

BIG GOD, LITTLE GOD ¹

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AUCKLAND AIRPORT April 2018... As I was checking in through security, I noticed a lady next to me who was wearing a Yarmulke (a Jewish skull cap, which till this point I had only seen worn by their menfolk). I thought --- this is fascinating, I'd love the chance to talk with you.

I had just spent a few weeks preaching at the Mardon Road Church of Christ (Life Only in Christ) on the subject of *Our Prayer-Hearing God* and there's no point not practising what we preach! So I silently prayed, "Lord, I would dearly love to engage with this woman. If it be Your will, You are big enough to arrange a meeting."

Well, she went her way through the Auckland terminal and I went mine. I found my way to the lounge next to where I was to board, and sat down with plenty of time to spare. Nobody was yet seated in that lounge. Not a soul was anywhere near me. But I had no sooner opened a book, than guess who sat down --- *one* seat from me? (I later discovered this was quite contrary to all human reason because she had to go to another lounge for a flight to New York!)

Turns out she was a Jewish rabbi who had spent the last 35 years leading a synagogue in New York, but had just finished an interview for a position for senior rabbi in Auckland (she said there were about 200 families in that liberal Jewish synagogue).

I told her that I loved the Jewish Tanakh (OT) and believed everything the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures had said. She was delighted to hear this. I went on to tell her that the greatest joy of my life was in knowing & walking with the God of Abraham.

Her reply was something of a shock to me. She said, "Abraham was a mystic. Abraham was given a unique vision of God not available for most of us. Abraham's walk with the Almighty is reserved only for a privileged few!"

Shock! Horror! Here was a Jewish rabbi who was essentially declaring that her God was far removed from ordinary people. Here was "a daughter of Abraham" according to the flesh, but who had no idea that God is not an elitist locked away in mystical remoteness. She had no idea that the God of Abraham "is not a respecter of persons" and wants to be everyone's friend too. Abraham's God was out of her league, too big for the majority.

Time came for her to go to *another gate* to catch her plane back to the USA! A feeling of tremendous sadness for the Jewess who was a learned "doctor of the Law" settled upon me. She was clearly a stranger to the God of Israel. Her god was the God of Abraham the mystic. Her god was shrouded in mystery, remote, virtually unknowable by us ordinary folks, it seemed..

I want to ask this morning, Is your God the near God, or the far God? Is He your Friend and Companion, or is He shrouded in unknowable mystery?

Sitting in that Auckland terminal, I started to turn my mind toward getting home. It will be so good to get home. It suddenly hit me that my mobile phone needed its SIM card changed. I was to arrive late at night, and on landing in Brisbane, I would need my phone to confirm my bus leg home, plus I wanted to let Chris my wife know I was back in the country safe.

But how was I to open the little SIM compartment? I searched everywhere for a pin or implement that could perform the little operation. My fingernail was useless. Now, it's fair to say I didn't worry. I wasn't anxious. But it's also fair to say I don't recall talking to the God of Abraham --- my heavenly Father about this tiniest of needs.

¹ These are the notes of a message delivered at the Papamoa Family Camp, New Zealand on Saturday 16th Feb., 2019.

The check-in attendant had asked if I had any seat preference. I told her that wherever she put me would be just fine. (I always ask the LORD to put me in the seat He has chosen for me!) Well, I was allotted an aisle seat. An elderly lady sat on the other side of the aisle. She was holding her mobile phone, then she pulled out the tiny key to change her SIM card. My heart leaped for joy as she very kindly allowed me to change my SIM card as well! The smallest of things, I know.

But, the Lord seemed to witness to my heart. Is there anything too small for the God of Abraham? I know your thoughts, before they form in your head! Not only am I the big God who runs the Universe, but I am God of the littlest things as well.

It was at that precise moment the Lord witnessed directly to my heart. "There is nothing too small for Me! And that's the theme of your messages when you come to the Papamoa Family Camp next year --- big God, little God!" So, I knew there and then I was to come to this camp, and I knew there and then, what I was to speak on. I sat there exulting, bursting with glowing joy inside. "Big God, Little God!" I am definitely going to Papamoa!

Bill's Lost Keys.

Let's backtrack a little. After I had preached the first sermon in that series on *Our Prayer-Hearing God* a dear old saintly man grabbed my arm as I leaving the church. He was sitting right in the very back seat of the church. He asked me, "Do you think God wants to hear about my lost car keys?" Implicit in Bill's question was, "You were preaching about God answering the prayers of Elijah, David and Daniel, but does God really care about the little stuff in my life? My lost keys?" Every time I would see Bill during that stay we talked about lost keys and a big God, little God.

A week or two after I was back home, I received the following email from Bill:-

Hi greg ,

Cat took the keys but they got too heavy and fell on the road from whence somebody took them into Winger Motors who sell Suzuki. I happened to be going past and had a strange feeling to call into Wingers who were holding some keys. Lo and behold they were mine. What a wonderful God is our heavenly Father. Praise his holy Name. By the way I hope you and your wife are having a wonderful holiday. Greetings in his name, Bill.

Big God, Little God! Yes, look through *the telescope* ... The Universe has billions of galaxies and stars, ever expanding, incomprehensible. Most of us seem to have no trouble imagining how big and how great, how transcendent the LORD God is. Perhaps that part is easy, because it removes God from us, shrouds him in unknowable mystery, makes Him almost impersonal, untouchable. Too big for comprehension. And for most of us, that's a safe distance!

But to use the language of the theologians, we desperately need not only a transcendent God, but an immanent God for Whom nothing is too insignificant. And that is the very God the Bible says we have. *J.B. PHILLIPS* wrote:

To hold a conception of God as a mere magnified human being is to run the risk of thinking of Him as simply the Commander-in-Chief who cannot possibly spare the time to attend to the details of His subordinates' lives. Yet to have a god who is so far beyond personality and so far removed from the human context in which we alone can appreciate "values", is to have a god who is a mere bunch of perfect qualities --- which means an Idea and nothing more. We need a God with the capacity to hold, so speak, both Big and Small in His Mind at the same time. This, the Christian religion holds, is the true and satisfying conception of God revealed by Jesus Christ. ²

Yes we need a God who is Big enough to run the affairs of this universe, a God who is Sovereign over the nations and the epochs, and we need a God who is intimately committed to the smallest details of our individuals lives ... even down to who sits next to us in the airport & the plane and who loves to hear us talk to Him about our lost car keys!

² J. B. Phillips, *Your God is Too Small: A Guide for Believers and Skeptics Alike*. Touchstone NY, 1952, p 44

Since the creation of the cosmos His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made ... (Rom. 1: 20). It is not by accident that modern science was birthed by men & women who believed this universe is the handiwork of an all wise and loving God, men & women who believed that everywhere we look we will see the Mind & heart of our Creator in whose image we are made. And whether they looked through the telescope or the microscope they found the Living God, big God, little God, near God, far God.

I stayed in the home of a Physicist employed by the Australian Federal Govt. to measure weight and distance. He is one of 60 scientists engaged in determining how long a metre is, and how heavy a kilogram is! You would think we know that by now. But apparently we don't. In fact, his department consults with other government agencies from around the world all performing these experiments to standardise weights and measures and to measure time!

Apparently the whole program started when somebody went to weigh the original kilogram held in France. To their amazement the kilogram no longer weighed a kilogram! What had happened? Well, they then did the same for the metre. Guess what? The original metre had also changed its length! You would think a metre would be a metre would be a metre always. But no!

Whole scientific programs are being run at huge expense and effort to get our weights and measurements right. My friend explained, that if one satellite for example, needs to communicate with another satellite (such as to run your GPS) then if they are out of sync by a nano-second (it's actually called a **pico-second**, which is 10 to the minus 21!), then the message is beamed off and gets lost in outer space.

Yes, looking through **the telescope** it's easy to be overcome with awe and a sense of the majesty and "otherness" of God. To speak of light years and galaxies, and quasars, and alleged black holes, and what seems to be an infinitely expanding universe makes us feel so insignificant, so small. But ...

