

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your correspondence to the Al Denson Show and for tuning in every week to our program. My prayer for you is to be encouraged in your daily walk with Christ through the words of this booklet. Our hope is that in turn you will tell others of what God is doing through our ministry to youth and parents on TV. I am convinced you will not find another program on any network anywhere that deals with issues today's youth and their parents are facing, and provides answers from a Godly perspective.

In addition, we would love for you to help us by going to our web site at www.aldenson.com. Here you can write to us, order additional material like this booklet, check out all my music, have a daily bible study, and stay up to date on the ministry. You can also send us a prayer request and questions for the TV show. But more importantly, please continue to be in prayer with us as we work together to help those that are in need.

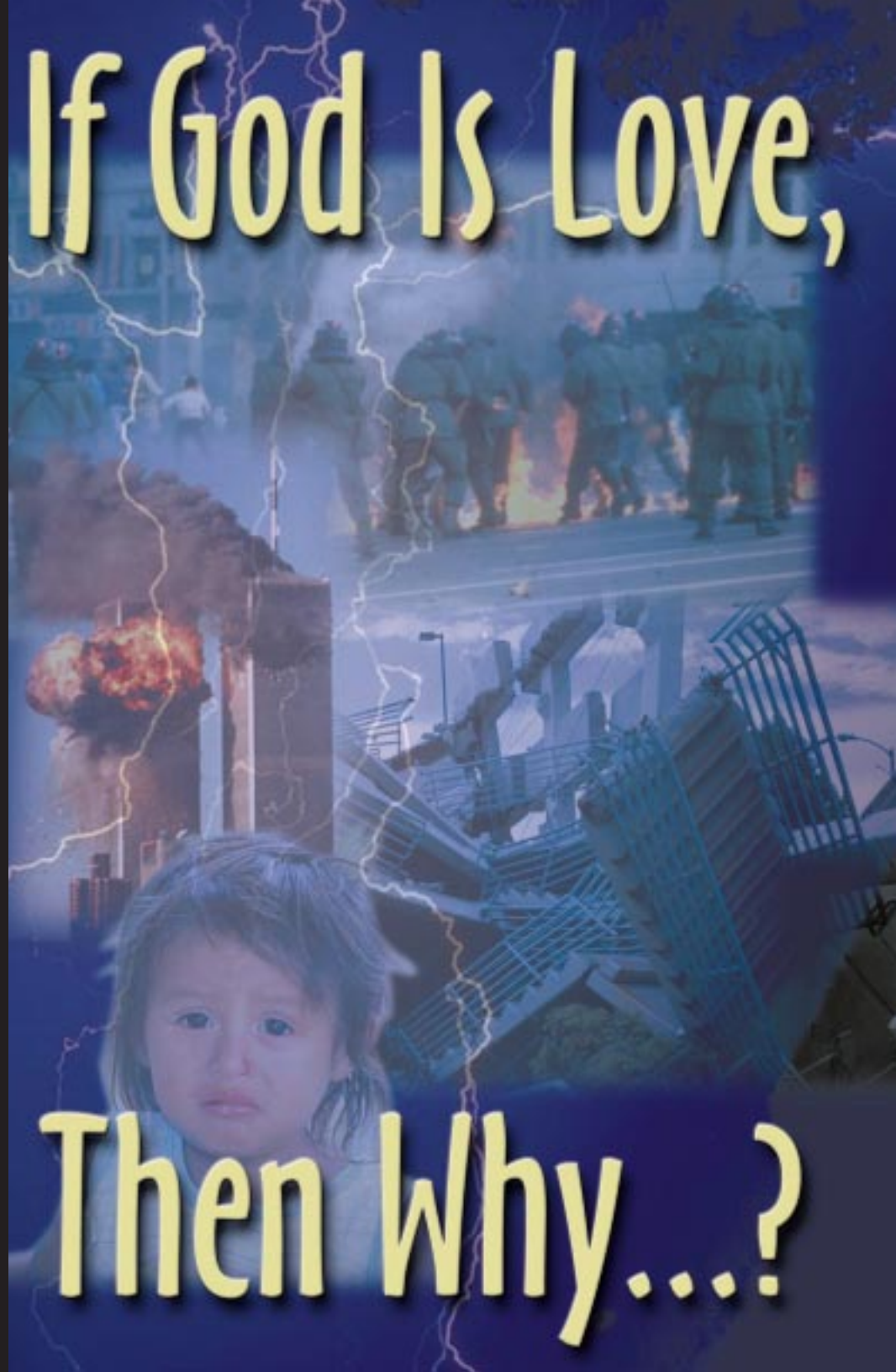
Thanks for watching and God Bless!

