the fact that this apparently is the first time that he was physically abused for speaking the prophetic word, seems to have triggered his violent emotional reaction.

¹¹ This passage has been interpreted in many ways, including some arguing that Jeremiah was not actually cursing the man who announced his birth. For instance, the *Word Biblical Commentary* adopts Leo Prijs's proposal that verse 15 is “not the typical optative or wish construction . . . , but a statement of fact, indicative mood.” Then if, “as Holladay suggests, the statement includes v 14 as well, the poem has a slightly different thrust. Rather than desiring a curse, Jeremiah is stating a fact: the day was cursed because of his birth and the man was cursed for relating the news of his birth” (Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 1-25* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1991], 277f.).

Derek Kidner takes a different tack. He takes these verses as expressing a “wild cry of pain” that involves some “extravagance” on Jeremiah's part, but an extravagance that affords us

some insight into “some other extremes of invective in Scripture.” “For even if (which is unlikely) he genuinely wished a particular day of the year to become one of ill omen (14), he certainly could not have seriously consigned his father’s friend to misery and death for not perpetrating a double murder (15-17)!” He then continues:

What these curses convey, therefore, is *a state of mind, not a prosaic plea. The heightened language is not there to be analysed: it is there to bowl us over.* Together with other tortured cries from him and his fellow sufferers, these raw wounds in Scripture remain lest we forget the sharpness of the age-long struggle, or the frailty of the finest overcomers. (*The Message of Jeremiah: Against wind and tide* [Leicester, England, and Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1987], 81; my emphasis)

I think Jeremiah may have meant what he said; and if so, then this passage shows there is very little that God’s saints may not entertain while suffering profoundly. His curse is especially shocking when we remember that he was not some loose talker who would not think twice about guarding his mouth and keeping watch over his lips (see Ps. 142:3). He would have known that we will be judged for our every loose word (see Prov. 10:19; Eccl. 5:2; Matt 12:33-37). Yet, as we shall see, this did not preclude God’s continuing to be gracious and merciful to him.

¹² This valley located directly to the south of Jerusalem was the city dump. The New Testament Greek word *géenna*—sometimes transliterated as *Gehenna* and standing for the place of eternal punishment (see Mark 9:43-48)—is derived from an abbreviation of the Hebrew name for this valley, which reveals how it came to be viewed after God fulfilled Jeremiah’s prophecy.

¹³ “The reference seems to be to the overthrow of all the ideas and intentions which the people carried out in the land in every department of their life” (Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 450). In other words, God was going to destroy all of the ordinary, everyday hopes of his apostate people.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Psalms 6:2-3; 27:7-10; 42:9-10; 44:23-26; 102:1-11.

¹⁵ Moses confronted God somewhat similarly when he thought that God was causing the Israelites grief by not rescuing them from Pharaoh’s wrath (see Ex. 5:22-23), and God declares through Ezekiel that if a prophet is deceived and speaks a false word, then “I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet” (Ezek. 14:9; cf. 1 Kings 22:19-23). Yet Scripture makes it clear that God never breaks his promises and indeed neither does nor can lie (see 1 Sam. 15:29; Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:13-19; 2 Tim. 2:13). Of course, some of God’s promises are conditioned on the obedience of his people (see, e.g., Josh. 23:14-16), including the promise he made to Jeremiah to deliver him as long as Jeremiah would steadfastly trust in God rather than be terrified by those opposing him.

Commenting on vv. 7-10, William L. Holladay notes:

Verse 7a is unique, an accusation of deception leveled at Yahweh. There are many complaints in the Psalms that Yahweh has taken the psalmist to the gates of Sheol or the like (for example, Ps 88:7), but there is no parallel for this accusation Verse 7b is a

more conventional statement, the complaint that the suppliant is the cause of derision (Pss 22:8; 44:14-15; 79:4); but vv 8-9 connect that derision with the word of Yahweh, and that is new. Verse 10 continues the complaint by a description of the enemies, including a quotation of the words used by the enemies (compare Pss 22:9; 71:11); but some of these words were originally [Jeremiah's] own, given him by Yahweh!" (*Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 551).

I shall note in my fourth chapter how it is just possible to construe Jeremiah's words in a way that avoids portraying his suffering as having tempted him to acquire some false beliefs about God, although I think it is clear that he did at least flirt with such false beliefs.

Regarding another aspect of this verse from Jeremiah, it was of course not unusual for God's spokesmen to feel that he had his strong hand upon them (see, e.g., Isa. 8:11; Ezek. 3:14; 40:1) and was in some sense constraining them to act as they did (see 1 Cor. 9:16).

¹⁶ In his *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1980), Jean Améry observes that with the very first blow a prisoner receives in custody, he loses his trust in the world, including his trust that "the other person will spare me—more precisely stated, that he will respect my physical, and with it also my metaphysical, being" (28; see 24-29). I think Jeremiah felt something very much like what Améry describes after Pashhur struck him or had him beaten (see 20:2, where *nakah* can mean either strike or beat), as long as we substitute 'trust in God' for "trust in the world."

Jeremiah's accusations in verse 7 may be much darker. The Hebrew words *pātâ* (translated in the NIV as "deceived") in the first line and *ḥāzaq* (translated as "overpowered") in the second have sexual overtones—*pātâ* sometimes refers to someone who has been *seduced* (see Exod. 22:16; Judg. 16:5) and *ḥāzaq* sometimes indicates that someone has been raped (see Deut. 22:25; 2 Sam. 13:11, 14; cf. Prov. 7:13). This led the great Jewish biblical scholar Abraham Heschel to translate the verse as

*O Lord, Thou hast seduced me,
And I am seduced;
Thou hast raped me
And I am overcome.*

(Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction* [New York: Harper and Row, 1969], 113.)
In attempting to make sense of this sort of accusation against God, J. A. Thompson says:

Jeremiah seems to be saying that he had understood his relationship to Yahweh to be something like a marriage bond but it was now clear that he had been deceived, enticed by Yahweh, who had used him and tossed him aside. The language verges on the blasphemous. . . . But more than that, Yahweh had *laid hold on* ("overpowered" . . .) him and had prevailed over him Perhaps the sense is, "you forced me," carrying on the metaphor of seduction. (*The Book of Jeremiah*, 459)

Holladay finds Jeremiah using marriage images for his relationship with God in 15:16 and 20:11 (see *Jeremiah 1*, 458-59, 549-50). I think he may be right that Jeremiah's "acceptance of the call to be a messenger of Yahweh's word gave him the delight analogous to that in marriage" (459), which would fit with interpreting the accusation in 20:7 in terms of seduction.