Don't forget, we can also look through **the microscope** ... and we can see the Big God revealed in the little. The smallest living microscopic cell (which we can't see with our naked eye) is a universe in itself, with its own capacity to reproduce, its own transportation system, its own power generating plant (mitochondria), its own sanitary and waste plants, its own defence systems, and yes, its own communication system. More complex than the biggest city on earth! A universe within the smallest living cell!

And this is to say nothing of the world within the living cell, that universe called Quantum Physics. The world of sub-atomic goings on within that miniscule cellular universe! Who can fathom that subatomic world of quarks (there are six 'flavours' of quarks --- up, down, top, bottom, strange and charm!) There are six types of **leptons** --- electron, electron neutrino, muon, muon neutrino, tau, tau neutrino! Then there are other subatomic particles called **gauge-bosons**, etc. ? There are universes within the atom! Our God is not only the Big God of the telescope, but also the little God of the microscope. He has created universes within universes, within universes, within the Universe!

He has made distances that can only be measured in billions of light years, and he has made pico seconds! And He is our heavenly Father! Big God, little God! (1 Cor. 15: 52 ... promises that when Christ returns we will changed in a fraction of a second; in the blink of an eye!)³

MICHELLE SIMMONS was the 2018 Australian of the Year. She is a Nuclear physicist at the cutting edge of quantum physics, the world of "weirdness", the world within the atom. Simmons has received multiple national and international awards for her leading research in quantum computing. Her research group is the only one in the world that can manipulate *individual* atoms to make atomically precise electronic devices ... famous for making the world's smallest transistor ...a single-atom transistor. Imagine that ... making a transistor the size of one atom!?!

³ The Greek word is literally "in an atom"!

Also, she has made the narrowest conducting wires ever made in silicon, just four atoms wide and one atom high. She is on track to make a fully functional quantum silicon computer ... "A quantum computer would be able to solve problems in minutes that would otherwise take thousands of years," says Simmons.

THE PSALMIST --- even though he had no idea of light years or of microscopic living cells or quantum physics --- wrote'

When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained (LXX = 'founded'); What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him: And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him (Ps. 8: 3-4). It was a great wonder to this man that the God of the heavenly expanse, should also consider and care for mankind. Yes, the psalmist was taken by the Big God, Little God, even though he had no idea about things like light years or subatomic particles.

But he was not content to leave it to generalities. The psalmist reduced the lump of humanity right on down to considering how God thought about himself, as just one particular individual within the mass of humanity;

O LORD, You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately --- *intimately!* --- acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it (Psalm 139: 1-6).

Eugene Peterson in *The Message* puts it this way; God ... I'm an open book to You; even from a distance, you know what I'm thinking (before I know what I am going to think, You know what I am going to think!). You know when I leave and when I get back; I'm never out of your sight. You know everything I'm going to say before I start the first sentence. I look behind me and you're there, then up ahead and you're there, too --- your reassuring presence, coming and going. This is too much, too wonderful --- I can't take it all in! Big God, little God! Near God, Far God!

Our Lord Jesus believed our heavenly Father is like that. Jesus reasoned that since God clothes the grass and the flowers, and if He feeds the birds, then how much more does He clothe us and feed us. Jesus assured us, Your heavenly Father knows what you need before you ask Him!

Jesus assured us, "Your Father sees in secret" (Matt. 6:6,18), and He "Will judge the secrets of men" (Matt. 6: 25). Again, "But there is nothing covered up that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known. Accordingly whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in the inner rooms shall be proclaimed upon the housetops" (Lk. 12:2-3). The God of the heavens is the God Who lives inside our homes! Big God. Little God.

THIS IS NOT THE GOD of the secular materialist or the atheistic evolutionist. We are all conditioned by the modern secular society's naturalistic outlook. You know, the view that says our world works within a closed system. The modern man thinks it incredible, a flight of fantasy, that this world is the effect of a cause outside of itself. The modern mind, conditioned as it has been so much by Darwinian thinking, imagines the only laws working in this universe are the physics we can observe and measure with our senses. The modern man thinks there is no salvation outside of his own resources. It is to him unthinkable, that we can be influenced and directed from the "outside" of time, matter and space.

What an unscientific position this is! Science knows of no chain of events without a beginning, so how did the chain get started? Nothing cannot produce something! Even Maria in the '*Sound of Music*' sang that --- "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could! Everything we observe in this Universe has already come from something that already has existence. If nothing existed before the beginning of the Universe, there would be no Universe today.

As hard as it is for us who are locked inside time, matter and space to comprehend, there is an eternal, non-material first cause necessary to have started the chain of events we observe. The Bible says, **Before the mountains were born, or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God (Ps. 90:2).**

So, we ask the secular humanist, the atheistic evolutionist, "If there is no God, then how do you explain our material universe?" There are three possibilities:- Either matter sprang from nothing, or matter has always existed without a cause, or there is an infinite regress of causes without a beginning --- whatever that means!

But each of these answers takes us out of the realm of science and the universe we observe. Each of these answers is nothing short of an appeal to miracles, for science knows nothing of physical processes that spring out of nothing or that have no beginning.

This means modern science is insufficient to explain the existence of the world. Whatever brought it into being must be outside of time, space and matter. That is, we are in the realm of the extrantural or the supernatural.

The Bible says, **By faith we understand that the worlds (eons) were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible (Heb. 11:2).** Ladies & Gentlemen! We have news for the scientific world. This world is here because of what is beyond our physical capacity to know and to understand. Science --- that which our senses are trained to observe --- can never trace our origins for, **what is seen was not made out of things which are visible.**

I want you to notice what this verse teaches. It says, **the eons were prepared by the word of God.** That word **prepared** ⁴ means fashioned, equipped, for a purpose. It is used in **Luke 6: 40** where Jesus says, **A disciple [student] is not above his teacher; but everyone, after he has been fully trained [has been fashioned, equipped], will be like his teacher.** The word you see, suggests a deliberate fashioning, or preparing for a particular work.

The Bible says this world has been **prepared** with an underlying purpose in mind. But do not get me wrong. I do not denigrate science. But science can only take us so far. If this world had been formed out of materials which were subject to human observation, there would be no room for faith based on revelatory knowledge from God. There is behind this world an unseen Mind, a Personal God Who cannot be submitted to experimental science. And the Invisible God is the object of our faith ... for **by faith we understand the eons were prepared (equipped, fitted out for a specific reason) by the word of God.**

The God of creation has prepared this universe that we might know Him and walk with Him through it! He wants us to know that He is not just the big God of the heavens & the earth, but that He is the little God Who delights to walk with and be known and loved by each of His dear little children. That **He wants us to know that He has the key to life, and that He is interested in our lost keys at the same time!**

MISUNDERSTANDING GOD'S LEADING

Now let's be practical here. A lot of Christians wonder and ask, 'But how can I discern God's leading in my daily life?' They seem to wait for bolts of lightning, audible voices, visions and dreams, some kind of supernatural sign.

When the wise man of **Proverbs** thought about this, he discovered the Big God guiding him in the smallest of things in the world ... **"Go to the ant! Learn of the ways of the ant and let the Almighty guide you! The Big God is talking through the ant!"**

Still being practical let me put it as simply as I can this way. I have a relationship with my wife that I enjoy very much and which encompasses several different aspects. I enjoy the romantic involvement as well as the simple activities done together: minding grandkids, a swim at the beach, sitting together watching a decent TV show or movie, a drive in the outback, riding our bikes.

⁴ *Katertisthai* ... literally suggests the wise adaption of each working part to a whole purpose.

There is also a quiet confidence that comes when she is in her sewing room making garments for various charities or cooking getting reading for a visit from family. And I am in my study, at the desk. And there is the joy of hearing her voice on the phone when I am away from home.

One of the greatest pleasures is knowing that even when I cannot see her, she is there for me, waiting. So yes, most of my relationship with Chris is not emotionally or physically ecstatic, and yet in all its parts is equally enjoyed.

Now, I am not saying that in our relationship with the Lord that God never stirs our emotions. But I am saying that most of us have never learned to rest in our relationship with the Lord when it is calm and quiet. Some of us seem to want more and more excitement. And if God is not inclined to stir our hearts and our thoughts, we try to find artificial means to stimulate them.

