

If God Loves

Me So Much,

Why ... ?

God's Role In Adversity

Rich Dixon

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Introduction

I hope this helps.

I believe that these words address a universal question. It's certainly a question I asked, often screaming in the silent darkness of one more interminable night. In the course of a difficult recovery from a serious injury, sanity and peace demanded an answer.

I am not smart enough to generalize my experience to fit every circumstance, nor arrogant enough to imagine that I've uncovered a unique divine revelation of truth. I wish to honestly recount one Christian's struggle to understand God's role in tragedy and pain. I am certain only that I discovered an answer that works for me.

I pray that my journey will provoke others to consider their personal cries for relief in a slightly different light and to believe that healing is possible. No formula can possibly make this sort of journey easy. But with God, the most horrible path can lead to a destination of contentment and peace.

I'd love to hear from you. Please send me a comment via email (rich@richdixon.net) and stop by my blog at <http://richdixon.net/bouncingback>.

I encourage you to PRINT these pages if possible. You'll absorb more if you're not reading from a monitor. Take it to the beach, the park, or your favorite coffee shop. Sit on the deck with a cold drink. Curl up in a cozy chair. I really believe you'll benefit from reading the material in printed form.

Answer the questions. Write in the margins. Perhaps keep a journal handy to record thoughts or insights.

God **does** love you. He's right here, wherever *here* might be.

Rich

UNIQUELY SIMILAR

I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. John 16:20

Uniquely similar sounds like an oxymoron, sort of like *clearly confused*, *exact estimate*, or *only choice*. You can be unique, or you can be similar. It doesn't seem like you can be uniquely similar.

Each human being is unique. External appearance, genetic makeup, environmental influences, personality, life experiences, relationships, and countless other factors contribute to the absolutely distinct nature of each individual. Every single person is truly one of a kind.

Despite this apparently infinite diversity, humans also have a good deal in common. There's little doubt that a mutual set of emotions, desires and experiences comprise a common core of what it means to be human.

Once upon a time some young people were speaking to an elder. They said, "Teacher, it is impossible for you to ever really understand us, for our world is so different."

The elder replied, "Once there were two villages which occupied the same land at different times; a Pueblo Indian village and the Los Alamos Atomic Research Village. The people who lived in one village were sometimes hungry and thirsty, strived for power, loved, hated, got tired, and felt other people did not understand them. And, of course, it is obvious which village I describe." Jan Rye Kinghorn

There's little doubt that a mutual set of emotions, desires and experiences comprise a common core of what it means to be human.

Sociologists, theologians and philosophers speculate about the central essence that makes each unique human also uniquely human, but one particular reality appears virtually inescapable. At some point a

crushing loss rips apart nearly every soul and an insurmountable cavernous void supplants relative wholeness and peace. At the edge of the abyss a tormented spirit encounters grief along with its inherent anger, fear, hopelessness and despair.

From the depths of anguish arises the seemingly inevitable question: “Why?”

Nothing insulates from these devastating truths or alleviates their painful consequences. Rich or poor, sinner or saint, peasant or king, nobody seems exempt. Bitter, painful loss claws at every heart, grief clutches every spirit, and every voice cries, “Why?”

Faith doesn't insure against these universal certainties. Individual religious beliefs may impact the nature of the journey through emptiness or the words that attempt to express what really cannot be spoken, but no degree of faith or non-faith appears to shield us from loss, grief and “Why?”

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Swiss physician Elizabeth Kübler-Ross identified a universal series of stages that comprise the grief process. These basic steps occur consistently across cultural, religious, economic and social boundaries: *Shock, Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, Acceptance.*

I wish I could offer a revolutionary shortcut through this painful darkness, but apparently no such simple path exists. Attempts to avoid this arduous journey only result in additional struggle. Efforts to skip a step lead to backtracking, traveling in circles, or becoming stuck in the mud of anger, depression or denial.

I'm a Christian who's been there. I suspect that since you picked up this book, perhaps you've been there as well. Maybe you're there right now, or possibly you know someone who is.

In my case, a freak incident forced me to confront “Why?” You can read a longer version here (<http://richdixon.net/RelentlessGrace.htm>) if you wish, but here’s the Cliff–Notes version.

In December of 1987, I fell about twelve feet from the roof of my house. I don’t remember the accident or how I managed such colossal clumsiness, but the result of this never-explained accident was a spinal cord injury and permanent paralysis below my chest. I endured five months of rehabilitation, another eighteen months of recovery, and more than a decade of painful and devastating anger and depression.