If this sort of interpretation is correct, then Jeremiah was accusing God of something much worse than mere deception. He was accusing God of having first deliberately enticed him and then psychologically violated him in an utterly despicable way. Evidence for such an interpretation may include Jeremiah's claim at 15:16 that when he found God's words, he devoured them as his heart's joy and delight because he took himself to be called by God's name. This parallels how lovers read letters from their beloveds. All of this, then, apparently motivated him to sit apart from his fellow countrymen because he identified with God rather than with them (see 15:17).

¹⁷ The fact that Jeremiah was forbidden to marry was a very great tribulation by Old Testament standards, as J. R. Soza makes clear:

Jeremiah is called . . . to identify with God in his being obliged to forgo marriage and children so as to symbolize the barrenness of a land under judgment (16:1-4). God signifies the complete end of his relationship with Israel by his representative prophet's not having a wife or bearing children. Natural life as the Israelites know it is becoming extinct. Jeremiah himself is called to extinction. By his life he symbolizes the death of his people. . . . *Jeremiah's bachelorhood . . . is so unusual among the Jews that the OT has no word for bachelor, and it undoubtedly reinforces questions about him.* (*New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000], s.v. "Jeremiah"; my emphasis)

¹⁸ Jeremiah's ministry had begun with a blast of negative preaching that predicted disaster for God's apostate people (see, e.g., 2:1-37) but that remained unfulfilled for well over twenty years (see 25:3).

¹⁹ See 17:15-18. Jeremiah's request in v. 18, "Let those be put to shame who persecute me, but let me not be put to shame; let them be dismayed, but let me not be dismayed; bring upon them the day of disaster; destroy them with double destruction!" seems to be a response to his opponents' taunt, in v. 15, "Where is the word of the LORD? Let it come!" Jeremiah's plea "LORD, don't terrorize me!" in v. 17 (NLT) may very well express his fear that, despite the fact that he has not shirked his prophetic task and has spoken all and only what God commanded (see v. 16), perhaps his words were indeed to go unfulfilled.

Jeremiah's knowledge that God had enticed—the Hebrew word is again *pātâ*—Ahab to his death by sending a lying spirit into the mouths of all of Ahab's prophets (see 1 Kings 22:13-23) probably aggravated his suspicions.

²⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Volume II, *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions* [New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1965], 205. My points in this paragraph echo von Rad's observations.

We shall see that often the worst part of profound suffering is our inability to make sense of it because we can't trace God's good hand in it, as Jeremiah's confessions often convey.

²¹ Kidner notes that in Jeremiah's declaration in verse 13, "Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers," the phrase "the needy" is in the singular, signifying that Jeremiah was referring specifically to his own deliverance from the stocks (see *The Message of Jeremiah*, 80).

CHAPTER THREE

¹ See, e.g., Dietrich Bonhoeffer's little classic, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) and Eugene H. Peterson's *Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989).

² Old Testament prayer characteristically calls upon God as "LORD"—in other words, Yahweh—and thus addresses him by his 'personal' name (see Gen. 4:26, Deut. 4:7, and endnote 12).

³ See, e.g., Psalm 150:1-2: "Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness!" This is third-person language, which refers to something by means of the pronouns *he, she, or it*, or as *him, her, or it*, or as *his, hers, or its*. Its plurals are *they, them, and theirs*. It doesn't address God directly, although it refers to him.

The psalms that refer to God exclusively in the third person are 1, 2, 11, 14, 24, 29, 34, 37, 46, 47, 49, 50, 53, 78, 81, 87, 91, 95, 96, 98, 100, 103, 105, 107, 110-114, 117, 121, 122, 124, 127-129, 133, 134, 136, 146-150. So 44 psalms are poems but not prayers.

⁴ It is a bit unclear which psalms should be classified as laments, since some of them contain lament-like pleas without perhaps actually being laments (see, e.g., Pss. 40; 41; 94). Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9-10 (9-10 together form an incomplete acrostic and so should be read as one psalm), 12, 13, 17, 22, 25, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 39, 42-43 (these two psalms form a single prayer), 44, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61, 62, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 74, 77, 79, 80, 83, 85, 86, 88, 89, 90, 102, 108, 109, 120, 123, 130, 137, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144 are usually classified as laments. Most of these are *personal* laments by some individual—e.g., "Deliver *me*, O LORD, from evil men; preserve *me* from violent men" (Ps. 140:1)—although some are *community* laments—e.g., "By the waters of Babylon, there *we* sat down and wept, when *we* remembered Zion" (Ps. 137:1).

⁵ C. Hassell Bullock mentions that the psalmists' experiences of joy and sorrow and of hope and despair represent only their lives' extremes. Yet these experiences still tell us a lot about them by illuminating what really moved them, what they valued, and what they thought was their reason for being. See his *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 136.

⁶ 2 Samuel 7:1-17 records God's pledge to David to establish the throne of his descendants forever. Psalm 2:7-8 alludes to this pledge, with Hebrews 1:5 putting Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 together as ultimately referring to our Lord.

Peterson's chapter on the first two psalms is revelatory (see *Answering God*, 23-32).

⁷ I call these psalms *Davidic* laments because all but two of the psalms in Book I of the book of Psalms after the first two (that is, Psalms 3-41) have a heading referring to David. The headings do not, as Michael Wilcock notes, "necessarily mean 'by David'; they could 'belong to' him in various other ways (about him; for his use; dedicated to him, in a collection under his name; and so on). But there is generally no strong reason why it should not mean authorship, and in some cases – for example, Psalm 18 – it clearly does" (*The Message of Psalms 1-72* [Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity, 2001], 25). Following the common New Testament practice, I will refer to the psalms having the word *David* in their titles as David's psalms (see, e.g., Matt. 22:43, 45; Acts 2:25).