This is compounded in those Christian groups that only seem to give the glowing, spectacular reports of the great things God is doing in their midst. These people seem to believe that our relationship with the Lord is to be a continuous ecstatic arena, and they cannot rest and enjoy the simple aspects of a relationship with the God of Abraham, like watching the ants in your garden!.

You see, He is the big God, little God. He has the big picture, and we can trust him to direct our paths;

And a great and strong wind was rending the mountains and breaking in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire, a sound of a gentle blowing ... a voice came to Elijah ... (1 Kings 19: 11-13).

Yes, as I sat there in that [Auckland terminal](#), I was struck by that rabbi's scholarship, but for all her knowledge and learning, she seemed to be a stranger to the God of her Bible. The idea that the God of Abraham wanted to walk with her, and to be her friend too, was too mysterious to contemplate.

Now don't get me wrong. I like scholarship, I am committed to learning as much theology as I can. But it seems to me, the Church is cluttered with shipwrecked scholars who thought the Bible was written for just knowledge but did not recognize it is written to bring us life --- the life of God for the soul.

I sometimes think that the wisest thing a Christian could do would be to shelve his theological books, close the Ipad, ditch the mobile phone or even sell the lot, and use the proceeds to buy a telescope and a microscope, and gaze up at the stars and planets, and then gaze at a the world within a butterfly's wing, and be in silent awe!

One night and day spent this way would revolutionise us. One day and one night spent in silence before our Big God, Little God would cause us to exclaim with awe and gratitude as the Psalmist did, **"O LORD, You are intimately acquainted with all my ways!** Surely, You are the God of Abraham, the Big God, Little God. And we would hear His assuring gentle voice, "My child whom I have redeemed by the blood of Jesus My Son so you may walk with me every single day."

Big God, little God!

NEAR GOD, FAR GOD

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JOKE: Did you hear about Paddy the Irishman who was lying out in the paddocks looking up into the sky? He decided to try a conversation with God. "God, in your sphere", he said, "what are a million years loyke?" God answered, "In My sphere, a million years are but as one minute." Paddy then asked, "Well God, in your sphere, what would a million dollars be loyke?" God answered, "In My sphere Patrick, a million dollars are but as one single dollar." Emboldened Paddy asked a third question, "Well God, do ya tink you moyght be able ta spare me just one o' Your dollars?" God answered, "Patrick, just one minute!"

LORD, You have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were born, or You did give birth to the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. You turn man back into dust, and say, "Return, O children of men." For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night. (Psalm 90: 1- 4).

Before your birth God knew you! Your days were numbered. Do you think this is an imaginative stretch? **Luke 12: 6-7 ... Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows.**" The hairs on your head are **numbered**. What does that mean?

1. The total number is known to God? Even that is an amazing assertion ... the average human head has about 60,000 hairs ... before they start to drop off --- permanently. So just to keep tabs on your head and keep altering the tally is remarkable enough! Now consider that there are over 6 billion people on the planet. And God knows each tally for each individual, and that tally for each individual can change by the day, by the hour! They are **all numbered** --- not one hair is left out of the grand tally! Oh, what a big God, little God we have! Our Father.
2. Each hair has an assigned number? The Greek may also read, **the hairs on your head are each numbered**. Each individual hair has a registered and recorded number? Which means God has counted them individually out! **Pas, pasa, pan** = every, each as well as all. (A God who has created

universes, within universes within the Universe, and a God who can count in pico-seconds is surely able to do this!)

So, the hairs on your head are all numbered ... each individual hair is assigned a number, and the total is counted up as well! Do you know the number of hairs on your head? Have you counted out each individual hair? No? Well, so great is your Father's love and care for you that He has already done it. Do you know the number of hairs on the head of that precious wife of yours? (I ask about the women folk, because the job of counting the hairs on your husbands' heads for some of you is no challenge at all!) Or the darling head of that little baby, that son or that daughter of yours? No? No! Then how dare you be anxious for them, says Jesus. Your heavenly Father has already counted them! You can't by anxious thought even add one inch to your own stature! Stop worrying.

Not even one sparrow is forgotten before God, says the Son of God (Luke 12: 6) even though we don't even notice the sparrows, selling them for a pittance. (In the early days when sparrows were introduced, the government in Oz offered a bounty of a penny per sparrow head!) Considered a pest. But they are precious to your Heavenly Father! He is the big God, little God.

Let's not rush over what Jesus says here. "Are not five sparrows sold for two cents, and not one of them is forgotten before God" (Lk. 12:6). The sparrow is the tiniest of the finch family in the Middle East. The word itself is what's called a *diminutive* --- they are *little sparrows*. They are a common little bird. Jesus tells us that you can buy a pair for the equivalent of a cent. You can buy 2 pairs for 2 cents, and the dealer will throw in an extra one for nothing; you get 5 *little sparrows* for 2 cents. Sparrows are cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap, cheap (!)

But, "Your heavenly Father does not forget one little sparrow when it falls to the ground" I used to think Jesus means that not even the death of one sparrow goes unnoticed by the Sovereign Creator of the Universe. That in itself is remarkable enough. How many little sparrows are there in the world? (Feral cats in Australia eat 1 million birds *every day!*) Not one of them can die (fall) without your Father's knowledge. I used to think that. But remarkable as that is, I'm not so sure now that that is entirely what Jesus meant.

"FALL". It certainly can mean to die or to be destroyed. For instance, Jesus talked about how great would be the "fall" of that house which is not built upon the rock. The Bible talks about falling by the edge of the sword, meaning dying by the sword. So certainly, in some contexts to fall means to be destroyed or to die and perish.

But in other contexts, to fall can mean simply to harmlessly drop. Crumbs can fall from the table. When the sower scatters the seed during planting, it is said to fall onto the ground.

So when Jesus says not one of the smallest and most common of the birds, *the little sparrow* can fall to the ground without Father's knowledge, did he mean your Father knows when each and every individual sparrow dies and perishes, or did he mean that each time every single little sparrow hops off its perch onto the ground to feed, that your heavenly Fathers knows and *sees it throughout its entire lifespan?*

Either way. Jesus assures us, our Father in heaven is a big God, because He pays attention to the minutest of details about everything. How awesome that He who knows all things, cares for each individual every single moment. *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, it is high, I cannot attain to it.*

Tell me, when you awoke this morning, did you think about birds. Were you concerned for them? Did you notice them? Well, I can tell you on the authority of God's own word, God was watching them. And it is guaranteed, whilst you slept God was watching you. Before you stirred, He was there. Before your mind kicked into gear, He knew your thoughts (He's still waiting for some of you to click your minds into gear!). Before your feet hit the floor, He knew what your first words would be. Big God, little God!

HOW DO I KNOW GOD IS LEADING ME? Many strain for years trying to discern. As I say, the problem is they are looking in the wrong places ... dreams, visions, angelic visits, voices from the whirlwind, emotional highs, and so forth. But I am going to tell you a great secret. Are you ready for it?

When we are in the will of God, we will hear and feel nothing necessarily out of the ordinary. Let me illustrate:

When a **child** is doing the will of his parents, he will hear nothing from his mum or dad. Suppose you tell your youngster not to ride his bike on the road. If you see him riding on the street you will run out and yell at him, "Get off the road!" Or if you don't scream at him, you will simply act and run out and retrieve him from danger.

However, if you look out the window and see your lad riding on the footpath as he is supposed to, he will hear or see nothing from you. Right? The same is true of our heavenly Father. When we are in His will, we will hear nothing out of the ordinary.

So, how does one get into His will? Quite simple. When alternatives present themselves, you pray, "Lord, You know I want Your will to be done in my life more than anything else. Not mine, but Your will be done. I am thinking of doing such and such, or going to such and such a place. If it's not Your will, please close the door. If it stays open I will move ahead with confidence in Your loving hand before me.

The God of Today and the God of Tomorrow. Don't worry, for God knows your needs even before you ask. He is the God of the rolling ages ... He is called the "eternal God" or, more literally, "the God of the ages of the ages". He holds the big picture in His eye, and yet, He knows when a hair on your head falls out, and when a little sparrow hops onto the ground. He is the God of this day, your day, this pico-second of a moment in eternity!