My personal journey through grief and loss revealed no magic answers that transformed a grueling journey through hostile territory into an easy, comfortable excursion across friendly terrain. In fact I’m pretty sure that uncomplicated resolutions don’t exist for the gut-wrenching uncertainties that accompany grief.

WHY ...? is seemingly hard-wired into the grief process. Its existential nature touches the essence of whatever it means to be human. Along my personal journey, I questioned until repetition rendered the words nearly meaningless. The distressing uncertainty demanded resolution and compelled an uncomfortable exploration of the character of this God who seemed to abandon me when I most needed Him.

WHY ...? is seemingly hard-wired into the grief process. Its existential nature touches the essence of whatever it means to be human.

I suspect that it’s possibly the most soul-searing question one will ever encounter, one so visceral that it’s asked not so much with voice as with heart and soul and gut.

IF GOD LOVES ME SO MUCH, WHY...?

I claim no unique theological or psychological analysis of this penetrating question, so why share my thoughts? What might I add to the understanding of grief, and what qualifies me to speak into such a difficult and sensitive topic?

By God's grace I managed a lengthy and circuitous journey through a tragedy that nearly overwhelmed me. Because God was perfectly faithful despite my incessant lack of faith, because of the commitment of significant people who entered and enriched my life despite my resistance, I survived and ultimately thrived.

If it happens, it must be possible, so I know that a positive conclusion to this most difficult search is achievable. My certainty is not the result of some abstract conceptual argument or an invisible, impractical faith; I know it's possible because it happened to me.

I urge you to believe in that possibility. Not because it's easy or fast or fun, but because it's the source of the hope that can sustain you in the darkness and guide you once again into the light.

I am the light of the world. Jesus

A THEOLOGY OF ADVERSITY

We can't talk rationally about God and ignore the real-world realities of pain and struggle.

We like to talk about our theology of love and grace and forgiveness. It's easy to gather on Sunday and sing to the God who blesses us with good stuff. It's a bit more difficult to talk about God's role in unexplained childhood death or a senseless auto crash that snatches a young mother from her family.

If we're going to have a theology of healing and recovery, we must have an equally developed theology of pain and struggle. We can't just ignore that suffering happens.

I'm certain that some of the questions that surround God's role in suffering won't be conclusively answered on this side of eternity. I believe it's a mistake to impose our self-centered demand for certainty and logic in areas of mystery.

If we're going to have a theology of healing and recovery, we must have an equally developed theology of pain and struggle. We can't just ignore that suffering happens.

But not knowing everything doesn't mean we know nothing. So while I can't offer definitive answers, I can share my personal experiences and insights.

First, a question for you:

What's your explanation for my injury?

Random accident? God's will? Did God cause it? Allow it?

Was it punishment? I've done a lot of bad things, made some really bad choices—was He punishing me?

What's His role when something like this happens?

To analyze this question scripturally I've tried to state some central principles.

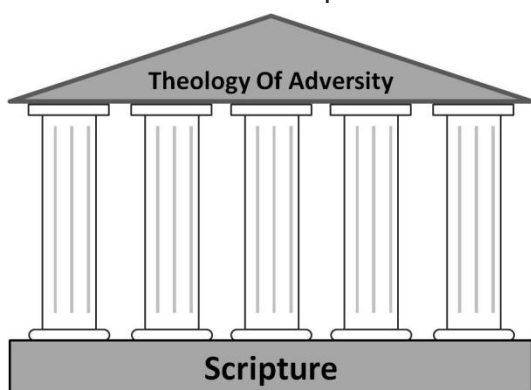
People interpret the bible along a broad spectrum. It's a spectrum that invokes intense passion and differences that can become contentious. I've known many individuals who are committed to following Jesus, who've devoted a large part of their lives to studying scripture. If all of those people sat down in a room, there'd be a good deal of disagreement on a variety of topics.

However, there would also be a surprising amount of consensus. I've noticed that we tend to focus on the differences because controversy attracts attention. But I'm more interested in the principles on which these folks would agree.

If we can identify the issues on which followers of Jesus concur, I believe we're a long way down the road of isolating those issues that comprise the truly essential aspects of following Jesus.

For example, they'd hold different views on the details and modes of baptism: infant versus adult, sprinkling versus immersion. But there would be absolute agreement about salvation by grace.

I suspect that the basics, the matters that really matter, might better be sought in the places of agreement.