⁸ David suffered resistance throughout his reign, declaring, "The righteous person faces *many* troubles" (Ps. 34:19 NLT). Similarly, Jesus chose Paul to spread the gospel and suffer *much* for his sake (see Acts 9:10-16).

⁹ In an article on the theology of lament, R.W.L. Moberly notes that the Old Testament offers some striking portrayals "of the possibly problematic nature of life under God" that establish that "coping with disappointment and speaking to God about it is . . . an integral part of the life of faith" (see "Psalms: Theology of" in Willem A. VanGemeren, General Editor, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), Vol. 4, 877-78). He then notes that the

predominance of laments at the very heart of Israel's prayers means that the problems that give rise to lament are not something marginal or unusual but rather are central in the life of faith Moreover, *they show that the experience of anguish and puzzlement in the life of faith is intrinsic to the very nature of faith*. Instead of the problems of the life of faith being put on one side, as though worship should really be just a matter of praise and thanksgiving, these problems are made central to the very act of prayer and worship. The practical realism of these psalms is most striking. (879, my emphasis)

¹⁰ Claus Westermann stresses that biblical prayer responds to God's initiatives:

One side of what takes place between God and humanity is response. Contrary to the opinion that prayer and offering are works initiated by humans, the Old Testament understands them both as response. There would be neither cult nor prayer if it were not for the acts and words of God. However, it must be said with equal emphasis that the acts and words of God cannot remain unanswered. God acts and speaks in order to elicit a response, both in action and in speech. *What happens in the Old Testament has the form of dialogue*. A typical example from the Old Testament is the first commandment in its dialogue structure "I-thou." Another example is the double meaning of the verb *berek*, which in the direction from God to man means "to bless," and in the reverse direction "to praise." A typical example from the New Testament is Luke 1-2, where what happens between God and humanity is accompanied at every point by human response, as shown

in the songs of praise running through [these chapters]. (*Elements of Old Testament Theology*, translated by Douglas W. Stott [Atlanta: John Knox, 1982], 153, my emphasis)

¹¹ See Genesis 1:28 for what is called “the creation mandate” and 2:16-17 for the first commandment.

¹² So, for instance, we are told regarding Abraham, “So [Abraham] went, as the LORD had told him” (Gen. 12:4).

¹³ They remembered what God had said to their first ancestor, Abraham:

The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.” . . . [And the] LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. (Gen. 18:13-14; 21:1-2; cf. Job 42:1-2 and Jer. 32:17 & 27)

¹⁴ Psalms 9 and 10 form an incomplete acrostic, indicating they were either originally one psalm or to be read together. (For a good account of their complementarity, see Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72*, 40-45.) David’s perplexity concerning God’s delay in vanquishing the wicked arose in the first two verses of Psalm 10: “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor.” Yet the beginning of Psalm 9 recalled God’s previous deliverances: “I will praise you, LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all the marvelous things you have done. . . . My enemies retreated; they staggered and died when you appeared. For you have judged in my favor; from your throne you have judged with fairness. You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked; you have erased their names forever” (9:1, 3-5 NLT). He reassured himself that “the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice” at 9:7 and thus could confidently assert that God did indeed take note of the trouble and grief the wicked caused in order to take it in hand, call them to account, and ultimately vanquish them, as he anticipated in 10:14-18.

¹⁵ See Psalm 71, and especially vv. 5-6, 9, 15, 17-21. Echoes of other psalms and the lack of a clear structure suggest this psalm was written in old age (see Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 1-72* [Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity, 2001], 246).

¹⁶ J. I. Packer notes:

God declared [his] name to Moses when he spoke to him out of the thornbush that burned steadily without being burned up. God began by identifying himself as the God who had committed himself in covenant to the patriarchs (cf. Gen. 17:1-14); then, when Moses asked him what he might tell the people that this God’s name was (*for the ancient assumption was that prayer would be heard only if you named its addressee correctly*), God first said “I AM WHO I AM” (or, “I will be what I will be”), then shortened it to “I AM,” and finally called himself “the LORD (Hebrew *Yahweh*, a name sounding like “I

AM” in Hebrew), the God of your fathers” (Exod. 3:6, 13-16). The name in all its forms proclaims his eternal, self-sustaining, self-determining, sovereign reality—that supernatural mode of existence that the sign of the burning bush had signified. The bush, we might say, was God’s three-dimensional illustration of his own inexhaustible life. “This is my name forever,” he said—that is, God’s people should always think of him as the living, reigning, potent, unfettered and undiminished king that the burning bush showed him to be (Exod. 3:15).

Later (Exod. 33:18-34:7) Moses asks to see God’s “glory” (adorable self-display), and in reply God did “proclaim his name” thus: “The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished . . .” At the burning bush God had answered the question, In what way does God exist? Here he answers the question, In what way does God behave? This foundational announcement of his moral character is often echoed in later Scriptures (Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). It is all part of his “name,” that is, his disclosure of his nature, for which he is to be adored forever. (*Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* [Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993], 23-25. The first set of italics is added.)

¹⁷ When God promised David that he would establish his throne forever, David responded by asking God to keep his word, noting that his courage to pray that God would do as he had promised rested on what God had just revealed to him (see 2 Sam. 7:11, 16, 25, 27).

When God seemed to be acting out of character, he registered outright complaints: “Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps. 10:1). To claim God was standing far away meant he was not acting on the psalmist’s behalf, which seemed contrary to his character: “[T]he Lord . . . has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness . . . The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. . . . [H]e does not forget the cry of the afflicted” (Ps. 9:7-9, 12).

¹⁸ Psalm 44:23 NLT; cf. 35:22-23. Moberly notes that “[s]ince Israel elsewhere confesses that the Lord in his care for Israel ‘will neither slumber nor sleep’ ([Ps.] 121:4), and Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal that their god who is no God ‘is maybe sleeping and must be awakened’ (1 Kgs 18:27), this is language that jars, and is presumably meant to jar, with Israel’s official faith. *In the expression of deep pain, the finer nuances of theological discourse may need to be left aside*” (880, my emphasis).