Sincerely,



An Outreach of Celebration Ministries

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If God Is Love,

Then Why...?



Most artists create for only a brief moment in time. That phenomenon was once known as “15 minutes of fame”. Yet even in a fickle world, there still emerge a talented few that transcends time and trends. With nearly 15 years as a major label recording artist and seven hit

albums to his credit, Al Denson is that kind of artist.

But the attention and acclaim his artistry has brought him over the years are anything but the routine rewards of worldly success. Rather, they are the fruits of a life of purpose and passion, and a mission that has always reached far beyond merely making music.

The millions of young people Al has performed for, befriended, counseled, consoled and clowned around with in his career already know that. And thousands more are finding out every day.

This past year has seen Al expand his efforts to a global audience through the reach of his daily syndicated television production, “The Al Denson Show.” “You’ve got to reach out to people where they are with the most powerful means and this form of media allows you to build trust and a rapport,” says Al. “This has all been so amazing. I can’t imagine what lies in store when the Lord finally calls me home, but I don’t have to wait for heaven to receive rewards. I get them every time a kid comes up to me and says, ‘I heard what you said, and I accepted Christ.’ You can’t ask for anything more or better than that.”

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If God Is Love, Then Why...?

In April of 2001, a young missionary couple, along with their two small children and a missionary pilot, were flying in a small plane over Peru. The Peruvian military mistakenly took the plane for a drug smuggling operation and shot it out of the air. The plane caught fire and plunged into the Amazon River. A few minutes later a godly mother and her baby daughter were dead, the pilot was seriously wounded, a loving husband was a widower, and a little boy was left traumatized and motherless. Who, hearing that story, did not or would not ask, “why?”

Human suffering comes in many forms: A crippling injury, the death of a loved one, a chronic illness, an incurable disease, a miscarriage, a stillborn child, birth defects, a broken relationship, a divorce, a family member who is spiritually lost or rebellious, a lost dream, a failed career, financial losses, the pain of rejection, humiliation, or loneliness, just to mention a few. Sometimes the suffering we experience strikes suddenly with no warning. Other times the pain and problems are chronic and eat away at our spirits over time, hour by hour, day by day.

We also hear, almost daily, about tragedies which occur on a massive scale like major accidents, acts of terrorism, war, famine, or

earthquakes. Whether suffering is personal or happens in the skies over Peru to people we have never met, we are tempted to ask the question that humans have been asking for thousands of years: “If God is love, then

why?” If God is love, if God is good, if God is all powerful, then why is there so much pain and heartache in this world? The “why” question is really three questions in one. Let’s address them one at a time:

WHY Did God Allow This To Happen?

The longest single speech God ever makes in the Bible is on the topic of human suffering. This speech

was God’s response to Job at the lowest point in his life. Job lost all his children, his wealth, his health, his reputation, the support of his wife and friends, and for 42 chapters in the book that bears his name, Job wrestles with all the questions and emotions that come with suffering. Job begins his journey believing that an explanation from God would help him bear the pain he was experiencing, so He asked God the “why” question in Job 7:20, “...Why have You made me Your target?”

We all tend to believe, like Job, that if God would just explain to us why we are suffering, we could somehow make sense out of it all and perhaps even prevent suffering from happening again.

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Not understanding why something happened makes us feel out of control, and not being in control makes most of us insecure and fearful. We foolishly believe that the way to regain control is to get an explanation, and ultimately, God is the One we all look to for that explanation.

