The background of the magazine cover features a wide-angle photograph of a massive, layered rock formation, likely the Grand Canyon. A lone figure is seated on the very edge of a prominent cliff on the right side of the frame, looking out over the vast, sunlit valley below. The sky is filled with soft, warm-toned clouds.

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# JUST THINKING

## The Hunger *of the Spirit*



WOUNDED  
LESSONS

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ON SUFFERING

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MY CHILDREN

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# The Hunger of the Spirit *And the Ties that Bind*

by Ravi Zacharias

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Why do people turn to God? Is it because of pain? Is from being weary of pleasure? The reality is that both leave haunting questions. As Ravi Zacharias observes, the struggle between pain and pleasure gives spirituality a more defined goal, and only God alone knows how we will respond.



# The Hunger of the Spirit

## *And the Ties that Bind*

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by Ravi Zacharias

I have pondered long and hard the question of why people turn to God. I remember a woman from Romania telling me that she was raised in a staunchly atheistic environment. They were not allowed to even mention the name of God in their household, lest they be overheard and their entire education denied. After she came to the United States, I happened to be her patient when I was recovering from back surgery. When I had the privilege of praying with her one day, she said as she wiped away her tears, “Deep in my heart I have always believed there was a God. I just didn’t know how to find him.”

This sentiment is repeated scores of times. More recently, I had the great privilege of meeting with two very key people in an avowedly atheistic country. After I finished praying, one of them said, “I have never prayed in my entire life, and I have never heard anyone else pray. This is a first for me. Thank you for teaching me how to pray.” It was a gripping moment in our three-hour evening, and it was obvious that even spiritual hungers that have been suppressed for an entire lifetime are in evidence when in a situation where there is possible fulfillment.

Although I agree that the problem of pain may be one of the greatest challenges to faith in God, I dare suggest that it is the problem of pleasure that more often drives us to think of spiritual

Excerpted from *Why Jesus? Rediscovering His Truth in an Age of Mass Marketed Spirituality* (New York: FaithWords, 2012). Used by permission.

things. Sexuality, greed, fame, and momentary thrills are actually the most precarious attractions in the world. Pain forces us to accept our finitude. It can breed cynicism, weariness, and fatigue in just living. Pain sends us in search of a greater power. Introspection, superstition, ceremony, and vows can all come as a result of pain. But disappointment in pleasure is a completely different thing. While pain can often be seen as a means to a greater end, pleasure is seen as an end in itself. And when pleasure has run its course, a sense of despondency can creep into one's soul that may often lead to self-destruction. Pain can often be temporary; but disappointment in pleasure gives rise to emptiness... not just for a moment, but for life. There can seem to be no reason to life, no preconfigured purpose, if even pleasure brings no lasting fulfillment. The truth is that I have known people who in the peak of their success have turned to God, and I have known others, drowning in pain and defeat, who seek God for an answer. Either extreme leaves haunting questions. God alone knows how we will respond to either.

This struggle between pain and pleasure, I believe, gives spirituality a more defined goal. People in pain may look for comfort and explanations. People disappointed in pleasure look for purpose. Dostoyevsky defines hell as "the inability to love." I think that is a pretty close description. But this is where, I believe, the West has lost its way and stumbled into the New Spirituality. We had what it took to experience pleasure, but in the end, what we experienced took from us what we had in terms of value. Pleasure disappointed in the West, and in our boredom, we went searching for an escape in the strange or the distorted, rather than looking to what God has clearly revealed in the underpinnings of the Christian faith that point to the person of Jesus Christ. . . .

### **THE HUNGER OF THE SPIRIT**

Life is a search for the spiritual. Whether in the throes of pain or in the disappointments of pleasure, we strive for an essence that is beyond the physical. Let me give you an example. Suppose you were to raise a little child and give that child everything he needed . . . love, shelter, education, support, all the way to becoming an adult. Let's call him Jason. One day, there is a knock on Jason's door, and an older person standing outside asks to meet him. After a few moments of conversation, the visitor breaks the news to Jason that he is Jason's biological father.

If this is the first time Jason has learned he is adopted, what do you think will happen? How do you think he will cope with it? His sensory emotions will tear him apart on the inside. “Why didn’t you tell me this?” would be his question to his adoptive parents. “Where were you when I needed you?” he would ask the biological father. Essence is far more than belief. Essence is belief based on the intrinsic being of the person. This is the hunger of the spirit beyond mere sensory and belief components.

This is why I believe that the intertwining of pain with pleasure is at the root of the human dilemma. These extremes of feeling at either end of the spectrum that most of us wish to avoid, even as we are drawn into them, are the twin realities that help shape our search. We want to find happiness. We want to avoid pain. We want to know who we are. We want to know what we are. We care about our origin and our essence. Pleasure and pain become indicators along the way on the road that will lead us to our destiny, and they are rooted in the question of our origin.

*L*ife is a search for the spiritual. Whether in the throes of pain or in the disappointments of pleasure, we strive for an essence that is beyond the physical.

It is not sufficient to say nice things such as “All religions say the same thing.” Nobody, and I do mean nobody, really believes that. If they say they do, you can call their bluff in moments by exposing the preconceived sovereignty they have exercised in evaluating one religion over the other and by which they have arrived at the conclusion that all religions lead to the same destination, even though the religions all say different things. How can anyone make such an assertion? Even in broad categories they do not say the same thing. Buddha himself rejected Hinduism because of some of its dogmas. And literally just days after his death, Buddhism began to fragment into a series of different Buddhist beliefs. Some even went into hiding, lest they be killed for the challenges they were making to the leadership. And only a short while after Muhammad died, blood was spilled

over who his successor would be. The first three of the five caliphs in Islam were assassinated—varnishing such facts with niceties doesn't do anyone a favor.

Were these divisions for religious reasons? Oh yes, that is what is claimed. It was for reasons of essence, but the apologists of these faiths fail to come to terms with the essential nature of their beliefs themselves. Belief systems must justify themselves. If they cannot, the ever more bizarre will be required to bring the same degree of fulfillment.

We will pick this up again. For now, let me posit three things—*relationship*, *stewardship*, and *worship*—that must define life if the spiritual search as it relates to pleasure and pain is to be understood. Such definitions, then, build into a worldview.

### THE TIES THAT BIND: RELATIONSHIP

In the Judeo-Christian worldview, all pleasure is ultimately seen from the perspective of what is of eternal value and definition. I often think

**Genesis 1:1**

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

of that day the astronauts became the first ones to go around the dark side of the moon. To them was given a beautiful glimpse of the “earthrise” over the horizon of the moon, draped in a beauteous

mixture of blue and white and garlanded by the light of the sun against the black void of space. It was something human eyes had never witnessed before. Isn’t it fascinating that no poem or lyric came to the commander’s aid in lending him words to express that moment of awe? Instead, the words that came to his mind were the first words of the book of Genesis: “In the beginning, God...”