¹⁹ Moberly defines biblical lament as “turning to God in prayer in times of distress.” He then sets the biblical laments in the more general context of Old Testament faith:

Although the OT constantly stresses the importance of [trust, faith, and obedience] as characterizing the true human response to God, the general canonical presentation is such that these are not to be conceived in any simplistic way, as though life were essentially a matter of “obeying orders.” Rather, there is a recurrent portrayal of life under God as containing space for dialogue with God, with room for question and answer. Obedience

to God is to be set in the context of an intelligent relationship and not be mindless. (876)

²⁰ Psalm 88 is unique among the personal laments in never expressing any hope or confidence that God will deliver the psalmist. As Moberly says, it “stands as a kind of boundary marker in the life of faith, a reminder that a sense of being forsaken by God can be both overwhelming and unrelieved” (880).

Psalms 44 and 89 are community laments that “show every sign of being carefully crafted compositions to present the paradox of God’s apparent absence in the life of faith” (880). Psalm 44 turns bleak at verse 9, even while it insists, both before and after (see vv. 4-8, 17-18), that God’s people have done nothing to deserve harsh treatment. In verses 34-37 of Psalm 89 we find, Moberly notes, “the strongest and most emphatic commitment ascribed to God in the whole [Old Testament]. Up to this point, “we have a hymn to the God of sovereign power, who is noted for his faithfulness and who has made an absolute commitment to be faithful to the house of David” (881). Yet starting with verse 38, the current situation is depicted,

which stands in complete opposition to what had been promised. ‘I will crush his foes before him’ (v. 23) has become ‘You have exalted the right hand of his foes’ (v. 42), and ‘I will not violate my covenant’ (v. 34) has become ‘You have renounced the covenant’ (v. 39). The difference between the absolute promise and what has actually happened could not be starker. (881)

The psalm’s final section “consists of a cry to the Lord, appealing, like Ps 44, to the Lord’s *hesed* [that is, his steadfast love] . . . , but receiving no answer or word of assurance” (881). (The psalm’s final verse—“Blessed be the LORD forever! Amen and Amen”—marks the end of the third Book of the Psalter and so simply follows the pattern of praise of the doxologies found at the end of each of its books.)

Both psalms “pose the theological problem of the conflict between Israel’s recognized faith in God and the agonizingly disappointing situations that may actually arise (and presumably [do] arise on numerous occasions)” (882). “It is essential,” Moberly notes, “to the understanding of each psalm that the tension be maintained between its conflicting elements, the formal confession of faith and the problematic circumstances. . . . *The conflict may be agonizing and lacking resolution, yet it is characteristic of the psalmist that the conflict must be faced and endured, if faith is to be genuine and avoid either unreality or despair*” (882, my emphasis).

²¹ Granted, we may at first be so troubled that we cannot speak. But then we must go on and address him (see Ps. 77). In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul stresses how important it is to our fellow believers for us to address God with intelligible speech.

²² 1 Thessalonians 5:17, read in the light of 1:6, 2:14, and 3:1-5; cf. Romans 12:12.

²³ Thompson renders the verse like this:

O Lord, thou art in the right
When I dispute with thee.
Yet there are cases I would argue with thee.

When the Stars Disappear: Understanding and Coping with Our Suffering

Why does the way of wicked men succeed?
Why are all treacherous men at ease?

(Thompson's second-person singular *thou*'s and *thee*'s emphasize that this prayer is addressed to God alone.) He then comments:

In 12:1-6 we have one of Jeremiah's "confessions," a brief self-revelation in which a man lays bare some of his own deep questionings and intimate feelings. . . . The problem raised is the age-old question of why the wicked should flourish. They were God's creatures. It lay in his power to bring them to judgment. But they pursued their evil ways unchecked and caused innocent men to suffer. Why, for example, should Jeremiah, God's servant, called to declare his word to disobedient Israel, be subjected to the treacherous plots of the men of his own village? Like Job and some of the psalmists Jeremiah believed in God and stood under his sovereignty but found his ways hard to comprehend.

There is no question that Yahweh is *in the right* (*ṣaddîq*). . . . The righteous man (*ṣaddîq*) was the man who was faithful to all his obligations of whatever kind. . . . No legal complaint can be brought against Yahweh since he is innocent of all charges. Yet there were some specific cases (*mišpāṭîm*) of "right" that Jeremiah wished to discuss, namely, cases where the wicked prosper. (*The Book of Jeremiah*, 352-52)

Job also desired to take his case directly to God (see Job 10; 13:3, 13-15; and 31:35-37) even as he also trusted in God's righteousness (see 23:1-7). Psalms 10 and 73 express similar perplexities.

²⁴ Psalm 13:1-3 NIV. Regarding Psalm 13:1—How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?"—the *ESV Study Bible* says: "For God to **forget** and to **hide** his **face** from someone is to deliberately abandon that person, to withhold his loving care." It does not mean that God had actually forgotten the psalmist. "If psalms were theological treatises, they would affirm that God will not forget his people (cf. 9:12) and that the abandonment described here is only apparent. But a song, *whose goal is to describe feelings*, does not need the same level of precision and detachment as a treatise" (953; the italics in the last sentence is mine). I prefer to say that the psalms often *express* feelings rather than describe them.

²⁵ I assume David penned Psalm 22 in response to some crushingly difficult experience. We can't, however, link it to any particular incident in his life and, in fact, as Derek Kidner observes, because it describes an execution, "the language of the psalm defies a [natural] explanation," since David wouldn't have survived to write it. Indeed, some of its verses, such as 16-18, had to await our Lord's scourging and crucifixion "to unfold their meaning with any clarity" (*Psalms 1-72* [Leister, England: Tyndale, 1973], 105, 107). Yet it surely isn't just predictive prophecy.

²⁶ See Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52-53.