God refused to answer Job's question, but as a result, Job made this great discovery: He thought what he needed was an explanation from God, but what he really needed was a revelation of God. Job got his revelation when God responded with the speech that took four chapters to record in the book of Job (chapters 38-41). In these verses God called to Job's mind the evidences of His greatness in nature. After each description, God asked or implied, "Are you powerful enough to duplicate these feats? Are you smart enough to run the world?" In chapter 40:7-9, God says, "Let Me ask you a question, and give me an answer. Are you going to discredit My justice and condemn Me,

so that you can say you are right? Are you as strong as God, and can you shout as loudly as He?" Job's response to God was one of repentance, and surrender. In Job 42:2,3 he says, "I know You can do anything and that no one can stop You. You ask who it is who has so foolishly denied Your providence. It is I. I was talking about things I knew nothing about and did not understand, things far too wonderful for me." Job's questions about God and suffering were never solved intellectually—the "why" question was never answered for him.

There is another book in the Old Testament that is very similar to the book of Job and that is Lamentations. Job was angry, bitter, and disappointed with God over his ruined life. In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah was angry, bitter, and disappointed with God over the ruined city of Jerusalem. Job didn't have a clue as to why all his suffering had fallen on him. Jeremiah knew exactly why his beloved city had been destroyed. One had the why question answered; the other did not. It didn't seem to make any difference when it came to dealing with their pain. They both had feelings of abandonment and despair over their losses. This simply illustrates for us that an intellectual answer will not solve the problem of suffering.

Does this mean that we are never to ask "why?" Of course not! Asking "why" is a very human and spontaneous response when a tragedy first befalls us. But the "why" that is sinful and unacceptable for a Christian is the

persistent and demanding "why" that sounds as if we are accusing God of doing something wrong. These are the "whys" that will become roots of bitterness in our lives and grow into something ugly and deadly.

When we are unable to make sense of all the suffering in this world, we sometimes point to God as if the problem lies with Him. In reality, our inability to reconcile human suffering with the love of an infinite God is because our human understanding is limited and finite. In Isaiah 55:8-9 God said, "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" Edward J. Young wrote of this passage, "The implication is that just as the heavens are so high

above the earth that by human standards their height cannot be measured; so also are God's ways and thoughts so above those of man that they cannot be grasped by man in their fullness. In other words, the ways and thoughts of God are incomprehensible to man."

Anytime we try to answer the "why" question for ourselves or for anyone else, we are on dangerous ground because we are taking on a privilege which belongs to God and God alone. If God chose not to answer the why question then what right do we have to do so? Maybe God's non-answer to Job was God's calling to his (and to our) attention a plain fact of life: We are too small and our brains are too finite to understand our big and infinite God. It is like trying to describe a sunrise to someone born blind, or a symphony to someone born deaf.

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Understanding all the ways of God or why He has allowed something painful to happen may be beyond our grasp. In spite of this, we can know that God has a purpose and a plan for our lives. Jeremiah 29:11 promises, “I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Not only does God have a plan for us, but He is using every detail of our lives to accomplish that purpose and complete His plan. Many times when we make plans, we are forced to change them, but not so with God. He never makes a mistake. His plans and His timing are always perfect, and nothing can derail His plans.

Jerry Bridges says, “God does not delight in bringing us pain and heartache. He always has a purpose for the grief He allows into our lives. Most often, we do not know what that purpose is, but it is enough to know that His infinite wisdom and perfect love have determined that the particular sorrow is best for us. God never wastes pain. He always uses it to accomplish His purpose.” God has a purpose and a plan for each of His children and He also the power to carry out His plan. Psalm 138:8 says, “The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me.” The ultimate outcome and the overall plan of God for every believer is that we be conformed to the image of Christ. In other words, it is God’s will that we become on the outside like what He has

already made us to be through redemption on the inside. God has a specific plan for every believer, so we can commit not only the overall plan of our lives to Him, but also the details and circumstances of our lives which are the path by which we reach that ultimate outcome.

Alan Redpath expressed this truth using words he adapted from the old saint of God, Hannah Whitall Smith: “There is nothing—no circumstance, no trouble, no testing—that can ever touch me until, first of all, it has gone past God and past Christ, right through to me. If it has come that far, it has come with a great purpose, which I may not understand at the moment. But as I refuse to become panicky, as I lift up my eyes to Him and accept it as coming from the throne of God for some great purpose of blessing to my own heart, no sorrow will ever disturb me, no trial will ever disarm me, no circumstance will cause me to fret—for I shall rest in the joy of what my Lord is! That is the rest of victory!”

WHY Is God Hiding?