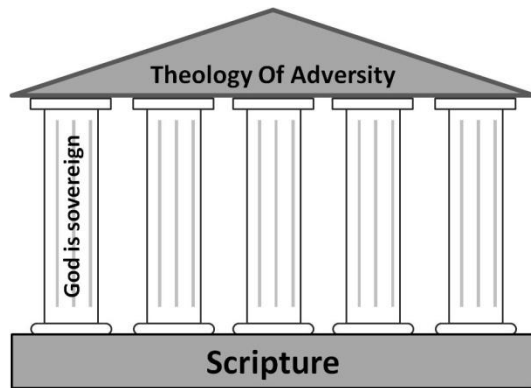
If we can identify the issues on which followers of Jesus concur, I believe we're a long way down the road of isolating those issues that comprise the truly essential aspects of following Jesus. And it's there that I wish to find my central principles.

I believe we ought to **major in the majors**. This graphic illustrates my desire to rest my personal theology of adversity on the core principles of scripture.

So instead of choosing specific passages, often out of context, to support a pre-conceived conclusion, I've tried to articulate five scriptural principles on which I've based my theology of adversity.

PILLAR #1 GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

God is absolutely sovereign. I believe scripture teaches consistently that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent.



God isn't limited. He exists outside of time and space. He's infinitely powerful, capable of anything He wishes.

God also isn't limited by my ideas about fairness, rationality, or justice. That doesn't mean He's not fair, rational, or just. It does mean that He doesn't conform to my notion of these concepts.

To many believers, the belief in God's complete sovereignty may seem so obvious that it's silly to even address it. After all, He's God.

But our human efforts to make sense of our struggles can create subtle twists in thinking. Before you even realize it, you'll find yourself wondering if God might have been unable to intervene in some particular senseless atrocity.

God is absolutely sovereign. He's 100% in charge, 100% in control.

In fact, it may seem easier to imagine that God is powerless over some horrific events. That might be preferable to struggling with why an all-powerful God would allow some of the horrors we see.

But scripture doesn't allow us that easy escape. Whatever our explanation, we can't fall back on the illusion that God would have stopped it if He could.

God is absolutely sovereign, completely able to act as He wishes in any situation. He's 100% in charge, 100% in control.

So that's settled. Pain and suffering DON'T happen because God is powerless to stop them.

Easy enough, but this assurance prompts more questions than it answers.

If He could have prevented my injury, why didn't He?

Why should I believe God loves me when He allows me to suffer unfairly?

Why do bad people get away without this kind of suffering?

Why do so many bad things happen to so many good, innocent people?

Do you have clear straightforward answers to these kinds of questions? I don't.

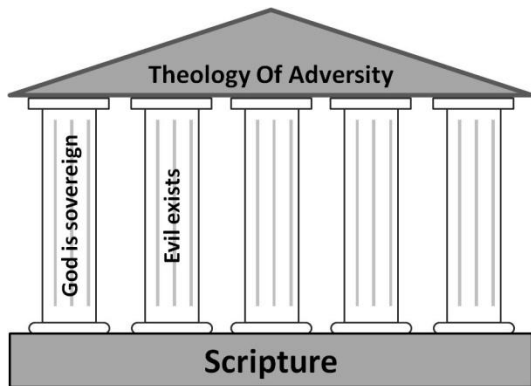
I do have some ideas. But whatever we decide, we need to dismiss the idea that some events are just beyond God's power.

They're not.

PILLAR #2 THE REALITY OF EVIL

You can't read the creation story without reaching the conclusion that evil exists.

Interpret the opening chapters of Genesis however you wish—literally, figuratively, historically, metaphorically—it doesn't matter. Somehow, some way, evil entered the world. We're under attack by an enemy dedicated to our destruction.



I wish to avoid getting sidetracked by debates about specifics about the enemy's origins. We can discuss and disagree about the theology of evil, but any reading of the bible leads to the unmistakable conclusion that the enemy exists.

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." [Matthew 4:1-3]

The enemy wanted nothing more than to divert Jesus from His appointed path. I believe that same enemy does everything imaginable to tempt, distract, and discourage me as well. He'll do anything in his power to grab my attention and focus it anywhere other than God.

Unfortunately, I'm not Jesus. He resisted and rebuffed every temptation perfectly and remained faithful. Despite my best intentions, I fail at nearly every opportunity.

A POWERFUL ENEMY

In his wonderful book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis offers a characterization of the enemy's position in the world.