Patrick D. Miller observes that the language the Psalms use to express distress from enemies "is stereotypical and imaginative, but it can hardly be understood apart from the real

presence of such hostile forces” (*They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994], 105). He notes, more generally, that

It is characteristic of the psalmic prayers for help . . . that they are prayed in extremis, where life is perceived as in the balance, and only the protection or help of God can ‘preserve my life.’ . . . Sometimes the imagery and language suggesting the threat of death represent the powerful suffering of one whose actual life may not be threatened but who experiences life as so on the brink that the cry ‘Save my life’ is authentic expression of where the sufferer really is. (106)

In other words, sometimes the psalmists needed hyperbole in order to be able to express as accurately as they could what they were actually feeling.

²⁷ Peterson writes, “Our habit is to talk about God, not to him. We love discussing God. The Psalms resist these discussions. They are not provided to teach us about God but to train us in responding to him.” This is the posture of prayer and so, Peterson concludes, “We don’t learn the Psalms until we are praying them” (12). Psalm 39 is a striking example of this. It is intriguing to think how much Christian talk about suffering would be transformed if we followed David’s lead.

Job sometimes complained about God in the third person—“If I summoned him and he answered me, I would not believe that he was listening to my voice. For he crushes me with a tempest and multiplies my wounds without cause; he will not let me get my breath, but fills me with bitterness” (Job 9:16-18; cf. 16:7-9, 12-14). Yet God still said that Job had (overall) spoken correctly about him (see Job 42:8). This seems to involve God’s having mercifully overlooked some of what Job said as well as how he said it.

In fact, part of Job’s suffering involved his thinking God was not personally available to him as Someone with whom he could converse (see Job 23:2-9, 13-16; 31:35).

²⁸ Even in Psalm 77, where the psalmist reported he searched his heart asking if God’s steadfast love had ceased forever and if his promises had come to an end (see vv. 7-9, quoted above, p. 44), when he started lamenting, he addressed God as “you.”

²⁹ Of around 40 personal laments, only Psalm 88 does not express any confidence, although the psalmist still cried to the LORD, calling him the God of his salvation (v. 1). For more on that psalm and the two bleakest community laments, see endnote 20.

³⁰ Much of the horror of David’s situation involved his enemies insinuating that, no matter who God was and what he had done for his people in the past (depicted by the “Yet you” of verses 3-5), he was not going to do the same for David now (see v. 8). David countered those insinuations with the “Yet you” of verses 9-10.

³¹ With community laments, the vow to praise and actual praise are usually missing, although they often express trust and confidence in God and what he will do. See endnote 20.

³² See the “Yet . . . you” and the “Yet you” at the beginnings of vv. 3 and 9 in Psalm 22, above;

for a “But you” see 102:12. For “But I” where it signals a move to confidence and praise, see Psalms 13:5; 31:14; 71:14; and for an implicit “[But] I” see 27:13. In the Hebrew, these transitions are marked grammatically by the psalmists’ use of the *waw* adversative, which is a conjunction that weds what comes before and after it even as it carves out a contrast (see, e.g., Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981], 70-75).

³³ Regarding the psalmist’s declaration that “Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come” (Ps. 71:17-18 NIV), Wilcock writes:

It goes without saying that our psalmist does not *declare* [God’s] *marvellous deeds* (v. 17) because he likes the sound of his own voice. He speaks so that others may hear; he sings so that they may join in. Specifically, he says, *I declare your power to the next generation* (v. 18). There is no shadow of doubt in his mind that God’s great acts in the past are meant to benefit the people of the future. The notion that the mere passage of time renders Bible truth obsolete is one of the more idiotic of modern ideas. . . . There is nothing more relevant *to all who are to come* (v. 18) than the vital proclamation of what God did in Bible times, and of the truth that that embodies.

He is, after all, the incomparable God. *Who, O God, is like you?* says verse 19. (*The Message of Psalms 1-72*, 248-49)

³⁴ What if this arc from complaint to confident praise doesn’t seem to us to ring true? Should we then conclude the psalmists were mistaken? No, for the Psalms are part of the Scripture that God has breathed out for us to breathe in so we may know what is true, realize and correct the wrong in our lives, and learn to do what is right (see 2 Tim. 3:16-17 ESV and NLT). It is much more likely that something within us is keeping this arc from ringing true than that God’s word as it is addressed to us through these psalms actually is untrue. We will explore these deficiencies later.

CHAPTER FOUR

¹ With small, everyday activities like going to the kitchen to drink orange juice, we are hardly aware of the fact we are orienting ourselves by means of a story because the whole process has become so familiar that its series of acts are almost automatic. (It becomes what psychologists call a *script*.) But with longer, less familiar stories, our awareness of our place in the storyline and what we should do next often needs to become much more explicit. This is especially true with the Christian story. See, e.g., 1 Corinthians 6-7, where Paul appeals to his readers to remember who they are and thus what they ought and ought not to do because “You are not your own, for you were bought with a price” (6:19-20 and see 7:23).

² I was orienting myself by the sort of interpretation of Romans 8:28 that C. E. B. Cranfield gives, but I was then relying too much on my imagination being able to fill in the picture of how God was working. Cranfield renders Romans 8:28 as “And we know that all things prove

advantageous for *their true* good to those who love God, that is, to those who are called according to his purpose.” He then comments:

What is expressed is a truly biblical confidence in the sovereignty of God. . . . The primary reference of πάντα is . . . to ‘the sufferings of the present time’ (v. 18) [This] is confirmed by vv. 35-39. Sins committed against believers by other people are clearly included (compare ‘persecution’ and ‘sword’ in v. 35). Paul might perhaps, if pressed, have said that even believers’ own sins were included in this πάντα It is certainly true that the believer will often be made ‘cautior et humilior’ [more cautious and humble], as Aquinas put it, by his falls. . . .

[The] verb συνεργεῖν should . . . be translated by some such expression as ‘assist’, ‘help on’, ‘profit’. Paul’s meaning is that all things, even those which seem most adverse and hurtful, such as persecution or death itself, are profitable to those who truly love God.

But not every sort of profit is meant. . . . Paul does not mean that all things serve the comfort or convenience or worldly interests of believers: it is obvious that they do not. What he means is that they ‘assist our salvation’.