He is the Big God, little God. Whether you lose a loved one in death, or lose your car keys (to the cat!) you can take your heart to God.

A BOW AT A VENTURE. Now a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel in a joint of the armor. So he said to the driver of his chariot, 'Turn around, and take me out of the fight, for I am severely wounded' (I Kgs. 22: 20). A certain man fulfilled God's decreed counsel. What was his name? Don't know. The Bible calls him a certain man. How old was he? Not told. And he drew his bow on a whim. No purpose to it. And this certain man let his arrow fly up into the air. No target chosen. But God's prophetic purpose must be fulfilled. So it flew with angelic aim. And where did this certain man's random arrow land? Ah! It struck between the joint of armour. But not just the armour of any body. It struck God's intended target. God's purpose, God's word, God's decree was at stake. Big God, little God!

A CERTAIN WOMAN OF TEKOA. But a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull ... Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech, which he had done to his father, in killing his 70 brothers." A certain woman. What was her name? Don't know. Was she married, a mother? Not told. The Bible is content to say she was a certain woman. But her rock struck God's intended target. Big God, little God.

Heb. 1: 2, 'In these last days God has spoken unto us in His Son, whom He appointed as heir of all things, through whom also He prepared the eons ...' The Bible says God is working through His Son to accomplish His everlasting purpose. That universal dominion which properly belongs to the Sovereign Creator Himself, He has now bequeathed to His Son. God has appointed Jesus as the rightful inheritor of universal dominion.

So you see, the significant element in the creation of this magnificent mass of rolling spheres and stars is not the vastness of the material worlds, but the evolution of God's purposes through the ages, through the eons. **And he [the Son] upholds all things by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3).**

The meaning of **upholding** is seen in such expressions as that of Moses in **Numbers 11**. Moses is feeling overwhelmed by the burden of "carrying" the nation of Israel in the desert. The burden of their administration and care and government is weighing Moses down. Every day the people are complaining to him about their conditions. 'Give us something to eat! Give us some fresh water to drink!' No wonder he's getting downright depressed. Moses complains,

Why have You been so hard on me, Your servant? Why have You laid the burden of all this people on me? I alone am not able to carry all this people... (vs. 11-14).

That's the exact meaning of **"upholding all things by the word of his power"**. It means the risen Christ carries responsibility for the government and guidance of the people of God. (It does not mean that Jesus was the Creator of the Genesis beginnings. It does not mean the Son now sustains and holds all the material universe together! Jesus has told us it's our Father who created in the beginning and who maintains the material universe.) Just look at the context. It says, God has appointed Jesus His Son to administer the kingdom and to govern its people and affairs!

As God's appointed king and Messianic Lord, Jesus upholds --- manages, administers ---- all things because **the government is upon his shoulders**. God has prepared the ages and world epochs for His Son --- and His saints --- to manage.

The Bible says that through the church of Christ, God has **brought to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3: 9-11).**

Illus. Magnifying Glass ... used to love to start fires by concentrating the power of the sun through our magnifying glasses. Used to sit up the back in Sunday school with the winter's sun streaming through the window. The naughty boys of whom I seemed (I now say to my shame) to be the ringleader, would huddle around and I would focus the sun through the lens onto the church's hymn books! I could get quite a cloud of smoke up, until the Sunday school Superintendent, Mr Merv Muller confiscated the magnifying glass!

The point is, Think about the big bright, fireball we call the sun. I could impress you with its size and the nuclear reactions going on, and how much fuel it burns every second. It sends every second out into the solar system so much energy. But such a tiny fraction of that heat and light hits our tiny planet. So many rays just hit nothing out there. They just get dissipated into outer space. Seems such a waste. But then think of the tiny, tiny bit of light that hits New Zealand! (I mean no disrespect to Kiwiland!) It's miniscule. Yes, big sun! But think of the smallest fraction of the sun's light that hits you! How warming and comforting that spec of heat is! It's just for you. At any moment of time, that sun is warming you!

God is the Big God of the Universe, but His rays of warming love still reach each of us individually. Jesus is like that magnifying glass. As we look at God through him, we see the Deity perfectly. Through Jesus we experience all the focused love and warmth of the Creator and Father. Jesus is the image of the invisible God. We all know that an image is not the original. The image is the likeness of the original. We see the original through the image. Jesus dwells in **"the bosom of the Father ... and has explained God" (John 1:18).**

The Big God has focused Himself into the perfect man, Jesus our Lord Messiah. We see in Jesus the Big God, little God perfectly revealed. Jesus said that the words he spoke and the works he did were the works of His Father God. Through the faith of Jesus we see the power of God stilling the storm and saving the witless disciples. Big God! Through the faith of Jesus we see the compassion of God miraculously feeding thousands effectively from a few crumbs of bread. Big God! Through the faith of Jesus we see the love of God noticing a poor widow's offering of two cents. Little God! Through the faith of Jesus we see the children taken up effectively into God's lap and blessed. Little God!

I think God's greatness is seen in His focused attention to the small stuff of our lives.

Illust. Of Brother Yun and voice recognition ... Fingerprints. **RESURRECTION DNA!**

LIGHT GOD, DARK GOD

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[FRAUNHOFER Lines](#) ... life is full of the colours of various experiences With the dark and black woven in.

[RICHARD DAWKINS](#) in *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, pp 132-133

The total amount of suffering per year in the natural world is beyond all decent contemplation ... In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."

[C.S.LEWIS](#) for years also rejected the existence of God because he thought a good and all-powerful God could not allow evil and suffering in His world. If such a God exists, then He has a moral obligation to stop suffering. So, suffering in this world proved God did not exist.

But eventually Lewis came to see the flaw in his own reason for rejecting God. Indeed, he came to see that evil & suffering in this world actually make the existence of God *more* likely! His book [Christian Reflections](#) concluded that awareness of moral evil in the world is a bigger problem for the atheist than the believer in God. How so? Well, his reasoning worked like this: If there is no God, then Lewis' outrage over suffering was based on his own private feelings:

The defiance of the good atheist hurled at an apparently ruthless and idiotic cosmos is really an unconscious homage to something in or behind that cosmos which he recognizes as infinitely valuable and authoritative: for if mercy and justice were really only private whims of his own with no objective and impersonal roots, and if he realized this, he could not go on being indignant. The fact he arraigns heaven itself

for disregarding them means that at some level of his mind he knows they are enthroned in a higher heaven still. (pp 69-70).

That's profound! Lewis came to recognize that our awareness of evil & suffering in this world is the clue that subconsciously we know God must exist. Moral outrage over suffering you see, is a subconscious appeal for God to put it all right. The atheist who expresses moral outrage over suffering in the world is really appealing to the objective reality that the God of Justice must exist! To talk about justice you have to talk about objective morality, a standard outside our own private values. And that means talk about God!

As Christians we do not deny there is suffering, *real* suffering in this world.

As Christians we know that, like Joseph it's possible to be sold into slavery and betrayed by loved ones who are jealous of godly character, or just plain unthinking and mean.

As Christians we know that, like Jonah we too can get swallowed up by the storms of life because of our own selfish, wilful and wicked choices.

As Christians we know that, like Job we can sometimes suffer for no apparent reason other than that God in His wisdom allows it to be so. Job's friends were sure that if a man lives righteously, then things under heaven should go right for you. Those 'comforters' were sure that if things went as badly for you as they did for Job, then surely God is punishing you and you are getting what you deserve for your moral imperfections.

So yes, sometimes the reason for a Christian's sufferings can be mystifying because they are hidden in the purposes of God. But of course, at the end of the day, Job received one of the most profound revelations of God's Sovereignty --- as well as being transformed himself. He learned that God is the light God, dark God.