There are moments like that in our experience when nothing can take away from the miracle of human life. No amount of time can explain it. No pondering within can satisfy all that the moment declares. There is something extraordinary here. It is not just the miracle of life; it is the miracle of life imbued with particular worth. The identity of the child is as significant as the fact that it is. We all know that. The New Spirituality distributes life into the generality of “consciousness” and loses the particularity of personal relationship. So it is not merely time we are talking about here, or some pool of consciousness into which we all merge and from which we emerge. In the Judeo-Christian worldview, we believe that every “person” is actually created in God’s image, in that God himself is a person, and that each person has *relational* priorities that are implicitly built in, not by nature but by God’s design.

Consider the tragedy of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Even in that stoic culture, where community rises above everything else, each one who wept was grieving the loss of their own loved ones: They were not grieving just for the total loss of life but also for their personal loss. This is real. It is not imaginary. We stand before the individual graves of the ones we love more often than we stand before a graveyard in general.

But there is more. Personhood transcends mere DNA. There is essential *worth* to each person.

Recently in a game show, a computer (named Watson after the founder of IBM) handily defeated two human contestants in a knowledge contest. This had happened before when the computer Deep Blue beat the world champion in chess, Garry Kasparov. Computers are faster and better at calculations and at chess. But what one article said is interesting: In this instance, where language was involved, Watson's victory over its two human competitors advanced IBM's master plan of making humanity obsolete. I would add that the ultimate revenge would be for Watson to deny that humans exist or that they created "him." You see, to create a computer to do what Watson did required brilliance. As David Ferrucci, the principal investigator of Watson's DeepQA technology at IBM Research, said,

*In the Judeo-Christian worldview, we believe that every "person" is actually created in God's image, in that God himself is a person, and that each person has relational priorities that are implicitly built in, not by nature but by God's design.*

*When we deal with language, things are very different. Language is ambiguous, it's contextual, it's implicit. Words are grounded really only in human cognition —and there's seemingly an infinite number of ways the same meaning can be expressed in language. It's an incredibly difficult problem for computers.<sup>1</sup>*

It was precisely the coding of that “human-ness” into Watson that required the effort of twenty-five of IBM’s top research scientists, and they accomplished it with a mishmash of algorithms and raw computing technology. “Watson is powered by 10 racks of IBM Power 750 servers with 2,880 processor cores and 15 terabytes of RAM; it’s capable of operating at a galloping 80 teraflops. With that sort of computing power, Watson is able to . . . scour its roughly 200 million pages of stored content—about 1 million books worth—and find an answer with confidence in as little as 3 seconds.”<sup>2</sup>

The question is, “What is Watson doing or thinking now?” The entire question is reduced to one issue: What does consciousness mean? It is not surprising that “consciousness” and “conscience” come from the same root word. When you put together terms like “consciousness,” “conscience,” “individual,” “right,” “wrong,” “good,” and “evil,” you are on the path to spiritual thinking. Matter alone or resorting to quantum doesn’t create spiritual thought. Deepak Chopra can write of an ageless body and a timeless mind all he wants, but when you lose your child, something has been lost that can never be replaced—even if you have another child—and can never be explained by his philosophy. Never.

What this means is that our essence is both shared and particular—a truth that is Judeo-Christian in its assumption. This leads me to see the critical and defining notion of essence and its connection to relationship. That must be defined first before pleasure can be derived legitimately or otherwise in concert with the essence of the thing enjoyed. So it is not merely the essence of the object that is being enjoyed that matters. It is the essence of the subject who is experiencing pleasure that legitimizes or delegitimizes the experience.

There is a clear and unequivocal assertion in the Judeo-Christian faith that God created us for his purpose: to fulfill life’s sacred nature within the particularity of an individual life, in relationship with him and his indwelling presence. This particularity does not offset the fact of being part of the larger community of fellow human beings. It does not deify us, nor does it demean us. To be a human being is to be one who is fashioned in the image of God, who is the point of reference in all relationships. This is the difference between Islam and Christianity. In Islam, a person will kill to supposedly protect the honor of Allah. In the Christian faith, Jesus sacrificed his *own* life to honor the love of God as it is revealed for all humanity. In pantheism, the “I” dies the death of a thousand qualifications; hence that vacuous term “duty” in

the Gita or even “dharma.” For the Christian, the I is a person valued by God. This is a world of difference from all other religions.

In search of this relationship we pursue spiritual realities. And often we end up creating God in our own image when we have failed to see, or perhaps don’t like, what it is that God intended to convey to us in his love. No, this is not the “relativity” of physics, special or general, or of quantum theory, or even of metaphysics. It is the relationship of a person within himself or herself. It is who we are, not fragmented, in the accretion of everything that makes us an individual. It is why we even refer to ourselves as “individuals” . . . indivisible . . . the underlying meaning being that we cannot be divided into parts.

*The good and decent among us mourn broken homes. We delight in long relationships that have withstood the test of time. This is a clue, a huge clue of how life is intended to be lived. We are designed, shaped, and conditioned to be in relationships of honor, and in our hearts we wish to see those relationships triumph over all other allurements.*

Even in pantheism, one cannot be content with the Gnostic category of “knowledge.” Nor in Zen can we merely mutter “*Rupa* is nothing.” That is where the monists and Vedantists and Zen thinkers wish to leave us. Thus Hinduism has the Gita, the most beloved of Hindu texts (not the Vedas), in which questions of war, devotion, worship, and sacrifice are raised. These are relational issues. How can I go to war and kill my brothers? was the question Arjuna placed before Krishna. Only he didn’t know who Krishna was, so reality and the nature of the source of the answers were veiled from him in the early stages of the text. What is good and what is evil? What is the *right* thing to do? That’s what Arjuna wants to know. It came down to duty in a play called *Life*.

Buddhism raises the issues of poverty, pain, sickness, death, responsibility, and the causes of misery. All these were not just ideas, they were evidenced in persons or in how they impacted persons. Of all religions, Islam is the least focused on relationships, even though it gives the appearance of being a community. And the result is law, authority, and power over the community. These become the rationale for Islam. Thus, it is not surprising that the very word *Islam* means “to submit.” And it’s no wonder that it is sometimes called a “pantheism of force,” where individuality is sacrificed at the altar of authority. Some Muslims I have spoken to admit this is what Islam is, but insist that it was not intended to be this way. How do you even debate such an issue when you are silenced if you disagree? This authoritarianism and submission become the means to the end of community. Any community there is exists only in the narrow confines of faith, which often provides the adherents with justification to sacrifice their own for “their faith.” The faith, in effect, negates the person.

I have two very special friends whose lives have been a blessing to countless children who have been deformed from birth. They have established an orphanage to give them a home and find medical help to correct what can be corrected. Then they look for families who will adopt them. One little boy had always been passed over for adoption because he has a particular brain malfunction that is very rare. He often doesn’t connect thoughts. At about nine years of age, as I remember the story, he was becoming despondent as, one-by-one, he saw his housemates being selected by families and leaving. He began to ask those who were taking care of him why no one was adopting him. Why didn’t anybody choose him?

Through an incredible series of events, a couple from Texas, who had already adopted one child from the same orphanage, called to ask if this boy was still there. Through the goodness of the parents’ hearts, and the generosity of the couple who established the orphanage in agreeing to cover all the costs of his adoption, the day has been set for this little boy to be taken to his new home. The special part of the thrill for him is that he will be reunited with one of the little boys who was his housemate at one time.