[So] nothing can really harm—that is, harm in the deepest sense of the word—those who really love God, but . . . all things which may happen to them, including such grievous things as are mentioned in v. 35, must serve to help them on their way to salvation, confirming their faith and drawing them closer to their Master, Jesus Christ. But the reason why all things thus assist believers is, of course, that God is in control of all things. The faith expressed here is faith not in things but in God. (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975], Vol. I, 404, 427-428)

I will argue in Chapter Twelve that this interpretation of this verse is central to our being able to survive profound suffering with our Christian faith intact.

³ Daniel I. Block writes

Hesed is one of those Hebrew words whose meaning cannot be captured in one English word. This is a strong relational term that wraps up in itself an entire cluster of concepts, all the positive attributes of God—love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, covenant faithfulness; in short, *that quality that moves a person to act for the benefit of another without respect to the advantage it might bring to the one who expresses it.* (*The New American Commentary*, Vol. 6, Judges and Ruth [Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 1999], 605; my emphasis)

More on *hesed* below. We shall see in later chapters how our practicing *hesed* is central to our helping those who are suffering and thus to recovering from suffering ourselves.

⁴ David learned to welcome some suffering: “O LORD, I am calling to you. Please hurry! Listen when I cry to you for help! . . . Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips. Don’t let me drift toward evil or take part in acts of wickedness. . . . *Let the godly strike me! It will be a kindness [a hesed]! If they correct me, it is soothing medicine. Don’t let me refuse it*” (Ps. 141:1,

3-5 NLT). In fact, God told David that his *hesed* for David's descendants would include punishment: "I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands. But my love [*hesed*] will never be taken away from him" (2 Sam. 7:14-15 NIV).

⁵ 4:15 NLT. The Hebrew adjective *tôb*, translated as "better" by the NLT, carries overtones of pleasantness. Israelites considered a family of seven sons to be ideal (see 1 Sam. 2:5).

⁶ Naomi's response is another instance of the general way that biblical faith involves our responses to God's initiatives (see Chapter Three, endnote 10). Block labels Naomi's response "decisive." See his commentary on these verses, 630-32.

⁷ Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, Volume 9, Ruth, Esther (Dallas: Word, 1996), 52.

⁸ Naomi attributed *hesed* to Ruth and her sister in v. 8: "May the LORD deal kindly [*hesed*] with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me."

⁹ See 2:1, 5-6, 8-17. At 2:20, Naomi counts Boaz's kindness to Ruth as God's kindness to her family: "And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, 'May he be blessed by the LORD, whose kindness [*hesed*] has not forsaken the living or the dead!'"

¹⁰ "Although *hesed* is only attributed explicitly to Ruth (3:10), the kindness, goodness, loyalty, and faithfulness that are characteristic of God are true of his people. . . . No one in the book demands of God that he meet his/her needs On the contrary, true covenant faith is expressed by concern for the welfare of others. In the story this concern is expressed by loving actions that promote the next person's well-being and by verbal expressions of prayer for the next person. . . . It is striking that no one in the book prays for a resolution of his own crisis. In each case a person prays that Yahweh would bless someone else. This is a mark of *hesed*" (Block, 611-13).

As my last chapter showed, there is nothing wrong in praying for oneself. In fact, such prayers are sometimes crucial to our communication with God and thus to the maintenance of our spiritual lives. And, indeed, the mere fact that such prayers are not found in the book of Ruth does not mean they weren't uttered. Yet the absence of such prayers in Ruth emphasizes that it is sometimes appropriate for us to be more concerned about the wellbeing of others than about our own wellbeing.

¹¹ See endnote 3, above, plus this:

Naomi's use of *hesed* as the direct object of the verb *ʿāsâ*, "to do, act, demonstrate" [in Ruth 1:8], reflects the fact that *this quality is expressed fundamentally in action rather than word or emotion*. This is confirmed in v. [9], where she requests that Yahweh might grant (*nātan*) rest (*mēnûhâ*), that is, security, [to each of her daughter's in law] in the house of her husband (Block, 605-06, my emphases).

Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., emphasizes that while the practice of *hesed* is presented in Ruth as the Israelite ideal, it requires extraordinary commitment. It goes beyond the ordinary and the expected. Those who don't practice *hesed*—such as when Naomi's unnamed relative decides not to redeem her field because he would endanger his inheritance by having to marry Ruth (see 4:1-6)—aren't doing anything wrong, but in doing what is expected they aren't practicing *hesed*. Those who do practice *hesed*, like Ruth and Boaz, do what is extraordinary and unexpected. In doing these things they become Israelite role models (see *The Book of Ruth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 72-73).

The fact that those who don't practice *hesed* may not be doing anything wrong may seem to suggest that *hesed* is supererogatory. But Micah 6:8 says otherwise:

He has told you, O man, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness [*hesed*],
and to walk humbly with your God?

And so, paradoxically, *hesed* is required of the LORD's people!

¹² After Ruth proposed to Boaz at night on the threshing floor, he declared, "The LORD bless you, my daughter! . . . You are showing even more family loyalty [*hesed*] now than you did before, for you have not gone after a younger man, whether rich or poor"(3:10 NLT).

¹³ This biblical principle generally holds even during our earthly lifetimes, although God has not promised it will hold in this life. For the general principle see 2 Samuel 22:26 and Proverbs 19:17. For its ultimate and sure eschatological fulfillment, see Matthew 5:7; 25:31-48; and Luke 6:37-38.

¹⁴ More technically: "The *hiphil* participle מְשִׁיב, "one who brings back," answers to the use of the same stem (שָׁבַע) in Naomi's accusation that Yahweh had brought her back empty (1:21). This form also plays more generally on שָׁבַע, "to return, to come back," the key word in chap. 1" (Block, 728n78).

¹⁵ While Naomi seems to express utter hopelessness regarding herself at 1:11-13, her instructions to Ruth in Chapter 3 show she had begun to harbor hope again, at least for Ruth. And her hope was based in her faith in Israel's God.