The Old Testament book of Exodus opens with the Jews, God’s chosen people, suffering in Egypt. These children of Israel had been slaves in that land for over 400 years, oppressed and afflicted by the cruel Pharaohs. Most of us have heard how a very reluctant Moses was sent by God to deliver His people. The Pharaoh finally agreed to let them go, and Moses headed out of town with two and a half million Israelites in tow.

But the Pharaoh had a change of heart and came after them. Moses found himself with the Red Sea on one side and the entire Egyptian army on the other side. If you remember the story, God delivered His people by parting the Red Sea and allowing them to cross over to the other side on dry land. As soon as the last Israelite was across, God let go of the waters and all the Egyptian soldiers were drowned.

God revealed Himself plainly to them through a great miracle. It would seem that what God did for the children of Israel that day would have been enough to carry them through any hardship or suffering they would face for the rest of their lives, but that was not the case. In Exodus 15:22-24 it says, “then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea and they went into the Desert of Shur. For three days they traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to

Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What are we to drink?”

The children of Israel had been saved by a miracle. They had seen God work in their lives and reveal Himself to them in a mighty way. But right after that experience, the Israelites found themselves at Marah, a place of suffering. God was gracious and didn’t leave them there in spite of their complaining, bad attitudes and lack of faith. The Bible goes on to say in Exodus 15:27: “Then they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water.” How sad that the entire time they were feeling sorry for themselves and thinking they had been abandoned by God, they didn’t realize that God had Elim waiting just five miles down the road for them.

He (God) always has a purpose for the grief He allows into our lives.

God is not nearly as interested in our obedience as He is in our trust...

We know God has promised never to leave us, but sometimes it seems He chooses to hide the sense of His presence from us and immediately we wonder “why?” We want God to reveal Himself to us, especially when we are struggling with confusion, doubt, or pain. We want Him to step into our world in a way that will assure us He is there. In his wonderful book, *Disappointment With God*, Philip Yancey gives us this insight:

“The Old Testament book of Exodus shows God stepping into human history almost daily. He acted with fairness, and spoke so that everyone could hear. He even made Himself visible. God’s covenant with the Israelites was almost a ‘behavior modification’ program for His people. In the Sinai Desert, God promised to reward and punish His children with strict fairness. The only condition of the contract the Israelites had to follow was to obey His laws. The terms of the contract came with a guarantee: If they were obedient, things would be great. If they were disobedient, things would be miserable. God was giving them a fair system of rewards and punishments. But despite all the wonderful benefits of the covenant, Israel failed to obey God and meet its terms. The New Testament writers would point out years later that the old covenant, the law, served as an object lesson to demonstrate that humans are incapable of fulfilling a contract with God. That is why God made a new covenant, one that is based on forgiveness and grace.

God revealed Himself plainly to the Israelites. They never had to wonder about what they should do—they only had to look up. They had a cloud by day that would move when God wanted them to move and would stand still when God wanted them to do the same. At night, the cloud glowed like a tower of fire so they had God’s revealed will in front of them twenty-four hours a day. But this clear direction from God didn’t increase their obedience. In fact, the clarity of God’s will had a stunting effect on the Israelite’s faith. Why should they step out in faith when the results were already guaranteed? Why should they struggle with choices when God had already resolved the problem? In short, why should the Israelites act like adults when they could act like children?

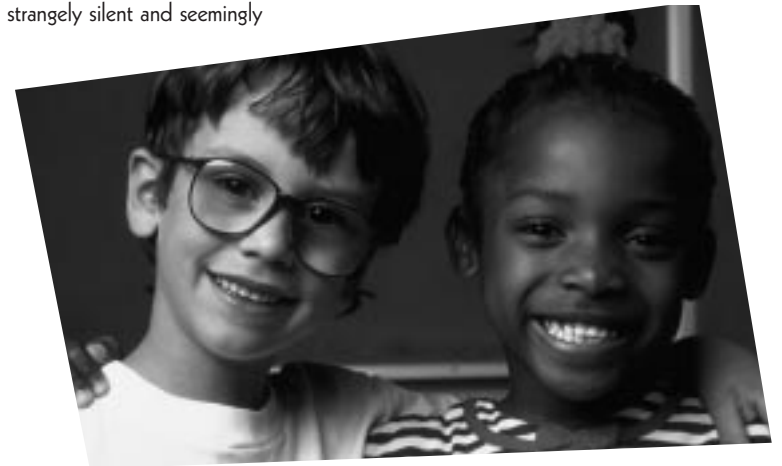
It seems, if the Israelites are any example, that signs and crystal-clear guidance do not encourage spiritual development. In fact, they eliminate the need for faith at all. The Israelites’ decisions became a matter of obedience rather than faith and trust. The children of Israel had every proof of God’s existence, but it seems as if all this produced the opposite effect. They didn’t respond with worship and love, but with open rebellion. Ten times on the plains of Sinai, they rebelled against God. Christians may long for miracles and signs of God’s presence, but these don’t seem to produce the kind of faith God is interested in. Signs seem only to addict us to signs, not to God.”