His actual name is quite hard to pronounce, but it is quite a normal name in his native setting. His adoptive parents have sent him the name they want to give him—Anson Josiah, the initials of which are A.J. He now walks around that home, waiting for his new parents to

come for him, telling everybody as he points to his chest, “You can call me A.J. My name is A.J.” Is it not interesting that even with the debilitation of disconnected thoughts, he is able to pick up the redeeming thrill of relationship and particular worth evidenced in his new name?

One of the great epic poems of the Middle East is *Shabnama* (or *Shanameh*), written by the Persian poet and author Abu ol-Qasem Mansur Firdawsi (ca. 935–1020). In it he recounts the legendary history of the ancient kings and heroes of Persia. It is known to English readers principally through Matthew Arnold’s version, written in the mid-nineteenth century: *Sohrab and Rustum*. I remember reading it as a young lad in Delhi. Rustum is a mighty warrior, second to none. War is his way of life and as the story unfolds, even though he has a family to take care of, Rustum is constantly far from home, taking on challenges. One day, he comes across a younger though equally well known warrior named Sohrab. Sohrab is reluctant to take him on because he knows that Rustum is actually his father. Years before when he was a small child, Sohrab had been sent away by his mother to spare him the lifestyle of his father, and Rustum has been misled into believing that the child who was sent away was a daughter, born while he was gone.

Sohrab and Rustum eventually meet in one-on-one combat. Twice, Sohrab could have fatally wounded Rustum, but he spares him. Finally, Rustum has Sohrab on his back, and victoriously plunges his sword into Sohrab’s side. As the life is ebbing out of him, Sohrab tells Rustum who he is and, when challenged, proves it by producing a locket his mother had given him. The rest of the story is the grief and remorse that fill Rustum when he realizes he has killed his own son, who had spared him when he had the advantage.

I find utterly fascinating the stories of deep relationship that are woven into the histories of various cultures, stories that reveal the folly of succumbing to the lure of power and prestige. What a tragedy to destroy our own children by denying the One who gave us life. Isn’t that where we are today, in our geopolitical and religious wars?

The good and decent among us mourn broken homes. We mourn broken lives. We mourn shattered dreams. We celebrate reunions. We delight in long relationships that have withstood the test of time. This is a clue, a huge clue of how life is intended to be lived. We are designed, shaped, and conditioned to be in relationships of honor, and in our hearts we wish to see those relationships triumph over all other allurements. It has been nearly four decades since I lost my mother. I

don't think a day goes by that I don't think of her. Is all this not an indication, given to us by the One who made us, that we are designed to live within relationship and to find our greatest sense of worth and fulfillment within relationship?



Relationships are multidirectional and multidimensional. For this, physics, chemistry, even psychology, for that matter, are all inadequate starting points. Relationship must begin with essence, not with the essence of others but rather with the essence of oneself. That is why pleasure and pain become critical. It is not psychologically necessary to teach somebody that their parents matter. We know that by intuition. My life has been replete with examples of meeting people who wish they could find that one friend or one relationship. It is not accidental that in the long bibliography at the end of her book on spirituality, which draws sparsely from Christian literature, Elizabeth Lesser still finds place to mention C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, a powerful book on the depth of his grief when he lost his wife, Joy.

How and why is this so? In Christ-ianity, the essence of each and every person and the individual reality of each life is sacred. It is sacred because intrinsic value has been given to us by our Creator. Atheism is the extreme form of placing ultimate worth in an accidental universe. For the atheist, the only real relationship is between each person and the universe. That is it. There is no outside voice or revelation. To attempt to mask the loneliness of this reality, we offer parallel universes, aliens or some other entities somewhere that will surely someday find us if we don't find them first. There was a play written some years ago

called *Waiting for Godot*. The title was a play on words for the lonely inhabitants of the world in the play, waiting for a God who never shows up. The play to honor the sciences should be titled *Waiting for Logo*, which would mean waiting for a word from anybody out there.

In pantheism, which is the basis of much of the New Spirituality, the “I” is lost in the desired union with the ultimate impersonal Absolute; there is no more “I and you.” In rebirth, all actual relationship with what has preceded is lost, and we are encouraged to believe there is an essential relationship only with the deeds of the past. No one in this cyclical framework ever answers what an individual was paying for in the first birth. After all, one cannot have an infinite number of lives to their credit: If there were an infinite number of births, one would never have reached this particular birth. So, going backward, what was the debt owed in the first life? As one of my Hindu friends once said after he came to know Jesus, “Even the banks are kinder to me. At least the bank tells me how much I owe and how much time I have to repay what I owe. In karma, I don’t know what I owe or how long it will take me to repay it.” For Deepak Chopra to bring relief to Maharishi Mahesh Yogi by telling him that his (Chopra’s) blood would not carry his karma to the Maharishi borders on the pathetic . . . the pupil having to reassure the teacher that karma was not carried in the blood. Where is it carried, one might ask, in an ageless body and a timeless mind?

A *relationship* with God that is both individual and to be reflected to the rest of humanity in a shared birthright is God’s gift to us.

### STEWARDSHIP

It is in the area of stewardship that I think Christians have done an enormous amount but have also failed in a very serious way. The priority was right, but the reach was short. Let me explain.

The world is in great need. There is so much that needs to be done. Ask yourself this question: *Which worldview has reached out the most globally?* The numbers are staggeringly disproportionate. I remember in the early days of my travels walking into institutions for people with leprosy. You can go to the fringe of the Sahara desert or to the island of Molokai in Hawaii and see the footprints of Christian missionaries at work there. Look at the hospitals in many parts of the world, the orphanages, the rescue homes, the care for widows. Look way beyond the reach of one’s own land. It is not enough to say that America has had much and therefore Americans ought to give. What about the

wealth in the oil-rich nations of the world . . . how many hospitals and universities, orphanages and rescue homes have been built by that money? There is so much need in India that one just grows accustomed to it and walks by. Does Allah desire that billions of dollars be spent on a mosque while millions of people live in terrible need? Bangladesh, a Muslim country, is one of the poorest areas in the world, where hundreds of thousands live below the poverty line. In contrast go to Abu Dhabi, also a Muslim country, where the sheikh has spent more than \$3 billion to build a mosque. Is this stewardship? Is this for God's glory, or is it for the glory of an earthly kingdom that forgets others of the same faith who are living on the edge?

But present-day Christians cannot rest on the actions of Christians of previous generations. Today, we would do well to also ask ourselves this same question as we build our church megaplexes that often border more on memorials to human icons than on anything that lifts the heart toward God.

Whatever one may say, only the blind and the antisocial can ignore the realities of a desperately needy world. Christopher Hitchens's cheap book attacking Mother Teresa showed a heart that was so hard he could not be touched even by the reach of a little woman with a big heart.

But I have to say that there is one area in which we as Christians have been negligent. We may have a good track record for reaching out to the hurting of the world . . . to building relationships with the world, but by and large we forget that there is a natural world out there to be protected as well. We have been negligent in matters of the environment, and just because the environment has no feelings we trample it underfoot. The pantheist deifies the impersonal and we ignore it. Both extremes are wrong. The created order was meant to be cared for.