Christianity agrees that this universe is at war. But it does not think this is a war between independent powers. It thinks it is a civil war, a rebellion, and that we are living in a part of the universe occupied by the rebel.

Enemy-occupied territory-that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.

This characterization affirms Pillar #1. God is the rightful ruler, the enemy is a rebel. But don't be misled about the rebel's considerable power to wreak havoc on the inhabitants of occupied territory. Even though his ultimate defeat is assured, he causes substantial pain in the interim.

STORMS HAPPEN

For the first thirty years of my life I held the misconception that really good Christians weren't supposed to encounter obstacles. If you followed the rules, did the right things, and kept smiling, good stuff would follow. Obey God's rules and He'll give you automatic health and wealth.

NOBODY gets through life without adversity. "Being good" doesn't insulate us from trials.

This "prosperity theology" ignores one obvious fact: NOBODY gets through life without adversity.

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who

*hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. **The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.**" [Matthew 7:24-27]*

Note the highlighted phrases. The storm came to both the wise man and the foolish one. "Being good" doesn't insulate us from trials.

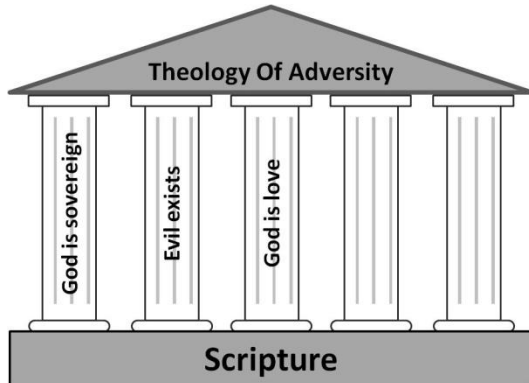
So we're collateral damage in a spiritual war, targets of an enemy who's destined to lose the war but committed to taking us down with him. That explains my situation; it doesn't answer the question.

Why?

PILLAR #3: AGAPE

God is love. [1 John 4:8(b)]

You can't say it much more clearly. Whatever you believe about God, however you characterize or visualize Him, one attribute must occupy the center.



Agape.

The apostle John knew Jesus about as well as anyone. They traveled together for three years, and he was part of the inner circle of disciples in whom Jesus apparently confided. John listened to Jesus' public teaching and likely engaged in intimate small-group discussions and private conversations with Him. He observed miracles and struggles, celebrated the glory of Palm Sunday and wept as an eyewitness to the horrors of Good Friday.

Late in his life, John communicated from the perspective of a wise elder who had witnessed the most significant events in human history. He was called and prepared personally by Jesus to fulfill a unique destiny as disciple, apostle and leader. More than a mere observer, John played a central role in the remarkable story of Jesus' ministry, His death and resurrection, and the birth and growth of the church that proclaimed Him as savior. Now this old man reflected on and wrote about the significance and impact of this magnificent tale.

How did this man chosen by God to live at the very center of His plan for redemption summarize all He had seen and learned? **God is love.** He writes this twice in verses 8 and 16 of 1 John 4.

God is love. This man who shared a unique intimate relationship with Jesus didn't say "God is a supreme being who loves" or "God loves, among His many other characteristics" or "Love is one of God's many

attributes.” When John looked back on everything he’d learned from Jesus about God, he wrote simply, “God IS love.”

Ponder that for a moment. After living at the epicenter of a story spanning thousands of years, after the founding of an entire nation blessed to be a blessing to the world, after everything God had done to reveal Himself and His nature, this old man who once called Jesus THE WORD distilled his experience and understanding of God into three words: GOD IS LOVE.

WHAT’S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Our cultural obsession with love generates a good deal of confusion. Leo Buscaglia once said that the difference between a friend and a lover is that if a friend says, “I love you,” you know precisely what he means. Love can denote a parent’s love for a child, my love for my dog, or a person’s love for a spouse. “Love” is invoked in varied situations to connote a diverse spectrum of emotions and actions. The word “love”, so powerful, overused and confusing, is rendered nearly meaningless.

God is love. God is self-sacrificing. He is selfless, committed and devoted. He is perfectly faithful. These are not external characteristics of God, parts of the whole like eye color or hairstyle. They are who He IS.

The concept translated as “love” in Scripture connotes subtly varied meanings. Ancient Greek contained three different words translated as love. *Eros* is romantic, sensual love, the love of sexual attraction. *Philos* is friendship or brotherly love, a love arising from familiarity, trust and comfort. *Agape* is selfless, unconditional, self-sacrificing love. Agape implies commitment, devotion and charity.