There are many reasons behind our suffering, but we do not have such a fatalistic view as Dawkins of this world. We know that at the bottom of it all, at the heart of this universe, is not "**pitiless indifference**", but that in the unfathomable depths of hidden darkness, there is the light of God's all-wise and loving heart --- revealed to us in the life and atoning death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

We do not think suffering is just an illusion, like the Buddhists or the Hindus, or **Christian Science** so-called, (which teaches that sickness and external evil are products of our own imaginations!) either. Christians, like our Saviour's life-long suffering and his consummate suffering on the cross, are permitted (even encouraged) to express our griefs with tears and questions.

We can be like our Saviour who said, **My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow even to the point of death (Mk. 14:34)**. It's perfectly permitted for the disciple of Jesus to be in anguish and fall to the ground, and to feel as though our suffering is unfair, disproportionate and unjust, and to pray, **"Father, if it's possible take this cup from me!"** Of all people, the upright and loving Jesus deserved a good life on the basis of his good moral life. But all he got was the cross. Certainly Jesus experienced the light God, dark God that we do.

WHY IS THERE DARKNESS AND SUFFERING AND EVIL IN THIS WORLD?

The question of why there is suffering in the world has exercised every culture and every philosophy and religion in all generations. And let's be honest. The presence of evil & suffering in the world is a serious challenge to our Christian minds as well. But we work within a general framework that buttresses our faith.

1. CREATION & THE FALL.

The Bible tells us God originally placed humans into a world without suffering and death. Everything was harmonious and peaceful --- until the day Adam & Eve took matters into their own hands and rebelled.

The evil we experience today was not originally meant to be a part in God's world for us. Death is our enemy. That means, that even what we may euphemistically call "a peaceful death in sleep" at age 95 is **not** the way things were originally meant to be. The Bible says --- and deep within our own hearts we know it --- death is just plain wrong. We were **not** meant for mortality, **not** meant to say goodbye to our loved-ones.

This is why it's not exactly right to hear what we often hear, "Death is a perfectly natural part of life!" No it's not. To say such a thing is asking us to repress our original created sense --- we were not made for the dust and love's relationships were meant to last!

The Christian doctrine of the rebellion of man helps us understand why evil & suffering have entered our world. The Bible says, **By one man's sin death entered (invaded!) into the world ... and so death spread to all ... (Rom. 5: 12).** Death is an alien, a hostile invader to this planet! Death is the great usurper.

We may properly say therefore, that evil & suffering are a part of God's system of justice upon the planet. As **Romans 1** says, **even though humans knew God, they did not honour Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man, and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over ... to degrading passions ... and to a depraved mind... (Vs. 18-28).** A world in rebellion cannot enjoy God's unlimited favour. The doctrine of the Fall of man teaches that our world's suffering is a part of God's corrective justice.

This does **not** mean that individual instances of suffering are the result of that person's sin(s). It does **not** mean that if I get sick, or you suffer an accident, or if a loved one dies that God is punishing you or me for a particular sin. You only have to look at Job's suffering to know that is the case.

Job's "miserable comforters" thought Job was suffering because of some unrighteousness in his life. But Job's friends forgot the other half of the equation: while it is true that overall suffering of mankind is due to our rebellion, nevertheless is not dished out in a proportionate or fair way. Bad people may not suffer more than good people. Sometimes the most godly saints have experienced the worst kind of suffering. Jesus is the ultimate example of that kind of suffering --- he suffered hostility and rejection and injustice precisely because he lived right before God and spoke the truth always.

The Christian doctrine of the Fall then, gives us a finely nuanced understanding of the suffering in our world. As members of the human condition even we Christians inherit the brokenness of the entire human race. Jesus said, **the sun shines and the rain falls on both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5: 45).** Logically then, the storms hit Christians as well as atheists. Tornadoes destroy good peoples homes as well as the homes of the godless.

The doctrine of the Creation & the Fall tells us this world has a moral order to it, and that although much suffering & evil appears unjust and unfair, nevertheless there is an underlying moral fabric to the world. Behind it all there is the justice of God, the righteousness of God.

2. FINAL JUDGMENT & RENEWAL OF THE WORLD.

The second Christian doctrine that helps us understand the evil & suffering in our world is the final judgment & restoration of the world.

Our society today has lost its sense that there is a day of reckoning coming. A day when the Almighty is going to put everything that's wrong, right. In fact, for a lot of modern folks, the idea that there is a holy God who is going to judge evil and punish injustice, is a repugnant thought. But the degree to which our post-Christian society has lost the sense that God is going to judge the world, is the degree to which sin is running rampant.

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY famously wrote:- **"Without God and the future life ... everything is permitted, one can do anything."** This quote makes the modern secularist bristle because it implies that people without faith in God are necessarily less good and less moral than those who do. This is not true! Because the NT teaches that all persons, regardless of their belief, are created by God with a moral conscience. So, even on the premise of Christian doctrine it is wrong to imply that you can't be good without God. (I know atheists and unbelievers who are more committed to justice and social good than smug, self-satisfied Christians.)

To take Dostoyevsky that way is to miss his challenge. Dostoyevsky is saying that without God there is no moral *obligation*. Everything is "permitted" or allowed. Without God morality is relative. Without God, your

truth is not necessarily my truth. But if morality is grounded in the will of the Almighty God, then cosmic order is restored. Moral absolutes are grounded in the character of the Living God.

This is no longer the general consensus in our modern secular society.

TELOS. Before the 18th Century, people generally understood that morality was important because the world is heading towards an end game where God's judgement awaits. The whole point of ethics was to prepare men to pass from this present world to his true end.

The Bible word for this truth is *telos ...* meaning end, consummation, arrival, the goal. The world and our lives are going somewhere ... we are going to meet God and righteousness and justice when all things will be put to rights. There is an Age (eon) beyond this present world order.

But this worldview changed from the 18th Century. So-called Enlightenment thinkers became committed to the belief that human reason and science, apart from ancient revelation or tradition are sufficient to give us the knowledge we need to live in this world.

So, the basis was laid to stop thinking about what human beings were made *for*. That became the wrong question. We were told there is no design, no purpose, no end, no **telos**. Rather than being told we humans were made by God and for God and to be His accountable stewards in this world, we were told we were no different than the fish or tadpoles. (Origin of hiccups? Because tadpoles burp!) Thus, our modern society supposedly based on reason and science alone has rejected any notion of a Divine purpose and answerability for human beings. Now think about that!

If there is no Judgment Day then in the end, it makes absolutely no difference whether you live a kind and righteous life or whether you live a life of selfishness & cruelty and oppression of others, because at the end of the day there is no such thing as objective, universal justice. So just come to grips with the fact you live in an amoral Universe and stop looking for justice. Resign yourself to the fact that evil & injustice & tyranny are never going to be redressed. Or ...

If there is no Judgment Day then we have to be the judges. We have to take up our weapons and we seek revenge and take justice into our own hands. We must hunt the baddies down now! We better saddle up our horses and ride our own possie! We are the lynch mob!

From a Christian perspective, the doctrine of the Judgment Day is not a gloomy prospect. If I know that God has promised to finally mete justice out according to His fair and holy character, according to all the motives and facts of the case that only He could possibly know, then I can live with both hope and grace in the meantime. If I know justice will finally and fully be administered, then I don't have to live with vengeance on my mind and unforgiveness in my heart. God has said, **Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the LORD.**

The Bible says that when he was being tried and tormented and strung up on that cross so unfairly, that **while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting himself to Him who judges righteously (I Pet. 2: 21-24).** And God did vindicate Jesus. God's justice shone through ... He raised him up and declared to the world that this indeed is His Son and he is now Lord of the world.

So, the doctrine of the judgment means my case is in God's hands. But this still tends to be more on the negative side. It still doesn't give a completely satisfying answer to why God allows evil to continue in the world. Surely there is something more? What lies on the other side of Judgment Day?

Ah, this is where the implications of the resurrection of Jesus Christ must be worked out. Since we know that when Jesus Christ appears he is going to **transform these bodies of weakness to be like his glorious body**, then we are going to inherit the lives we always longed for but could never achieve in this present age. We are going to receive renewed bodies that radiate glory and health and eternal vigor to enjoy a renewed material world!

Although God does not show us everything yet, although we can only peer through a cloudy glass, I get the impression that the eventual joy and transformation we are going to receive at Jesus' Coming, is going to be infinitely greater than it would have been if there was no suffering this side.