If essence gave me the reason for relationships, existence gave me the mandate for *stewardship*. The world exists in real terms. It is not merely form. It is also substance.

## WORSHIP

In my study at home, I have an old Anglican prayer bench. It is my place of refuge. It is where I come on my knees before God and open my heart in its most deeply felt struggles and needs. If you had told me as a young lad going to church that someday I would long for a prayer bench, I would have despaired even more than I already did. Kneeling in

worship and being aware of others kneeling beside me was not exactly the highlight of my week. I would covertly glance out the corner of my eye to see what others were doing. *Worship* was nothing more than a word in my vocabulary. I saw prayer and the repetition of creeds as nothing more than a hypnotic effort at inducing some state of mind. It mattered little, except at examination time and in times of crisis. It was a sort of “God, if you are there, please help.” Now, in my adult years, I have seen more happen during my time of prayer than any other time.

*Worship of the Supreme Being is what makes it possible to find unity in diversity in the world around me by enabling me to find unity and diversity within myself, first. Worship is the starting point.*

The hunger for worship is one of the greatest clues in life. In India, temples are full, and the whole cultic experience of priests, ceremonies, chants, blessings, fears, and superstitions is all part and parcel of the culture. You grow up knowing and accepting that “religion” is a vital part of a person’s life. The interesting thing is that we seldom ask the questions that ought to be asked. Why? It seems that whatever ceremonies we are taught become part of our personal culture, a habit of the heart and an expression of our community. More often than not religious rites are performed out of fear or superstition. And they are seldom questioned or examined.

Growing up, I noticed many culturally meaningful things that several of my friends did. One was to touch the feet of the father of the family to show respect. This was a very admirable and beautiful act to watch. Each time the father would enter the room or the son or daughter would bid their father good-bye before heading on a journey, they would lean over and touch his feet as a sign of respect, and there would be a quick ceremonial blessing given by the father to his children. I had a very dear classmate who devoutly followed that practice. But I noticed something. The ceremony had become nothing more than that and did not reflect any true reality. In his private life, his values were anything but honoring to his father. What was even more tragic

was a day that I remember well, when this young man doused himself with kerosene and lit a match to his body. When his parents came home, it was to find his charred body. What did this say to the parents? The son who had touched his father's feet in respect and the father who had given his blessing to his son really didn't know the other or what the other was thinking. All the formality and ceremony had amounted to nothing.

This is the ultimate violation of worship. All the ceremonies in the world, all the perfunctory reverence, do not make for worship. Worship that is properly understood and properly given is co-extensive with life. . . It informs all of life, everything we do and everything we say and think. At its core it is the sense and service of God. Worship brings into confluence all the questions and answers that we have and do not have. For the answers we do not have, a relationship with the One who does have them carries us through. It is the submission of our will, heart, and purpose to the sovereign will and the person of God who created us and loves us. Worship is a relationship from which all inspiration flows and the relationship through which all of our needs are met. It is knowing even partly the One who knows us fully.

Worship of the Supreme Being is what makes it possible to find unity in diversity in the world around me by enabling me to find unity and diversity within myself, first. *Worship* is the starting point.

Once you understand essence, existence, and reverence in the context of a relationship expressed in stewardship and worship, life's purpose becomes clear. From that come beneficence and the imperatives. Then love can be legitimately defined; otherwise, it is nothing more than a word that is open to each person's own interpretation and context. Then legitimate pleasure can be defined; otherwise, all pleasure is up for grabs.

The purpose of life given by my Creator is both general and specific. It is general in that we all are designed to have the sacred as a starting point in everything. This even means that the notion of truth is a sacred trust. It is specific in that love has its boundaries. When Oprah said that she couldn't conceive of God being jealous, she betrayed her warped definition of love. God is not jealous because he wants us to himself as a private possession, he is jealous because he wants us to have the supreme experience of love, which, contrary to the implications of the pluralistic religions, is exclusive. It is the nature of love to bind itself. Love is not free. Someone who truly loves another cannot be other than jealous for the object of their love.

Some time ago, I saw a special program on the progress that is being made in the development of artificial limbs. While I was awed by the incredible mechanical genius of giving a person arms and legs, there was something else that could have been easily missed. Two who had received these prosthetics and were able to stand up from their wheelchairs said something that was totally unexpected: "It is so wonderful to be able to hug and be hugged again." Who would have thought of that except someone who had been in a wheelchair and was unable to hug or be hugged because of the intrusion of the chair?

God embraces us with his love and has given us the extraordinary privilege of love and sexuality in a relationship from which God has exempted himself because he is "Spirit"; his love for us is so great that he has provided for us to have pleasure in our material finitude. And he makes that same body his dwelling place, his temple.

To be sure, the New Spirituality loves to talk of the sacred, or of purpose and meaning, but the starting point of an impersonal absolute without any of the attributes of God, except by negation, does not justify the New Spiritualists' participation in the categories they like to talk about. In doing away with God and deifying themselves, they have actually ended up losing the personal self as well. We are, in effect, amputated, because there is no one to embrace or to be embraced by. We are alone in a world where everything is nothing and we are part of the divine. From the Judeo-Christian perspective, humanity is the supreme creation of a personal, loving God. That starting point allows values and imperatives that find their definitions in a personal God.

And in the person of God, our Creator, revealed in Jesus Christ, we find our essential worth and our calling into an intimate relationship with God. That relationship has a reach that goes beyond us to others and enjoins a life of stewardship of all creation, culminating in worship. ●

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<sup>1</sup>Alec Liu, "IBM's Watson Computer Wallops Jeopardy! Champs in Trial Run" (January 13, 2011), accessed online at <http://www.foxnews.com/scitech/2011/01/13/ibm-watson-takes-jeopardy-champs/>.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.



[A HEALING PROCESS]

# Wounded *Lessons*

by Jill Carattini

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When we come to Christ asking for help, we are offered a person, not a list that adds insult to injury. To the wounded, he simply offers his own wounds.



## Wounded *Lessons*

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by Jill Carattini

For a moment I was completely confused. Wincing, I bent down to remove what I thought was a thorn between my toes when a bee crawled out of my sandal. My immediate reaction was one of indignation. I hadn't done anything to warrant this. But this train of thought was immediately derailed by a second sting on the opposite foot. The next thing I knew bees were everywhere. They went after my head and continued to chase me regardless of how fast or far I seemed to run. By the time I made it home, I had been stung again and again.

I can't remember the last time I had been stung by a bee. (I was probably five or six years old, and my mom was immediately there to medicate and console me.) By the time the adrenaline stopped rushing, I was overwhelmed with throbbing limbs and digits. I had forgotten how painful a bee sting can be and I had no idea how to soothe the hurt. My husband gave me a bag of ice and set off to the Internet for information. What we discovered was half-helpful, half-maddening.

On every website that offered information on treating bee stings, there inevitably seemed to be a few thoughts on what I should have done to prevent them. The lists were always very similar: Avoid wearing perfume and bright colors. Don't work or play around beehives or hornet nests. Don't provoke them or disturb them. Remember that bee stings are painful and can be dangerous. The words almost seemed to make the stinging worse; the burden of fault was unbearable.