Only *philos* and *agape* appear in the New Testament, and *philos* occurs sparingly. The predominant form of love referenced by the New Testament writers is *agape*. This is the “love” John references when he says God is love. God is self-sacrificing. He is selfless, committed and devoted. He is perfectly faithful. These are not external characteristics of God, parts of the whole like eye color or hairstyle. They are who He IS.

What does this agape mean for me? How do I experience this unconditional love that is infinite God? How does agape that is God impact my exploration of His role in adversity?

It's one thing for God to tell me He loves me and for me to feel all emotional and gushy when everything's going great. It's another thing entirely for me to really understand and experience His love in tough times when it seems that there's nothing left to live for, when I don't feel loveable, maybe when I don't even want to be loved any more. How can words from an unseen God make any difference when grief knots my gut with fear and anger?

At such times, words seem empty and trite platitudes such as "Remember, God loves you" bring little relief. God knew that mere words could never speak His love for me, especially when loss buries my heart so deeply in sorrow that spoken words cannot penetrate the barrier of grief. God knew that I needed Him to speak directly into my heart, and he planned a much deeper and more intimate communication than words on a page.

God didn't simply speak words. He became the Word. When He sent Jesus, God said, "This is how much I love you."

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. [John 1:1-2, 14]

God didn't simply speak words. He became the Word. Jesus was God's proclamation. He was the ultimate example of "walking the walk" instead of simply "talking the talk." When He sent Jesus, God said, "This is how much I love you."

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. [John 3:16]

God loves me so much that He sent His beloved Son, the one with whom He enjoyed eternal fellowship, to die a horrible, undeserved death in my place. God knew that I could never meet His requirements and that I would lose eternal relationship with Him because of my disobedience. That relationship was His reason for creating me, and He valued it, and me, above even the life of His own Son. That's one way I experience this agape that is God.

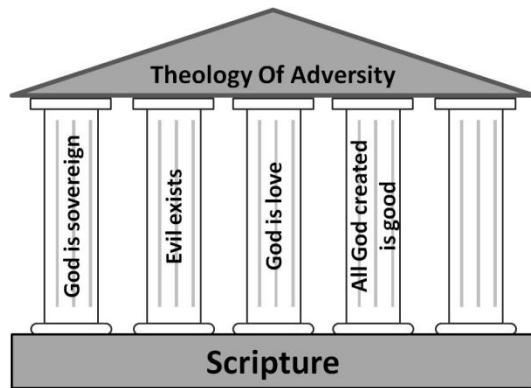
Jesus loves me, this I know, for the bible tells me so. It's perhaps the most basic level of Christian theology, so simple even a child can recite it. But even as the simple melody echoes in my head, the question demands my attention:

If God loves me so much, why ...”

PILLAR #4: ALL GOD CREATED IS GOOD

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. [Genesis 1:31b]

God intended a creation that lived in harmony with itself and with Him. However you choose to interpret it, The Garden offers a clear picture of intimate, transparent relationship. That's what God created.



All He created is good.

But, wait a second. God created everything, right? And everything He created is good?

So where'd the evil come from?

I believe it's important to know as much as possible, and equally important to admit what I don't know. I do not want my human desire for a logically consistent theology to force an explanation of details I don't really understand. So here's what I think I know.

God didn't create automatons who obeyed because they had no other option. God's creatures were given free will (More about that later).

That freedom meant choices, the choice to obey or to rebel. The enemy chose to rebel, and that rebellion destroyed the harmony God intended and set in motion the spiritual civil war in which we're immersed.

I apologize if that seems overly simplistic. It's what I know, and more importantly it's what's necessary for the current discussion. Much smarter people than I have debated this issue for centuries without reaching consensus, so I'll put the details in the "not quite so essential" category.

WHAT'S "GOOD"?

I think a lot of confusion around this entire issue results from misunderstandings of "good." I suspect that my perceptions of "good" mostly translate to "what I want."

- Lots of money = good; less money = not good
- Easy = good; difficult = not good
- My team wins = good; the other team wins = not good

You get the idea. If I like it and it benefits me, it's good. I once heard a pastor from a rural North Dakota church tell a story about our self-centered notion of good.

The farms surrounding his church were struggling through a prolonged dry period. If rain didn't come soon, an entire year's crops would be lost.

So the pastor prayed for rain. A few days later it rained. And for the rest of the summer, rain was frequent and plentiful. The farmers harvested record crops, and the pastor thanked God for answering his prayers.