¹⁶ As I have noted elsewhere (see "'All the Good that Is Ours in Christ': Seeing God's Gracious Hand in the Hurts Others Do to Us" in John Piper and Justin Taylor, eds., *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* [Wheaton: Crossway, 2006], 46-47), God put Job in Satan's gunsights by asking, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" (1:8), and then allowed Satan to test the sincerity of Job's fear of God through the suffering Satan inflicted on him.

¹⁷ The Hebrew word for “hated” at Job 16:9 is *satam*, which the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* ([Chicago: Moody, 1980], II.874) takes as equivalent to bearing a grudge against someone and thus wanting to persecute or pay him back. *Satam* is used to describe the grudge Esau bore against Jacob and his parents for his father’s having blessed Jacob rather than himself (see Gen. 27:41) as well as for the grudge Joseph’s brothers mistakenly thought he was bearing against them (see Gen. 50:15). Put colloquially, Job thought God ‘had it in for him.’

¹⁸ “Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face” (13:15). Job may have been expressing some sort of eschatological hope in a few other passages (see, e.g., 19:23-29).

¹⁹ For expressions of his hopelessness see, e.g., 14:7-22; 17:11-16; 19:10; 30:24, 26.

²⁰ As Block notes, Elimelech’s departure for Moab in a time of Israelite famine may indicate that his faith was weak, and the general Israelite contempt for the Moabites makes it remarkable that those in Bethlehem welcomed Ruth home (see 626-27).

²¹ Job’s social ostracism is detailed at 19:13-22 and 30:1, 9-15.

John E. Hartley lists some of Job’s symptoms:

painful pruritus [itching] (2:8), disfiguration (2:12), purulent [pus-filled] sores that scab over, crack, and ooze (7:5), sores infected with worms (7:5), fever with chills (21:6; 30:30), darkening and shriveling of the skin (30:30), eyes red and swollen from weeping (16:16), diarrhea (30:27), sleeplessness and delirium (7:4, 13-14), choking (7:15), bad breath (19:17), emaciation (19:20), and excruciating pain throughout his body (30:17). (*The Book of Job* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 82)

The ESV translates the relevant Hebrew phrase at Job 2:7 as “loathsome sores.” This phrase appears only four times in Scripture: here and at Leviticus 13:20 and Deuteronomy 28:27, 35. In Deuteronomy, such boils form part of God’s punishment for the Israelites if they strayed from the covenant. They are like the Egyptians’ boils in the sixth plague (see Exod. 9:8-12). Verse 35 says explicitly that these “grievous boils” (the Hebrew is exactly the same as the words translated in Job 2:7 as “loathsome sores”) will go “from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head,” as our verse tells us was true in Job’s case. Both verses state these are boils “of which you cannot be healed.”

In Leviticus, such boils required the priest to declare the sufferer unclean. A person with them had to “wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’” They also had to live alone, outside the Israelite camp (13:45, 46).

Since we don’t know when Job lived and when the book was written, we don’t know if Job and Job’s author were aware of these passages. What they establish is that in the ancient world a condition such as Job’s was taken to be very serious, to lead to the sufferer’s isolation, and to be likely to have religious implications regarding the sufferer’s standing before God.

²² See, e.g., 4:2-5; 8:2; 11:2-6; 15:2-6, 11-13. Job’s suffering made him loquacious.

²³ See 4:7-8, 17-19; 8:3-6; and, especially, 11:6—“Know . . . that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves”—with 11:13-20.

²⁴ Hartley says:

Job directly charges his friends with dealing treacherously with him. . . . He acknowledges a close relationship with his comforters, calling them friends and brothers. The word *brothers* (*'āhîm*, v. 15a) and the term *loyal love* or *fidelity* (*hesed*, v. 14a) indicate that there probably existed an official bond or covenant between Job and these comforters (cf. 1 Sam. 20:8, 14-15 [with Job 2:11]). Their pact certainly included friendship and mutual support. Thus Job accuses his partners of failing to fulfill the obligations of their covenant relationship. (*The Book of Job*, 135-36)

²⁵ Tremper Longman III comments:

In 6:14-30 Job expresses disappointment, even disgust, at the lack of support that his friends give him in the midst of his suffering. Indeed, they have intensified his pain rather than mitigating it. Job’s words remind us of the importance of relationships in the midst of suffering.

It is tempting to think that the biblical view is that all one needs is God to make one’s way in a difficult world, but this view is undermined as early as Gen. 2:4b-25. In this second creation account, God creates Adam first. Adam is in a harmonious relationship with God. He lives in Eden, paradise. One would think he has everything, but God knows better and says, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18 NRSV). If this is true in Eden, how much more so in the world after the fall.

Longman cites Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Proverbs 17:17; 27:9-10; 11:9, 11; and 2 Corinthians 1:3-7 to support this point (*Job* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012], 150-52).

²⁶ See, e.g., 7:11-21; 9:14-20, 25-35; 10:1-22; 16:7-17; 19:6-12; 23:13-17; 27:1-6; 30:16-23. Each *you* except in 27:5 involves Job addressing God in the second person, as in the psalms of lament. But he also refers to God in the third person in a way the laments do not.

²⁷ The book’s narrator affirms that all of Job’s troubles came from the LORD at 42:11.

²⁸ I am distinguishing between the explanation we get in the prologue for the initiation of Job’s sufferings and the lack of explanation we get for why they continued, once Job had passed Satan’s test because I believe, as Martin A. Shields argues (see “Malevolent or Mysterious? God’s Character in the Prologue of Job,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 61.2 [2010], 255-70), that the most significant point of the book of Job is that we do not always get an explanation, at least in this life, for human suffering.

²⁹ Ironically, Job’s hasty conclusion about God was as uncharitable as his three friends’ hasty condemnation of him.

³⁰ These questions and more are asked in Chapters 38 and 39.

³¹ In other words, as a ruler with his head held high, sure of his authority and the rightness of his cause.

³² A self-imprecatory curse calls judgment down on oneself if one's claims are untrue. Here is one of Job's curses: "If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it . . . , if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy without covering, if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep, if I have raised my hand against the fatherless . . . , then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket" (31:16-17, 19-22).