Have you ever talked to somebody who has come within a breath of dying prematurely? Perhaps they suffered at the hands of a sick psycho or a sinister terrorist who tried to senselessly take them out. Perhaps it was a young mother suddenly diagnosed with terminal cancer. But somehow, by God's intervention they were spared. And have you then heard them say, "Now I live every day as though it's a special day I was never going to have. My family is more precious to me because of that near-death experience. My work has taken on more significance than it ever had. Every minute, every hour, every day is such a precious thing and I feel as though I am getting so much more out of life than before." To find something you thought you had lost, makes the object even more precious!

Perhaps that captures a little of the apostles' sentiments when he wrote, **For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison (2 Cor. 4: 17)**. Our experience of the glory is going to be greater for the suffering, perhaps because we will be able to make the comparison.

Now, of course, this does not make the present suffering enjoyable. It's still dark. But the Bible doctrine of the judgment and restoration of all things proclaims that ultimately evil is going to accomplish something far greater. Certainly, apart from sin and evil we would never have known the astonishing extent of God's love and grace towards us sinners!

For us here in this life, the thought of God's glory is rather remote and abstract. But we must realize that the most rapturous delights you have ever had --- in the beauty of a landscape, or in the pleasure of food, or in the fulfillment of a loving embrace --- are like dewdrops compared to the bottomless ocean of joy that it will be to see God face to face (1 John 3: 1-3). That is what we are in for, nothing less. And according to the Bible, that glorious beauty, and our enjoyment of it, has been immeasurably enhanced by Christ's redemption of us from evil and death. (Timothy Keller, pp 117-118)

We are told that the angels long to endlessly gaze into the gospel, into the wonder of what Jesus did for us. In fact, God's plan to elevate his sons and daughters to the highest place of glory, means we know God in the most intimate level that angels who have never sinned cannot know! Our salvation makes the angels wonder too, and they give Him greater glory as they see His purposes through evil & suffering work out!

THE POWER OF HOPE GIVES ENDURANCE.

Human beings are hope-shaped creatures. The way you live now is completely controlled by what you believe about your future.

WILLIAM B. PROVINE summarises the inevitable conclusion that Darwinian Evolution arrives at:- No hope!

Let me summarize my views on what modern evolutionary biology tells us loud and clear ... There are no gods, no purposes, no goal-directed forces of any kind. There is no life after death. When I die, I am absolutely certain that I am going to be dead. That's the end for me. There is no ultimate foundation for ethics, no ultimate meaning to life, and no free will or humans, either. (*Origins Research*, 16 [1]: 9, 1994).

Did you hear about the true story of the two men who were captured and thrown into a dungeon? Just before they went into prison, one man discovered that his wife and child were dead, and the other learned that his wife and child were alive and waiting for him.

In the first year or so in that dungeon the first man just curled up, gave up, and died. But the other man endured and stayed strong and walked out a free man 10 years later.

Notice, both men experienced the same conditions of despair and suffering. But they responded differently. Both experienced the same tragic present, but they had their minds set on different futures. It was the future that determined how they handled the present.

TWO men looked out of prison bars,

One saw mud, the other stars.

(Victor Frankl, Jewish psychiatrist wondered why many Jews in the concentration camps just curled up and died, but others endured the severest of trials and sufferings and walked out ... those who survived had something in life more important than their own personal freedom and happiness, something bigger than themselves that they invested their hopes and dreams in.)

The Bible is right all along. The way to cope with present suffering is to give people a sure and certain hope. Do you believe that when you die, you just rot? That life in this world is all the happiness you will ever get? Do you believe that some day the sun is going to die and all human civilization is going to be extinguished, and nobody is going to remember anything? Well, that's one way to imagine your the future.

But here's another way. The Bible way. The NT way, the Gospel way. Do you believe in the new heavens and the new earth? Do you believe in the Judgment Day when every evil and rotten injustice is going to be redressed? Do you believe in the resurrection of the body, that in Christ you will be raised to immortality and eternal healthy embodiment? Do you believe you are headed for that renewed society of endless joy and uninterrupted fellowship? Do you believe life is going to swallow up death and decay and the bad?

Yes, those are two entirely different outlooks. Two futures. And depending on which one you believe, is going to make all the difference with how you handle your present suffering and disappointments, how you are going to handle your dungeon of darkness.

THE OVERLAP OF THE LAMB & THE LION AGES.

HIT BY THE SHADOW OF A TRUCK! Donald Grey Barnhouse, who was a pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia for many years, lost his wife when his daughter was a young child. Barnhouse was trying to help his little girl and himself, process the loss of his wife and her mother.

One day they were driving, and a huge truck passed them. As it passed, the shadow of the truck swept over the car. The minister had a thought. He said to his young daughter, "Would you rather be run over by a truck, or by its shadow?" His daughter replied, "By the shadow of course. That can't hurt us at all."

Dr Barnhouse replied, "Right. If the truck doesn't hit you, but only its shadow, then you are fine. Well, it's only the shadow of death that went over your mother ... And that's because two thousand years ago, the real truck hit Jesus. And because death crushed Jesus, and we believe in him, now the only thing that can come over us is the shadow of death. To lie down in the sleep of death is but to lie down knowing that our next waking moment will be to see the King of Glory at His return.

SWALLOW ... some skeptic will mock the idea that our future glory will be the greater for our present suffering now. They will think us crazy to think that some future bliss will be able to make up for what we go through here and now. But they forget the NT says death and evil and suffering will be "swallowed" up in victory.

Well, to swallow up something is to completely engulf it until you see it now more. That's the word we are to lay hold on. We are going to enter a glory that is going to completely swallow up all evil & injustice.

GLORY: Means "weight". Good friends, Jesus is coming back with the mighty angels of God, he is coming in the clouds of glory. There is a weight of glory coming --- glory so heavy with joy and love and life --- it's going to weigh us down with goodness! Yes, final Judgment & renewal of this world helps us put our present suffering & experience of evil into that eternal perspective.

3. THE CROSS & ATONEMENT.

There is another Christian doctrine that informs our minds and steadies our hearts as we consider the why's & wherefore's of evil & suffering in this world.

Put simply it is this: We will never understand our suffering until we look at Christ himself and the cross he bore. You see, in the OT the book that most confronts our experience of the darkness of evil is the Book of Job. And that book ends with the (shall I say) deflating message that in the end we cannot question God.

Certainly Job calls on God to explain why he has so suffered. Job is perfectly entitled to question, even to challenge God. It all seems so puzzling, so unfair. And Job wants to know what he's done to deserve his suffering.

But here's the bottom line, God's answer is to confront Job with his own finitude and inability to understand the sovereign ways of the Almighty. As a mortal Job is unable to enter the secret and hidden counsels of the Creator. Yes, Job is assured that God's ways are wise and loving, and although God blesses Job at the end of his faithful life more than at the first, nevertheless Job is still largely left in the dark.

GOD ARRIVES IN A STORM!?!

Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said ... (Job 38: 1). Hang on a minute! **The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind?** This must have initially been a frightfully confronting experience. Where else in the Book of Job do we read about a whirlwind? That's right! In the beginning of the book, Satan visited Job's children in a whirlwind and the house fell on them, and they perished.

But now God turns up and appears to Job in a whirlwind!?! God's way are not our ways. (Of course, the reader of the book knows stuff Job doesn't. We are privileged to have the celestial curtain pulled back and we know about Satan's backstage shenanigans in the drama. But of course, that for the reader opens up still other problems regarding suffering. Why does God let the Devil loose? And so on.)

So, appearances can be deceiving. The God who can calm the storm may yet appear in the storm! The God of light, may appear in the darkness. The colours of the rainbow may still be criss-crossed with black [Fraunhofer lines!](#)

The Book of Job rightly displays our human finitude and calls for total surrender to the sovereignty and hidden wisdom of God. But for most of us, that answer probably is somewhat unsatisfactory. But that's about the best answer the OT gives us. Submit to the greatness of God and trust He knows what He's doing in the dark. But thank God we now have the NT and the advent of Christ the Son of God, and in particular, the cross of calvary.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day expected a nice, easy-to-understand Messiah who would defeat the Roman power and lead Israel to political independence. A weak, suffering, and crucified Messiah made no sense to them. Those looking at Jesus as he was dying on the cross had no idea that they were looking at the greatest act of salvation in history.