God had been good.

One day as winter approached one of his parishioners appeared in the office in great distress. His business was on the brink of failure.

The man ran a large contracting company that did road paving work. The season for this work in North Dakota is relatively short, and excessive rain had prevented him from completing contracted obligations.

Long-time employees who depended on his company for income and benefits were in danger of losing their jobs. Roads would deteriorate over the winter from lack of maintenance, leading to increased taxes for everyone in the county.

As he scrambled for a way to keep his business afloat until the following summer, he asked the pastor to pray for good weather. To avoid disaster, he needed an exceptionally productive season.

I suppose this story contains lessons on many different levels. For me, it's a reminder that my perception of good is often pretty narrow and sometimes downright selfish. I'd like to promise that I'll take a broader view, but I won't. I can't see it from God's perspective.

We say that God is such a good God because it didn't rain on our Sunday School picnic. But He was still a good God when He allowed me to watch my sister, Betsie, die in a concentration camp. Corrie ten Boom

That's why this pillar is essential to my personal theology of adversity. It's a statement of faith and trust, an affirmation that everything God does is good in an eternal sense.

WHAT'S DEFINITELY NOT GOOD?

I need to be clear about one thing. In my view, this does not mean everything that happens is good. Some events are evil.

I do not believe God caused my injury. I don't believe He intended the pain I've endured. I believe that Jesus wept beside me as I lay on the ground struggling to breathe. I believe He shared my fear as I absorbed the horrible reality of permanent paralysis. I do not believe He created me so He could toss me off a roof.

I've watched both of my parents and my closest friend die slowly and painfully from cancer. I don't believe He caused or intended that sort of suffering.

I'm aware that some committed believers will disagree with this assessment. That's okay. We're all responsible for our own theology. My goal certainly isn't to convert anyone.

I seek only to explain my understanding, to spur you to construct your own pillars and your own personal understanding.

And, along the way, I hope to offer a bit of comfort to someone who's confused and hurting and wants to know how a loving God fits into their personal despair.

SO, WHERE ARE WE?

As I began, I imagined that each pillar might add a level of clarity to the notion of God's role in adversity. I envisioned a nice, logical construction leading inevitably to definitive understanding.

No such luck.

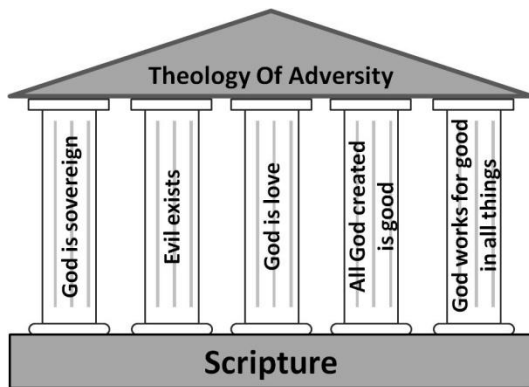
It feels like each added piece only muddies the waters further. Instead of deductive logic, each step seems to increase the sense of paradox and contradiction.

But there's one more pillar, one more principle that brings a difficult picture into focus.

PILLAR #5: GOD WORKS FOR GOOD IN ALL THINGS

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. [Romans 8:28]

This one didn't come easily. It's one of those things I knew in my head a long time before I knew it in my heart.



After my injury, some of the most hurtful things were said to me by well-meaning Christians. Have you ever heard any of these?

- "This is all part of His plan."
- "God needed your injury to accomplish some bigger purpose."
- "Your injury is His way of making you a better person."

No matter what you personally believe, I advise you to be careful about what you say to folks who are hurting. We need to tell the truth, but we also need to be sensitive and understand that these kinds of statements sound a bit dismissive.

It's probably apparent by now that statements like this don't work for me. As I said in the previous chapter, I simply don't believe that God intended my injury.

But ... my experience has shown me that God refuses to give up on me. Despite my bad choices, despite the results of evil in my life, He is faithful. He will continue to create good in even the most horrific circumstances.

Even though I believe my injury wasn't part of His plan, I can't possibly list all of the good, positive, loving things that have happened through the circumstances of my injury.

If you've read *Relentless Grace* you know many of them, but the book itself is an example.

I spent thirty-five years as a public school math teacher. Nothing in my background suggested an aptitude for or interest in writing. And yet, here I am, immersed in a completely unanticipated second career. My writing connects me with people around the world and offers opportunities of which I never even dreamed.