Religious people sometimes make use of similar teaching opportunities. When a person is crumbling under the weight of his or her own sin, crying out over a life of brokenness, or agonizing over a certain sting of consequence, someone inevitably steps in to offer some after-the-fact instruction. This person's objective may be well-meaning. There may even be nothing wrong with the words or wisdom offered. But there

is undoubtedly a wrong a time to offer them. Before we give a lesson on all that makes us bleed, the wounded need to know there is a physician.

Jesus came onto the religious scene of Jerusalem with a method that bothered a great number of people. The experts of the law were proficient in the commandments of Scripture; they wanted people to know that sin bears great consequence and that the way to God is straight and narrow. The teaching of Jesus certainly echoed these truths, and yet Jesus called out the religious leaders repeatedly as those who were “teaching human precepts as doctrines” (Matthew 15:9). “And you experts in the law,” he proclaimed, “woe also to you! For you load people down with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not lift a finger to ease them” (Luke 11:46).

Luke 11:46

*Jesus replied,  
“And you experts in  
the law, woe to you,  
because you load  
people down with  
burdens they can  
hardly carry, and  
you yourselves will  
not lift one finger to  
help them.”*

Of course, the advice given to me about avoiding bee stings was obviously sound. And on some level, it seems reasonable to include these principles while discussing a treatment plan; prevention is clearly the best treatment. But each time I came across this “guidance” as my entire body throbbed in pain, I naturally wanted to scream. Of course I didn’t mean to disturb the bees’ nest; I’m still not even sure where the nest was. To be fair, I didn’t see any of it coming. I wasn’t wearing bright colors and I wasn’t wearing perfume. I simply stepped in the wrong place at the wrong time and I was paying for those steps. Yet regardless: all of this was completely irrelevant at the moment I was looking for help.

There are times when sin simply comes in and completely flattens us. In hindsight we may be able to see the wrong turns and reckless steps that might have brought us there, or actions that might have prevented the heartache altogether. But in the midst of our brokenness, Jesus isn’t the one pointing this out. To the wounded, he simply says, “Come.”

When we come to Christ asking for help, we are offered a person, not a list that adds insult to injury. To the wounded, he simply offers his own wounds. While Jesus indeed offered instruction that would load down the strongest among us, God was lifting him to the cross to help us bear the burden. In his presence the stinging may at first seem worse, but the wound, he assures us, will heal. •

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{ HERE WITH ME }

# Reflections on *Suffering*

by Margie Zacharias

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What is the meaning of suffering? Should God spare us from suffering when He didn't spare his own Son? To be able to trust God even through suffering is a gift that is hard-won.



# Reflections on *Suffering*

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by Margie Zacharias

LATELY, I HAVE been pondering a lot on suffering, its source and its purpose. To say that God doesn't figure actively in suffering—that He just "allows" it and then makes beauty out of the ashes—seems like a cop-out to me and lets God off the hook. He *does* make beauty out of ashes, but that has to be only part of the picture if it is not to detract from who God is—all-knowing, all-powerful and all-loving—and make Him weak, wishy-washy or limited in some way. If He can't protect me from suffering but rather turns it around and uses it for my good, somewhat like the good fairy in Sleeping Beauty who couldn't remove the curse of the evil fairy so turned the threat of death into a deep sleep, then He really isn't all-powerful or all-knowing. To say that yes, God can keep me from suffering but just doesn't choose to means that He isn't all-loving, right? After all, is He the God of the Bible or isn't He?

Driven to the Scripture a short time ago I came upon Exodus 17. Interesting, isn't it, how these thoughts can be turning around in your mind for years, sometimes subconsciously, and then something happens that acts as a catalyst, just at the right time, and it's as if God has turned a light on. In this case it was the apparently premature death of a colleague's spouse. The thoughts on the source and purpose of suffering that have come to me over these past few months have had such an impact on me that I haven't been able to move on from ruminating on them, even though I have moved on from Exodus 17 in my reading. As much as I read and continue to learn, I find myself returning to these thoughts on suffering.

Several points immediately stood out to me in this passage of Scripture from Exodus. First, it was God who led his children into this place of suffering. Second, He led them into suffering *while they were being obedient to Him* and were following Him as He commanded them. Third, He ultimately gave them victory but it was not without personal cost. Fourth, Moses built an altar to the Lord and worshipped God saying, “The Lord is my Banner. For hands were lifted up to the throne of the Lord” (see Exodus 17:15-16).

Exodus 17:1 says that the whole Israelite community traveled as the Lord commanded them and *He* led them to a place of suffering where, on his orders, they set up camp. They weren’t even just passing

through; God told them to set up camp. He intended them to stay awhile in this barren place where there was no water, as far as they knew, and no way to sustain life. Moses called the place “Massah” because it was here that the people tested or doubted God, saying, “Is God really here with us or has He abandoned us?”

I believe that anyone who has ever loved God can identify with these Israelites. We’ve all been there ... or we will be soon. Like others, I’ve asked, “Has God abandoned me?” even though I know that He has promised that He will never abandon me and that nothing can ever separate me from his love. I know this is true because I know Him

and I know that He can never lie—He is Truth. It is not in his character to lie to me about anything, the good or the bad. But knowing this has not prevented me from questioning God when suffering comes. I believe that the lesson of Job is that God ultimately desires from me the kind of faith in Him that does not become fixated on “Why?” when suffering comes but is able to accept it from his hand with an open heart. It is most often found in children, which is why Jesus said that we must become as little children in our dependence on him and our trust in him. It seems the older we get and the more we experience the disappointments of life, the more we naturally lose our capacity to trust. To be able to trust God even through suffering is a gift that is hard-won.

So the Israelites followed God into a barren place where there was nothing to sustain them. To be camped in the desert with no water was bad enough, but to make matters even worse, they were attacked by the Amalekites, who were seeking to destroy them. And in this place of

**Exodus 17:15-16**

*Moses built an altar and called it The LORD is my Banner. He said, “Because hands were lifted up against the throne of the LORD, the LORD will be at war against the Amalekites from generation to generation.”*

suffering and death in which they found themselves not in spite of their obedience to God but because of it, they experienced the miracle of victory and the intimacy of true worship. It was not a spectacular victory like the defeat of Jericho would be, or of the Midianites and their allies, “thick as locusts,” by Gideon’s three hundred men. This time, there was no overt display of God’s power; it was a communal act of simple obedience to God in the roles He had given each one. As long as Moses, their leader, was able to hold up his hands in supplication before God, they were able to prevail against the Amalekites. Finally, when he had no more strength, those God had given him as supporters in leading the people held his hands up for him. Only then was the battle finally won. Joshua, the brilliant, anointed, and charismatic general, couldn’t win the battle in his strength or with his strategy alone; he needed to know that the leader God had provided to intercede for him was still there doing his job. And Moses couldn’t do it alone in his limited strength; he needed Aaron and Hur to support him.

It seems to me from this chapter that God doesn’t just allow suffering into our lives; rather, God has intended that suffering must come to those whom He loves. Isaiah 53:10-11 says, “It was the LORD’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer.... After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied.” Of course this passage is talking about Jesus, but as a child of God, the Bible says that I am a joint heir with Christ to God’s promises and resources.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, those promises apply to me as well. Though God leads me into suffering—dare I say designs the suffering for me—I will have victory in it. I will see the light of life, my soul will be satisfied, and I will worship God.