Could the observers of the crucifixion "clearly perceive" the ways of God? No --- even though they were looking right at a wonder of grace. They saw only the darkness and pain, and the categories of human reason are sure God cannot be working in and through *that*, so they called Jesus to "come down now from the cross," sneering, "He saved others ... but he can't save himself" (Matt. 27:42). But they did not realize he could save others only because he did *not* save himself. (Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain & Suffering*, p 51)

Jesus conquered evil & injustice not by striking back, but by absorbing the blows in his own body and soul. Here is the great truth of the cross. The Lamb of God conquers, overcomes, not by revenge and calling down Twelve Legions of Angels to unleash God's wrath, but by not opening his mouth and by absorbing the worst that the darkness could hurl at him, and by saying, **Father, forgive them!**

AMISH SHOOTINGS

In October 2006, a gunman took hostages in a one-room schoolhouse of an Amish community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. After shooting 10 victims, 5 of whom died, ages 7 to 13, he killed himself.

Within hours after the suicide-murders, members of the Amish community visited the killer's parents and expressed sympathy for their loss and support for the hard days ahead.

When the gunman was buried a few days later, his young widow and her 3 children were amazed to discover that half those attending the funeral were Amish, who showed nothing but support and concern for the murderer's family.

An entire Christian community faced their suffering with the same peace that Stephen did in Acts 7. The forgiveness and love shown by the Amish community toward the shooter and his family was the talk of the entire county. The way they handled their suffering had been a powerful testimony to the truth of their faith and to the grace and glory of their God.

Now of course, the secular world seemed unable to explain the Christian response of the Amish to their tragedy and pain. In fact, the media tried to mute it. They made a film about the incident and created a fictional character, Ida Graber, an Amish mother of one of the murdered children. In the movie, Ida is so filled with doubts and anger at God, and so unable to forgive the gunman, that she almost loses her faith.

Those who were actually involved with the Amish after the shootings countered that, despite the deep grief and pain, there was simply no one in the community who had their faith shaken or who could not forgive. So what the film ended up highlighting is the inability of our secular society to comprehend a faith in God that enables Christians to accept mysterious providence and dispense forgiveness without bitterness toward God or the shooter.

The cross of Calvary and the doctrine of our atonement is the ultimate proof that the darkness and tragedy of our suffering in this evil world are being absorbed by the love of God.

The Fraunhofer lines in the spectrum of the colours of the rainbow surely say in this Evil Age the colours of life will be sadly interspersed with sorrow and suffering. But the Christian worldview is able to look through the prism of the great doctrines of the **Creation & the Fall, the Final Judgment & Renewal of the World at Christ's Coming, and the Cross & the Atonement** and know that at the heart of this Universe, is the Eternal God, our Heavenly Father Who is working towards gathering up, summing up all things in Christ when death will be swallowed up by glorious life! The guarantee is that He has raised His Son up from the dead!

SECRET GOD, REVEALED GOD

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The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (Deut. 29:29).

When Jesus was born we are told the night sky lit up. The dark became gloriously light, for behold, a multitude of the heavenly host appeared to the shepherds as they watched their flocks by night. The glory of heaven lit up the sky; **Peace on earth and goodwill to all men.** Light God; Revealed God.

When Jesus was crucified we are told the midday sun was turned off and the world went dark. Jesus was born in the dark and the light came on. He died in the day and the light went out; God the Father hid His face. Dark God; hidden God.

ELISABETH ELLIOT

In 1966, Elisabeth Elliot who had been a missionary to the Aucas (Waorani) of the South American Amazon jungle, wrote a novel entitled *No Graven Image*. It's the story of a young unmarried woman named Margaret Sparhawk who had dedicated her life to translating the Bible for remote tribes whose languages had not yet been written down.

Margaret took up Bible translation work among the Quechua people of the mountains of Ecuador. Key to her work was the discovery of a man Pedro, who knew the unwritten dialect that Margaret needed to learn in order

to translate the Bible into that particular language. He began to teach her the language, and her painstaking work of systematically recording and documenting it moved forward.

One day Margaret is feeling grateful as she travels to see Pedro. She remembers the Bible verse, **Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage**. And she prays to God, "I've been waiting, Lord. Waiting and waiting ... You know I waited a long time to be a missionary to mountain Indians ... You seemed to say translation and medical work. So You gave me Pedro... Just being here today is an answer to prayer."

She thinks of all it has taken to bring her to where she is that day --- the support of friends, financial help from many people in the United States, years of training, years of building relationships, and of course, provision of the one man who knew both Spanish and the dialect she needed. God now seemed to be bringing things together. Margaret imagines the possibility of bringing the Bible to a million people in remote regions of the mountains.

Finally, she arrives at Pedro's home and discovers that he has an infected, painful wound in his leg. As part of her duties Margaret provided ordinary medical care and therefore she had with her a syringe and some penicillin. Pedro asks her for an injection and she decides to give it. But within seconds, Pedro begins to experience anaphylactic shock. His whole body was reacting violently to the penicillin.

The entire family is wailing round Pedro, as he lies convulsing. "Can't you see he's dying?" his wife Rosa cries to her. "You killed him."

Margaret is astonished at what is happening and prays, "Lord God, Father of us all, if You've never heard me pray before, hear me now ... Save him, Lord, save him."

But Pedro worsens and begins to retch, bent over in tormented spasms. Rosa puts both of her hands on the top of her head and begins the death wail of women in her community. Margaret continues to pray in her mind, "O Lord, what will become of Rosa? ... What will become of *Your* work? You started all this, Lord. It wasn't I. You led me here. You answered prayers and gave me Pedro --- he is the only one ... O Lord, remember that. There is no one else."

But Pedro dies. And indeed, it means Margaret Sparhawk's Bible translation work is over. All the years of labour are wiped away that day. "For she cannot go ahead without an informant. God knew about that when Pedro died. She says, "I do not write prayer letters [to my supporters] anymore, for I have nothing to say about my work. It seemed, on the night of Pedro's death, as though *Finis* were written below all I had done."

The book ends with a profoundly confused young missionary. There is no last-minute reversal, and no "silver lining". She stands at Pedro's grave and thinks, "And God? What of Him? **'I am with you'**, He had said. With me in *this*? He had allowed Pedro to die, or --- and I could not then nor can I today deny the possibility --- He had perhaps caused me to destroy him. And does He now, I asked myself there at the graveside, ask me to worship Him?"

The answer is yes. For at the very last page of her book, *No Graven Image* Elisabeth Elliot records Margaret's key line --- only arrived at after deep heart-searching: **God, if He was merely my accomplice, had betrayed me. If, on the other hand, He was God, He had freed me.**

You see, it's very easy for us to erect a graven image, an idol, a little 'g' of a god, who always acts the way we think He should. It's easy to make God after our image, by imagining He must support our plans, even if they are our plans for His work. That is a God of our own creation, a counterfeit god. Such a god is really the projection of our own wisdom, our very own self.

If that is our god, then He is just our "accomplice", somebody we look to and rejoice in only so far as He is doing what we want. If He allows and does something else, then we just "fire" him, or in modern parlance, we "unfriend" Him from our Facebook.

At the end of her book, Margaret Sparhawk realises that the demise of her plans had shattered her false god, and now she was free for the first time to worship the True One.

If you or I are serving the god-of-my-plans-my work, we will be anxious, never sure that that god is going to come through and get it right! Margaret was shattered to realise she had not been letting God be God --- all-wise, all-good, all-loving, all-powerful. At last she was liberated to put her hope not in her agendas and plans, but in God himself. This place brought her true freedom and her suffering had brought her to see God as God.