I do not believe God *needed* my injury to guide me in this direction, but it's evident that He used the terrible circumstances for good.

That's my source of hope. Regardless of circumstance, God will not waste my struggle.

So, how do I put this together? I've explained the principles on which I base my personal theology of adversity. Now, how do I answer the question:

If God loves me so much, why ...?

THE ISSUE OF WILL

My thoughts about God's role in suffering rest on the five principles I explained previously. However, before I try to wrap it all in a not-so-neat little package, I need to address a couple of other perspectives.

RELATIONSHIP—IN HIS IMAGE

Then God said, Let us make man in our image, in our likeness ... “ So God created Man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. [Genesis 1:26-27]

I've heard various interpretations of what God meant when He said I am created “in His image.” Some of those interpretations make sense and some appear superficial and even a bit silly. I cannot picture God as a middle-aged bald guy.

God is not a reclusive ruler who shuns interaction. He has always lived in transparent, intimate relationship, and He wants the same kind of interaction with us.

Whatever He intended, I'm pretty sure He was not referring to physical appearance. Scripture says that I will someday receive a new body, hopefully one that functions better than the current version. Perhaps that new image will involve an improved physical appearance; more likely, physical appearance won't much matter in God's presence. But for now I suspect that God was speaking of a different sort of image.

God values relationships. Father, Son and Holy Spirit have lived in relationship throughout eternity. He said, “Let us make man in our image ...” In his gospel, John refers to Jesus as THE WORD and writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God ...” God is not a reclusive ruler who shuns interaction. He has always lived in transparent, intimate relationship, and He wants the same kind of interaction with us.

As an aside, one aspect of Jesus' suffering has always resonated for me. Jesus was in perfect intimate relationship with God the Father throughout eternity. But His selfless, sacrificial agape for me was so perfect that he endured the most horrible punishment imaginable. For while crucifixion exemplifies physical suffering almost beyond description, Jesus' sacrifice exceeded any measure of physical pain.

Jesus endured separation from God on my behalf. I cannot begin to imagine what it must have been like for Him at that moment, nailed to a cross, tortured and humiliated, His eternal fellowship with God shattered.

As a child I memorized The Apostles' Creed without really understanding what most of the words meant. Decades later, at a critical point in my own wanderings, I wondered about the phrase "... He descended into hell." What could the early church leaders possibly intend to convey? Were they telling me that Jesus actually went to a hot place where flames roasted Him while Satan mockingly danced in victory?

Maybe, but I've since developed a different conception. I suspect that "hell" signifies eternal separation from God, total removal from the intimate relationship for which I was created. If so, then unending bonfires and dancing demons would be small consequence compared to the knowledge that I was eternally banished from God's presence.

That's what I believe Jesus experienced as He hung bleeding on the cross. At that moment I believe He experienced, for the only time in eternity, the horrible emptiness of complete isolation from God. It was an isolation He didn't deserve but willingly endured on my behalf.

God desired to walk in the garden with His creatures in the cool of the evening. He intended open, perfect communication with those He created, and He implanted this same desire for relationships at the very core of our being. God is agape, and relationship is a central element of that agape.

That's how I believe I carry the image of God. As He is a God of relationship, I am a creature of relationship.

FREE WILL VERSUS GOD'S WILL

It's an obvious question.

You say God's all-powerful, that nothing happens outside His will. But you also say that evil isn't part of His plan. How do you reconcile those seeming polar opposites?

I'll lean once more on C. S. Lewis and a powerful analogy from *Mere Christianity*.

Christians, then, believe that an evil power has made himself for the present the Prince of this World. And, of course, that raises problems. Is this state of affairs in accordance with God's will or not? If it is, He is a strange God, you will say: and if it is not, how can anything happen contrary to the will of a being with absolute power?

But anyone who has been in authority knows how a thing can be in accordance with your will in one way and not in another. It may be quite sensible for a mother to say to the children, "I'm not going to go and make you tidy your room every night. You've got to learn to keep it tidy on your own." Then she goes up one night and finds the Teddy bear and the ink and the French Grammar all lying in the grate. That is against her will. She would prefer the children to be tidy. But on the other hand, it is her will which has left the children free to be untidy ... You make a thing voluntary and then half the people do not do it. That is not what you willed, but your will has made it possible.

It is probably the same in the universe. God created things which had free will. That means creatures which can go either wrong or right. Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible.

Why, then, did God give them free will? Because free will though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata—of creatures that worked like machines—would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God

designs for His higher creatures is the happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight.