Of course, this is not to say that I don’t sometimes suffer because of my own sin or foolishness or because of the sin or foolishness of

**1 Peter 4:16**

*However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.*

someone else. The Bible is filled with examples of those who suffered for their own sins. In the case of Job, however, God Himself says that he was blameless and upright, a man who feared God and shunned evil. And unlike his letter to the churches in

Asia in Revelation, this was not followed by the chilling words, “Yet, I hold this against you.” Job did not suffer on his own account. I believe he suffered for the sake of those millions who have come after him and have learned from his experience.

Indeed, Scripture says in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 that God comforts us in our suffering so that we in turn can comfort others with the same

comfort He has given us: the implication being that our suffering can benefit someone else and therefore, sometimes we suffer for the sake of another. In John 16:33, Jesus tells his followers that they should expect suffering. But it's important to recognize that there are different reasons for suffering, and therefore, since suffering is inevitable, one might as well suffer for the right reason (see 1 Peter 4:16).

### HERE WITH ME

But that doesn't totally explain suffering and it doesn't explain why God actually deliberately led his people into suffering in this passage from Exodus 17. Can it be that sometimes my suffering is directly according to God's plan for me, that sometimes God leads me into suffering, that sometimes suffering is designed specifically for me by God? Is it possible that He has not just allowed it into my life but has actually *brought* me to this place of suffering in order to accomplish his purpose in and for me to teach me something about myself or about Him? Is it possible that it may have nothing to do with disobedience or God's inability to protect me from suffering?

*I*t seems the older we get and the more we experience the disappointments of life, the more we naturally lose our capacity to trust. To be able to trust God even through suffering is a gift that is hard-won.

In fact, I may find myself in a place of suffering when I am following closest to the Master. If this is true, and I believe it is, that sometimes my suffering has come from God's hand, according to his will and plan for my life, rather than asking how a God who claims to love me could allow me to suffer, I am reassured realizing that this period of suffering is because He loves me. He is desirous of a deeper relationship with me that can be achieved in no other way and is perhaps preparing me for the future. It doesn't remove the pain of the suffering but it does comfort me to know that since God Himself has brought me to this barren place He is here with me. He is sustaining me and has provided

for me, even when I feel that He has abandoned me; it is He who fights for me and He will give me victory. 2 Chronicles 20:15 reminds me that ultimately, this battle is not mine; it is God's. I am the battlefield, just as Job was. And “the Lord is strong and mighty, the Lord is mighty in battle” (Psalm 24:8).

But it also seems to me from this chapter that God does not intend for us to suffer or triumph on our own, abandoned and without

#### **Exodus 17:15-16**

*He said: “Listen,  
King Jeboshaphat  
and all who live in  
Judah and Jerusalem!  
This is what the  
LORD says to you:  
Do not be afraid or  
discouraged because  
of this vast army.  
For the battle is not  
yours, but God’s.*

resources. Not only has He promised that He is with us and that He will never forsake us<sup>2</sup> but He has provided support for us in the form of family, friends, leaders, and the church. It is their—and our—role to provide tangible encouragement and comfort in the middle of the suffering as well as to lift up hands in petition to our heavenly Father even to the point that our own physical resources are drained. Only *together* is victory won. God does not mean us to suffer in silence or to suffer alone. As the liturgy of the United Methodist Church says in the New Year's recommitment service, we are to *be* the

Body of Christ *to* the Body of Christ. That is the church in action. To allow a fellow believer to face their suffering alone is to fail in our responsibility as followers of Christ and is not part of God's plan. To refuse to accept the role God has given us in another's suffering is to prolong that person's suffering, perhaps even to condemn them to defeat. Even then, God is there in the suffering. But just as He has allowed us to share with Him in the miracle of creation by having children and to share in the miracle of salvation by being the messengers of his good news, so He has allowed us to share in the miracle of victory by participating in another's suffering.

### **AT WHAT COST**

So God brings me to this place of suffering, many times for reasons known only to Him. And He ultimately gives me victory here. But I am also reminded from Exodus 17 that victory isn't cheap, either for God or for me. It has been promised by God but it still comes at a cost. Yes, the Israelites defeated the Amalekites that day; but how many Israelites died in achieving victory? How many families mourned the loss of one they loved, perhaps depended upon? They weren't fighting with toy weapons; this was war, and no one then was concerned about “collateral” damage. Victory costs: Jacob walked with a limp; Job's new

sons and daughters were not the same children he had lost; Jesus's glorified body still bore the nail scars in his wrists and feet, and the hole in his side. And ultimately, victory is only possible at all because of the suffering of God through Jesus's death on the cross. Although victory is assured for me by God, I should not expect it to be without personal cost. So then I am forced to ask myself, how much do I really want victory? At what cost?

*To refuse to accept the role God has given us in another's suffering is to prolong that person's suffering, perhaps even to condemn them to defeat. Even then, God is there in the suffering, but just as He has allowed us to share with Him in the miracle of creation by having children and to share in the miracle of salvation by being the messengers of his good news, so He has allowed us to share in the miracle of victory by participating in another's suffering.*

Scripture assures me that if I persevere, I will see light and life restored. I will be satisfied with what God has done in my life and with what I have learned of his character through this suffering and I will fall before Him in worship. Through the suffering and the victory God has revealed Himself to me in a more complete way, perhaps through the wisdom of a godly friend, as Jethro was to Moses in Exodus 17. After the victory of the Israelites over the Amalekites, Mount Sinai was covered in smoke and fire. God descended among them in fire, gave them the Ten Commandments, and revealed his glory to Moses. He promised that his presence would be with Moses and that He would give him rest (Exodus 33:14). And Moses's soul was satisfied.

None of this—the Ten Commandments or the lessons of God's promised victory over suffering or the promise of God's enduring presence—could have been learned if the Israelites had not first followed God into that place of suffering where there was nothing to sustain them but God, where they had to acknowledge that they were totally dependent on Him, where they were vulnerable to attack from those who wanted to destroy them.

God leads me into suffering because He loves me. But He doesn't leave me there. He provides for me, sustains me, and gives me victory. He gives me his divine presence, his righteousness, and afterward, those times of green pasture and quiet waters where He restores my soul and guides me into the paths of righteousness—all so that I might really know Him and love Him. After I have learned to trust Him and have recognized my total dependence on Him, my soul is satisfied.

The next time I find myself facing suffering—and there will be a next time—I can say with the psalmist, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for *you are with me*, your rod and staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies (the victory you gave me before is known to all and you will do it again); you anoint my head with oil (you honor me before my peers); my cup overflows (I am satisfied).” Then I will worship God in the true spirit of worship. I will give Him glory as I lift my hands to heaven in thanksgiving and humbleness for God's love and care and loving kindness to me, and I will say, “Surely your goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever!”