Incidentally, Elisabeth Elliot's book *No Graven Image* offended many in the evangelical churches precisely because it proposed that we trust in the God of the Bible Whose ways we cannot always understand. Many Christians protested that God would *never* allow such a tragedy to happen to a woman who had so prayerfully dedicated her life to His cause. (Don't forget Elisabeth Elliot's own tragic story how her young husband Jim and four other missionaries had been murdered as they brought the gospel to the Waorani people. The night before their murders, those young men had sung a hymn, *We rest on Thee, our Shield and our Defender*, and the next day they traveled into the forest, met a party of Waoranis, and were all speared to death, leaving behind their widows and fatherless children.)

Elisabeth Elliot warned against trying to "find a silver lining" that would justify what happened. She wrote:

We know that time and again in the history of the Christian church, the blood of martyrs has been its seed. We are tempted to assume a simple equation here. Five men died. This will mean x-number of Waoran Christians. Perhaps so. Perhaps not ... God is God. I dethrone Him in my heart if I demand that he act in ways that satisfy my idea of justice. It is the same spirit that taunted, "If thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." There is unbelief, there is even rebellion, in the attitude that says, "God has no right to do this to five men unless ... Let's illustrate this principle from a story in the Bible ...

"BUT IF NOT"

And Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? ... If you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?' (Dan. 3:14-15)

Now, generations of Christians have found inspiration from this story. Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace has become a metaphor for any kind of suffering we are called upon to go through. In the case of those three Hebrew lads, it was State-sponsored totalitarian control. For millions of others the suffering might come in the form of unexpected and shocking tragedy --- sudden accident or death of a loved one, the birth of a deformed or stillborn baby, the collapse of a business, debilitating sickness, unexplained betrayal of a friend, etc.

Whatever the suffering, these Hebrew lads represent any who suddenly find themselves in a painful furnace of suffering through no fault of their own. In response to King Nebuchadnezzar's ultimatum, the young men gave their famous reply,

"We have no need to answer you in this matter ... our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. **But if not** be it known unto you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you set up" (Dan. 3:17-18).

Now, to be honest with you, this answer from these faithful young lads has always intrigued me and at the same time, troubled me. On the one hand, they display absolute faith that God is going to rescue them from the flames of death. "**Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King.**"

But then, they seem to express doubt, and waver. "**But if not.**" Is this doubt not what the book of James warns us of --- **he who wavers is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways (James 1: 6-8).**

On the one hand, these boys are confident God is able and will deliver them. But aren't they also having a bet each way when they admit the possibility they may not be rescued? Their answer as I say, both intrigued and troubled me. What's the solution?

The answer is that their confidence was actually in God, not in their limited understanding of what they thought he would do. They had inner assurance that God would rescue them. However, they were not so arrogant as to be sure they were "reading God right." They knew that God was under no obligation to operate according to their limited wisdom. In other words, their confidence was in God Himself, not in some agenda that they wanted God to promote. They trusted in God, and that included trust that He knew better than they what should happen.

So they were essentially saying this: "Even if our God does not rescue us --- and that is right --- we will serve Him and not you. We will serve him whether he conforms to our wisdom or not. We do not defy you because we think we are going to live --- we defy you because our God *is* God." ⁵

I often hear good people say, "When you pray for someone to be healed, then you must fervently believe He is going to heal them no matter what. We claim our blessing by faith. God will bless us in the way we have prayed in faith. We name it. We claim it. We believe it. That settles it. It's ours by faith. God will honour and bless our faith."

You know. I don't see that in the Bible. Certainly not here in the example of these boys' confident faith. And just think of the greatest men of faith in the Bible. Certainly, Abraham, Joseph, David, even Jesus himself, are instances of men of great faith who prayed in faith but did not get the answer they craved for. As Keller continues,

If we say, "I *know* You will answer this prayer, God. You *can't not* answer it" --- then our confidence is not really in God's wisdom but in our own.

My friends, the Christian prayer landscape is littered with countless believers who said, "I really trusted God to come through. I prayed so hard for X, but He never came through for me. He let me down!" What's the problem here? Well, the answer is that their confidence was actually set on their own agenda they had devised for their lives and God was just a means they were employing to arrive at their pre-conceived and wished-for end. *At best, they were trusting in God-plus-my-plan-for-my-life.* ⁶

In contrast, those three Hebrew lads, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, trusted God whatever His wisdom and love determined. *Full stop! Period!* And that's the confidence of a God-honouring faith that alone can fireproof you spiritually against the sufferings of this life. They knew that God would deliver them *from* death or *through* death, and their greatest joy and security facing the furnace was in wanting what God wanted for them and His glory.

They weren't in it just for what they could get out of God for their own lives. The heat of our sufferings, yes, even the darkness of our sufferings, can make us examine our real motives in our walk with the Lord. *If we have created a false God-of-my-program, then when life falls apart we will simply assume he has abandoned us and we won't seek Him.* ⁷

I suggest that if you go into the furnace of suffering without this attitude, 'My God whom I serve is able to deliver me, and will deliver me, **but if not** He is still my God and His love and wisdom for me are best', then when disappointment comes either one of two things will result. Either you will become very disillusioned with God and give up on Him. Countless have. They have come out of their dark hours of suffering saying, "I was serving God. I deserved better. God has not been just towards me. God has wronged me."

Or, others have gone into the furnace of suffering thinking God is bound to fulfill their agenda, and when He does not meet their expectations, then they have said, "The problem is with me. My faith was not strong

⁵ Timothy Keller, *Walking With God Through Pain & Suffering*, Hodder & Stroughton, 2013, pp230-231

⁶ *Ibid*, p 231

⁷ *Ibid*, p 234

enough. There must be some hidden sin in my life. I am not worthy and have failed God in some way." And so they are filled with feelings of failure and unworthiness, and they think God is mad at them.

But if you remember the Gospel truth that God has forgiven you all your sins in Christ, that you stand justified before the God of Heaven in Christ who is your righteousness, then the next time you are tossed into the furnace, you will say, "I am not being punished for my sins. Christ died for me. Christ bore every single last one of my sins, and in him, God the Father has removed them from His sight as far as the east is from the west. Although I am now in this furnace of a fiery trial, I am not being punished for my sins because Jesus bore the wrath of God for me.

Yes, I am going through this furnace, but just like when gold is refined and purified in the fire, so I will trust Him to let this fiery trial make me better for Him. As it turns out, it was God's will the boys be fireproofed. But for everyone miraculously saved, there were many more who perished;

Heb. 11: 32-40 And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets:

Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection;

And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment:

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins: being destitute, afflicted, tormented:

(Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise:

God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

The history of God's faithful people tells us that sometimes God mightily intervenes and delivers; sometimes God appears silent and He does not deliver, except to tragedy. Either way, God is God.

JEFF after resigning his position as founder and senior pastor at Rivergum for 19 years. He had given his total life in love and sacrificial service. His wife Pam, too. Knowing how invested Jeff was in the church, His commanding officer came to see how Jeff was doing, "Now that you have resigned from your church, and knowing how much you have loved and lived for those people, I am concerned as to how you might be in yourself. So I have come to do a pastoral visit. Are you OK?"

Jeff replied, "Sir, I cannot tell you how much your concern for me touches me. But I will tell you that, every morning when I wake up the first thing I do is lift my heart to the God of heaven, and affirm all that His grace has done in me. I affirm what He has made me in His Son Jesus Christ. I affirm my identity as a child of God greatly beloved of Him. I affirm His great love and His wise plan for my life that day. I affirm my commitment to His will. Sir, with the greatest of respect and appreciation to you, I have to say that today nothing has changed! Nothing has changed." The officer then confided in Jeff that he wished he had that!

SANDY: According to the world, I am a mistake. I am the illegitimate daughter of a mother who was 17 when she gave birth to me. My father should have known better; he was over twice my mum's age, already married to another woman and, the father of 4 children. According to the world, I am a mistake.

But according to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I am a daughter of my Heavenly Father. My life has eternal significance. I am here for a purpose bigger than the stars. I am a child of His love.

After the service I spoke with Coral. "Isn't God's grace amazing? He can bring good out of sin. He can bring blessing out of wickedness. He even turned the greatest crime ever committed on this planet --- the murder of His own Son --- into our eternal salvation.