And for that they must be free.

That's why the enemy was free to choose rebellion. He rejected eternal communion with God.

WHY ...?

That's been the question throughout: IF GOD LOVES ME SO MUCH, WHY ...?

I do have an answer, though I'm afraid that it might be a bit unsatisfying.

A friend once told me about one of his good buddies, a pastor, whose infant son died for no obvious reason. They called it SIDS, but as I understand it that means they really don't know what happened.

The guy was inconsolable. He stopped preaching, refused to go near his church. Literally for months he refused to have anything to do with God. And when they finally boiled it down to the essentials, it came down to the reality that this guy didn't have a theology of pain that really made sense to him. He'd never encountered significant adversity in his young life, and he had sort of a "God will always take care of me" attitude.

This young man had walked with God all his life, and this horror just didn't fit. And it very nearly took him out. He was ready to walk away from his ministry, from God.

People tried to console him and offer all sorts of well-meaning clichés about God's plan, really helpful stuff like, "I think God needed him more than we did."

Really?

He knew better than that, but he demanded a reason. This guy was ready to dump God unless he could figure out why a loving God he'd served all his life would allow such a thing.

My friend finally sat with him and said, “Do you believe God loves you and has a plan for your life?” He nodded.

“Suppose God came to us right now and offered a completely perfect rationale for why your child died. Can you imagine that you would miss him any less or that your pain would be diminished?”

WHY DOESN'T REALLY HELP

Why-ing doesn't do a lot of good. In fact, the search for sense within senselessness only prolongs the agony. As long as we insist on a rational explanation for an unexplainable tragedy, we're trapped in the pain. And that's precisely where the enemy wants us. I believe the desperate insistence on a reason is one of his more effective tools.

Why-ing doesn't do a lot of good. Out desperate insistence on a reason is one of the enemy's more effective tools.

I don't know how my accident happened. I've tried every possible way to understand, but I simply don't remember. Like that young pastor, I was haunted by not knowing why. I somehow imagined that the injury wouldn't be quite so devastating if I understood why I fell and why I couldn't remember.

Expressed in those terms, it sounds sort of silly. But in the middle of the storm, *why* seems awfully important.

It's really not.

THAT'S IT?

Seriously? You brought me through all of this to say that the answer doesn't really matter?

Senseless tragedies are just that: senseless. Trying to impose an artificial logic on the illogical only makes things worse.

I believe horrible things happen because evil exists. We're targets of a ruthless enemy desperate to keep our eyes on anything but God. Whenever I succumb to his temptation and focus on my selfish demand for a rationale that doesn't exist, he wins.

I win when I focus on God's unconditional agape and His consistently perfect faithfulness. I win when I recall the hope that results from knowing that He won't waste my pain.

Based on what I understand, here are my basic conclusions:

- ***God did not cause my injury. It wasn't part of His plan.***
- ***My injury resulted from an accident, a by-product of the presence of evil in this world.***
- ***Jesus understands my pain. He's been there, and He promises to walk with me through the adversity I will surely encounter.***
- ***God will work for good within my struggle. Even though it wasn't His intent, He will not waste it.***

That's how I see it. I hope it helps. If you've encountered an obstacle and wondered about God's role, I hope more than anything that you're convinced that He won't give up on you. His grace and His faithfulness are enough to get you past any challenge.

I pray that this helps you rediscover hope.

I encourage you to ponder, digest, and see what makes sense to you. As I've said before, we're each responsible for our own theology. Whether you agree or disagree, I hope this helps you to see Jesus more clearly.

That, in the end, is what really matters.

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Rich Dixon is the author of *RELENTLESS GRACE: God's Invitation To Give Hope Another Chance*.

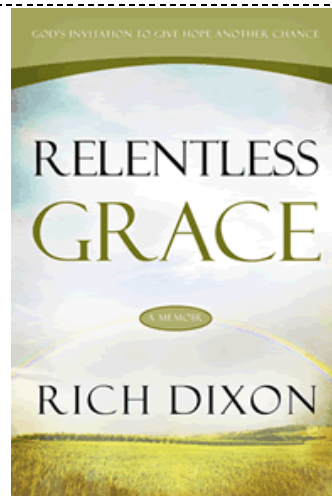
Rich writes and speaks about overcoming adversity, moving forward in hope and faith, and accomplishing dreams. He's published more than two dozen articles in both Christian and general-market periodicals. He blogs at www.richdixon.net/bouncingback

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