### PREPARING AND MOLDING

Lastly, I've always thought that God's purpose in my life here on earth is to prepare me for heaven, and that He will do whatever is necessary to accomplish that purpose, for as long as it takes. I've shared that thought with parents who are grieving the perilous path their child has taken, as a comfort to them. And it's true that while we are here on earth God is preparing us for heaven—but it's only partially. It's kind of a “motherhood” statement: it has no teeth, nothing you can grasp. What does it really mean, that God is preparing me for heaven? What is it that makes me ready for heaven? What is the actual goal? Is it just heaven itself? Then why doesn't God just take us all at the moment of conversion?

What I'm beginning to realize is that God's purpose in my life while I am here on earth is not so much to prepare me for heaven as it is to mold me into the image of his Son. And that is done through suffering. If this is true, that God's purpose in my life is to mold me and shape me into the image of his Son, then why should I be surprised when I suffer? Why should I expect that I should be spared from suffering when Jesus suffered so much? In Matthew 10:24-25, Jesus says, "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the student to be *like* his teacher and the servant *like* his master." So if Jesus was born to suffer according to God's design, why should I expect that God should protect me from suffering? Should God spare me from suffering when He didn't spare his own Son—even though Jesus pled that there might be another way to effect salvation—but instead, gave him up to suffering and death for us all? In fact, should I not expect to suffer even more, the more I become like him?

This is, in fact, why so many believers in generations past actually prayed for suffering or tortured themselves by beatings and flagellation. (Of course, suffering that is manipulated or deliberately provoked does not originate with God or accomplish his purpose in my life, as God is not in it.) Yet I'm afraid we have become soft and complacent in our commitment to what we believe. God molds me into the image of his Son in order to prepare me for heaven. And only as I submit to his gentle but firm hand and accept the suffering that He brings into my life can it be said of me as it was of the apostle Paul, that it is God who works in me to will and to do, according to his good purpose, so that I may be conformed to the nature of his Son, who humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross.<sup>3</sup>

Only then will I be ready for heaven. Only then will I truly worship. Only then will I be able to hear from the Father, "Well done!" Because it's all about the Son! ●

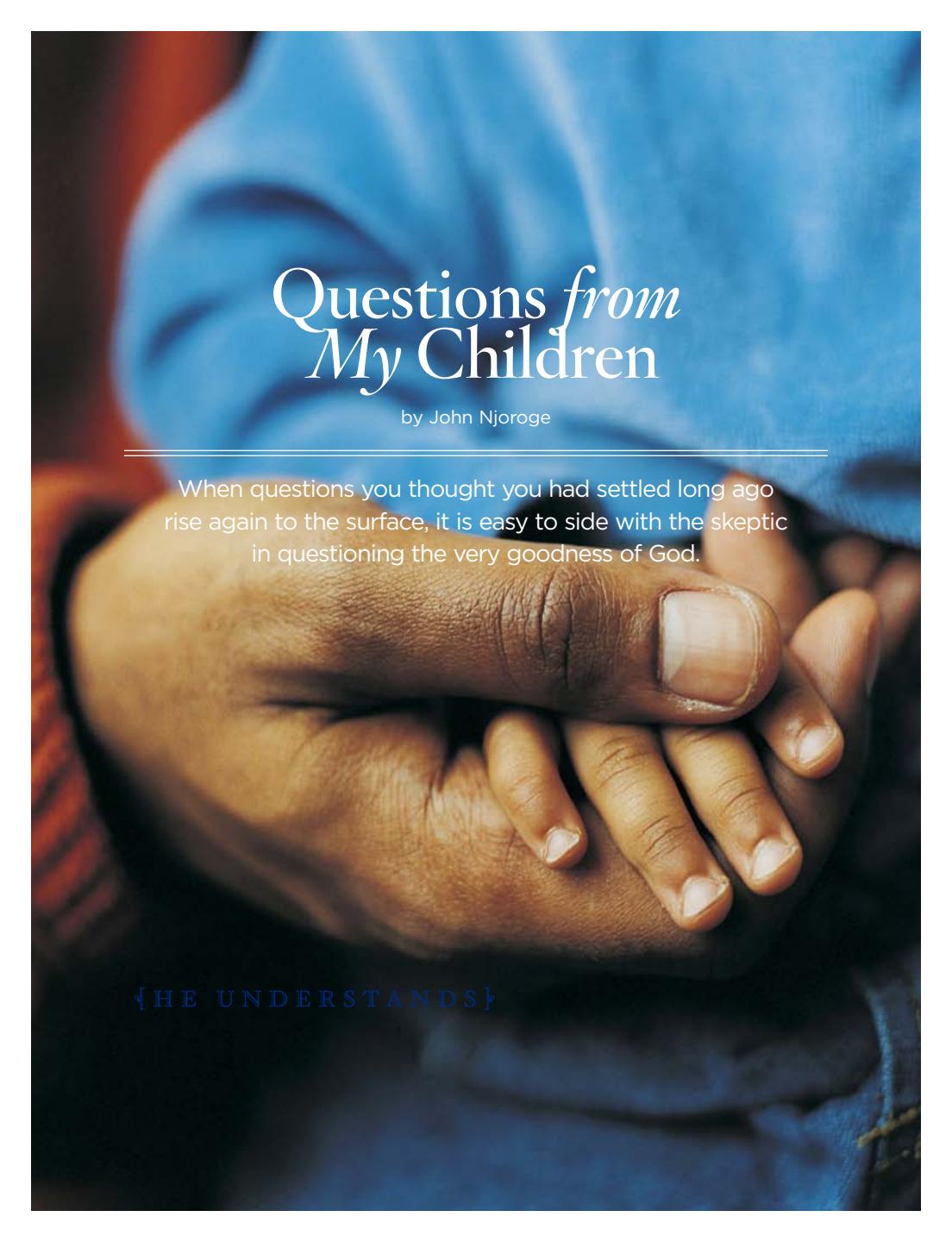
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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:17 says, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Joshua 1:5; Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 41:10, 13.

<sup>3</sup> See Philippians 2:13 and 8.



# *Questions from My Children*

by John Njoroge

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When questions you thought you had settled long ago rise again to the surface, it is easy to side with the skeptic in questioning the very goodness of God.

{HE UNDERSTANDS}

# Questions from My Children

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by John Njoroge

THE QUESTIONS flowed freely, as though a massive reservoir of bitterness and sorrow had burst open. *“How do we know that we can trust the Bible? How can we be sure things won’t just happen as they always do, whether we pray or not? How do we know God is listening? How can we be sure He’s even there?”* As Ravi has often reminded us, behind every question is a questioner. It was no exception in this case. There was a questioner behind these questions, two, in fact: both of my young boys.

As painful as it is to admit it, it is sometimes possible to cast rash responses at questions like these when standing before hundreds of anonymous people in an open forum. But it’s a different story when you are personally and deeply immersed in the circumstances within which the questions have been fomented.

This time, the questions were occasioned by the news that a dear friend, Anastasia Artuch, had lost her battle against cancer. Our boys had prayed for her every chance they got, with every meal, for about one year. She was the first person they knew fairly well and loved dearly who had died. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look of resignation on their faces and the painful words one of them uttered when the news reached us: “I can see how people become atheists.” Then followed a torrent of questions for the next few days. What complicated the whole situation was the fact that the questions were not merely intellectual. I had to keep in mind that they were driven by emotional factors and they could therefore not be fully resolved through carefully thought out responses. We had to live through them.