³³ See chapters 38-41. In addition to telling Job that Job's understanding of what he was doing was profoundly off-track ("Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge?" [38:2 NIV]), God challenged Job to answer questions about Creation to make clear that Job was ignorant of the biblical story's beginning as well as about its middle and end.

³⁴ See Isaiah 46:9b-11: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,' calling a bird of prey from the east, the man of my counsel from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it."

How God knows the whole story and ordains all that happens within it without violating our freedom will be addressed in Chapter Ten.

³⁵ For evidence that Job practiced *hesed*, see 29:11-17. For his expectations stemming from that, see 29:18-20 and, especially, 31:3—"Is not calamity for the unrighteous, and disaster for the workers of iniquity?" Cf. my comments in endnote 13.

³⁶ See Calvin's singular interpretation of Jeremiah 20 in his commentary on Jeremiah. Drinkard comes as close to Calvin as anyone does, noting that the verb *pātâ* at verse 7 "is variously translated as 'deceive, seduce, persuade'." He then cites Heschel's argument for translating the word here with its sexual connotations of seduction and rape (see endnote 10 in Chapter Two, above). Drinkard, however, writes that

Although it is possible for [*pātâ* combined with *hāzaq* ('stronger'), as it is here] to have those connotations, especially when brought together, in neither case is the sexual connotation the most common. Furthermore, despite the common English translation of [*pātâ*] as deceive . . . , the context does not indicate that Yahweh has in any way deceived Jeremiah: from his call experience on, Yahweh has warned Jeremiah of the opposition he would encounter. The context rather suggests the meaning of persuasion. (Peter C.

Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 1-25* [Dallas, TX: Word, 1991], 273)

Given what we have already observed in Chapter Two about Jeremiah's state of mind after Pashhur ordered him to be tortured, I think it is more likely that *pātâ* should be interpreted as at least meaning *deceived*.

³⁷ Job usually thought that if he could confront God, then God would be fair to him. Jeremiah came to think God was a deceiver. Yet God had not deceived Jeremiah, for while his actual experience of virtually universal opposition to him as God's prophet proved psychologically overwhelming, God had told him he would face such opposition (see 1:18-19).

³⁸ Much of Jeremiah is nonchronological. Its structure may reflect and indeed confirm the trauma that almost continuously accompanied Jeremiah's life. As Paul R. House helpfully observes, the book "may be shaped as it is because Baruch and Jeremiah wrote it piecemeal in the midst of their turbulent lives."

They preserved each part, and Baruch collected the pieces in an order intended to stress God's covenantal relationship with Israel in the midst of trying times. There is repetition because the whole of the parts was preserved. *Thus the book reads more like what political prisoners and refugees write than what persons writing in settled places and times produce.*

House then concludes, "Of course, the book itself presents Jeremiah and Baruch as the former sort of writers" (*ESV Study Bible*, 1363, my emphasis; cf. my comments from Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits* in endnote 16 of Chapter Two). In other words, people who are suffering or have suffered in particularly awful ways don't write coherent narratives.

Kidner adds that

the fact that Jeremiah's oracles are generally arranged by subject rather than by chronology may point here to a deliberate placing . . . of chapters 20 and 21 side by side as a prophecy and its fulfillment; for we see first Babylon as a distant threat (20:4-6), and now Babylon at the gates (21:4).

He notes that a "subsidiary factor in this grouping may have been the catchword provided by the name Pashhur, borne by the two men whose contrasting approaches to Jeremiah underline the fact that the march of events was already confirming his predictions" (*The Message of Jeremiah*, 84).

³⁹ Gerhard von Rad notes that, in addition to Jeremiah's explicit resolution in 20:9, Jeremiah's confession in 15:16-18 included a desire "to withdraw from his prophetic office" and "become a citizen among citizens," and that, at 20:8, he desired that "God should find himself another person" ("The Confessions of Jeremiah," in James L. Crenshaw, ed., *Theodicy in the Old Testament* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 90, 94).

⁴⁰ Most commentators agree with Derek Kidner that after Jeremiah's "wild cry of pain" found at the end of Chapter 20, he went on "to his worst ordeals with never a hesitation or a word of doubt" (*The Message of Jeremiah*, 81). Kidner also observes that "If ever one's morale as a servant of God touches rock-bottom, we may reflect that Jeremiah has been there before, *and has survived*" (80; my emphasis).

⁴¹ An essential feature of an interesting story is that after an unexceptional beginning ("Once upon a time there was . . .") there is some breach in the expected development of things somewhere in the middle of the story that is resolved by the end ("And they lived happily ever after"). See Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002):

What . . . is a story? Everyone will agree that it requires a cast of characters who are free agents with minds of their own. . . . [T]hese characters have recognizable expectations about the ordinary state of the world . . . [A] story begins with some breach in the expected state of things Something goes awry, otherwise there's nothing to tell about. The story concerns efforts to cope or come to terms with the break and its consequences. And finally there is an outcome, some sort of resolution. (16-17).

This is as true of real-life stories as it is of fairytales.

⁴² Job 42:12. Read vv. 10-17 to get the full picture. Of course, Job's grief from the loss of his first ten children almost certainly never ceased during his earthly lifetime, yet the blessings depicted in his book's final chapter falsify his despairing claim that his eye would never again see good.

⁴³ See Hebrews 10:19-39, and especially vv. 23, 38—"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. . . . [M]y righteous one shall live by faith, *and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.*"

⁴⁴ Matthew 10:22; 24:13; Mark 13:13. See also 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 and especially vv. 1-2—"Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, *if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you have believe in vain.*" At Revelation 2:10, he told those in the church in Smyrna: "Do not fear what you are about to suffer. . . . *Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life*" (cf. Rev. 3:11-12). Enduring to the point of death or to the end of the age (see Matt. 24:3-14) is what Hebrews 10 is warning us we each must do.

⁴⁵ In fact, some of the greatest higher-order goods can only arise out of the experience of great lower-order evils (e.g., our salvation out of our Lord's crucifixion). This will be a theme in my final three chapters.