Perhaps a little background will help put all this in a better context. As any international student will tell you, the excitement of being in a new country, miles away from home, can be rather short-lived. Reality begins to set in when, a few months into your new life, you realize that you cannot see your family and friends at will and that you have no choice but to adjust to the new environment. (As an aside, I may note that it is no small matter to minister to international students. Many of them go back to their countries to become prominent leaders, and some never get to visit an American home or hear the gospel while they are here in the US.) Such was my experience as a college freshman, until a fellow student invited me to his home in Pennsylvania. He came from a very loving family, he said, and they would love to have me over for Christmas.

That's how I met the Artuches. From the first day I set foot in their home, Anastasia welcomed me with open arms. It is impossible to do justice here to someone who literally treated me like her son for so long. Welcoming me to her home and waiting for me at the train station many times during my college days, she and her husband represented my parents during my wedding in New Jersey, prayed with me for many hours in her living room, hosted other international students again and again at her home when I mentioned to her that many didn't have places to go during the holidays, sent books and resources to pastors in Africa to support our teaching ministry there, and much more. Needless to say, her love and generosity were also not lost on my family, hence our commitment to pray for her so fervently during her illness.

### THE FAITH OF A CHILD

One of the best-known descriptions of a believer's walk with God is the phrase "childlike faith." It is exalted by some as the ideal recognition of the all-sufficiency of God and derided by others as a sure impediment to critical thinking. Apart from the fact that the phrase is not to be found in the pages of the Scriptures,<sup>1</sup> it is a serious mistake to underestimate the ability of a child to grapple with tough experiences and ideas. Whatever the phrase means, it cannot mean blind trust, for children certainly ask some of the most profound questions anyone can ask about life. I am convinced that a good number of people are drawn to apologetics as the direct result of difficult questions innocently and disarmingly raised by a child they love.

An example from the life of C.S. Lewis might help illustrate this point. When Lewis was nine years old, his mother was diagnosed with

cancer. Lewis prayed again and again that God would heal her. He had heard that prayers offered in faith would be answered. As he writes in *Surprised by Joy*, he hoped to produce by sheer willpower the results he desired. Even after his mother died, Lewis still continued to believe that she would miraculously rise from the dead. When it finally dawned on him that his prayers would not be answered as he had hoped, “all settled happiness, all that was tranquil and reliable”<sup>2</sup> vanished from his life, and it was to be many years before he would again embrace and defend his faith in God.

At that very moment when you are numbed by the pain, when you find yourself vacillating between moments of grief and disbelief, when questions you thought you had settled long ago rise again to the surface, it is easy to side with the skeptic in questioning the very goodness of God. Yet eventually we must confront this paradox: the deeper the pain and the more intensely we resist it, the greater the affirmation that it *ought not to be!* And if it is true that it ought not to be, then it is also true that there is a locus of perfect goodness that every human being longs to find. I know of no explanation to this undeniable fact of our experience that even comes close to the biblical answer. We are personal beings made in the image of a personal God. We care because He cares—for *He* is perfect goodness.

Thus I am unable to side fully with the skeptic. The pain itself points to a reality beyond our current experience, and to deny that is to trivialize human life itself. For if it is not true that the pain and suffering ought not to be, then it makes no sense to resist them, for whatever *is* just is. But the good news is that our God is no stranger to the experience of pain and suffering. He who saved others did not save himself (Mark 15:31), and he who hung on the cross anticipated the moment when those who hated him would shout at him, “Physician, heal yourself!” (Luke 4:23).

### WE SHALL NEVER SEE DEATH

Jesus endured the pain and bore the brunt of our sin so that death would be forever defeated. That is why those who, like Anastasia, are surrendered to God’s will are able to inspire and encourage others even in the midst of their own struggles, right up to the very gate of death. Early on in my walk with Christ, another dear friend lay dying on a hospital bed. Moments before he took his last breath, he turned to those standing around him and said, “It is so beautiful, can you see it?” I couldn’t help but think of the astonishing claim of our Savior that those who keep his

word “will never see death” (John 8:51). Jesus backed it up with his own resurrection from the dead, and he continues to confirm it to his followers.

But between our earthly life and the resurrection life stands the veil of death that casts a foreboding shadow over those who are left behind. We don’t grieve like those without hope, *but we do grieve*. The emptiness gnaws at our hearts, reminding us that in this world we have no permanent home. And so I can’t pretend to answer all the questions that my boys are asking, for in the end, the answer will not be the conclusion of an airtight syllogistic argument. It will be a person: Christ himself, bearing the marks of crucifixion on his welcoming hands. It is to him that we cling, for he understands and he comforts.

Anastasia had asked that I speak at her funeral, which was held on December 1, 2011. When I was leaving for Pennsylvania, one of our boys did something he has never done before. He has always been a giver, and from the time he was a toddler, he always made sure his brother also received whatever was given to him. But on that morning, he picked up a Ziploc bag, put a few pastries in it, placed it on my carry-on bag, and informed me that he wanted to make sure I had something to eat along the way. That was his way of letting me know that he understood the magnitude of the task before me.

In addition to the questions, tough experiences have a way of bringing into clear focus the things that really matter in life. To focus on those things is our calling and privilege, and my hope is that we will continually learn to say with Joseph Gilmore,

*And when my task on earth is done,  
When by Thy grace the vict’ry’s won,  
E’en death’s cold wave I will not flee,  
Since God through Jordan leadeth me.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> While Jesus speaks of receiving the kingdom of God as children, he does not use the phrase “childlike faith” or even “faith” in his description (see e.g., Matthew 18:4 and 19:14; Mark 10:15; Luke 18:16–17).

<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1955), 21.

<sup>3</sup> From the hymn *He Leadeth Me* by Joseph Gilmore, 1862.

# Think Again

Only God alone can weave the beautiful pattern of our lives.

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SOME YEARS AGO, I was visiting a place known for making the best wedding saris in the world. They were the producers of saris rich in gold and silver threads, resplendent with an array of colors. With such intricacy of detail, I expected to see some elaborate system of machines that would boggle the mind in production. But this image could not have been further from the real scene.

Each sari was made individually by a father and son team. The father sat above the son on a platform, surrounded by several spools of thread that he would gather into his fingers. The son had only one task. At a nod from his father, he would move the shuttle from one side to the other and back again. This would then be repeated for hundreds of hours, until a magnificent pattern began to emerge.

The son certainly had the easier task. He was only to move at the father's nod. But making use of these efforts, the father was working to an intricate end. All along, he had the design in his mind and was bringing the right threads together.

The more I reflect on my own life and study the lives of others, I am fascinated to see the design God has for each one of us individually, if we would only respond. As I have noted, God has created us for his purpose, and relationship, stewardship, and worship are built into this design.

God alone can weave a pattern from the disparate threads of our lives—whether suffering, success, joy, or heartache—and fashion a magnificent design. Perhaps today, if you will stop and reflect on it, you will see that the Father is seeking to weave a beautiful tapestry in your life.

Warm Regards,

A handwritten signature in red ink, appearing to read "Ravi".

Ravi



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