Many times God will hide the sense of His presence from us so we will develop a strong, mature faith and learn to trust in Him and not in a feeling or a sign. God is not nearly as interested in our obedience as He is in our trust because we can be obedient to Him without having a relationship with Him. The most important thing to God is that His children have a strong faith and trust in Him, because trust is evidence of an intimate relationship with Him. That intimacy is what God longs for above all else.

Faith, at its most childlike, is trusting God when we feel like it, when we sense His presence, or when we understand what is happening and why. But a deeper, more mature faith should be our goal. The Christian life consists of both. There will be times when God’s presence is so real we will be able to almost touch Him. But there will also be times when He is strangely silent and seemingly

absent. The deeper, more mature faith will cause us to believe that God hasn’t abandoned us no matter how things may appear. This is the kind of faith and trust that leads to a strong and intimate relationship with God.

In Hebrews 11, God shows us His “Faith Hall of Fame.” This chapter contains a list of the heroes of faith down through the centuries. These heroes, verse 13 says, were still living by faith when they died, not having received the things promised. But they responded to God’s hiddenness, not with demands that He show Himself, but with a faith that chose to believe Him even though He stayed hidden. They all understood, as Philip Yancey says that, “Faith means believing in advance what will only make sense in reverse”—trusting God when there is no apparent evidence of Him.



CAN God Be Trusted?

In addressing the issue of suffering, C. S. Lewis said of God: “We want not so much a father in heaven as a grandfather, that it might be said at the end of the day, ‘A good time was had by all.’... I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines, but since it is abundantly clear that I don’t, and since I have reason to believe nevertheless that God is love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction...The problem of reconciling human suffering with the existence of God who loves is only insoluble so long as we attach a trivial meaning to the word, ‘love,’ and limit His wisdom by what seems to us to be wise.”

Some people see this as an intellectual cop-out and a way to dodge the tough issues in life, but nothing could be further from the truth. Mr. Lewis was simply surrendering to the awesomeness of God. We must come to the place where we quit trying to understand it all and admit that God’s ways are untraceable by human hands. Only when we are willing to acknowledge that God’s wisdom, decisions, and methods are beyond our limited comprehension, will we know peace in times of suffering. There is a song that puts it very well: “When you don’t understand, when you can’t see His plan, when you can’t trace His hand, trust His heart.”

What God wanted from Job is the same thing He wants from us—trust. We humans are limited people. Our minds, intellects, and understanding are limited to the world we can see and touch. Yet we sit in judgement every day of God’s moral governing of the universe. Job was totally liberated when he came to the place of accepting that a God who can be totally explained or understood is no God at all. A God who is small enough for a human to understand is too small to be our God. This revelation freed Job from having to make sense of it all.

The real, underlying issue here for all of us is this: “Is God trustworthy?” When we don’t understand what is happening or why, or when we don’t know how long the suffering will last or what the outcome will be, can we trust God anyway? Suffering is a fact of life, and the only way to have victory and peace in times of suffering is not to make “why did this happen” our focus, but to make our focus “where do we go from here?” The attitude we have and our response to suffering, will determine whether the experience will be destructive or redemptive in our lives.

In II Corinthians 7:8-11 Paul gives us one of the best examples of an ideal attitude toward suffering found in the Bible. In writing to the Christians in Corinth he said, “I am no longer

sorry that I sent that letter to you, though I was very sorry for a time, realizing how painful it would be to you. But it hurt you only for a little while. Now I am glad I sent it, not because it hurt you, but because the pain turned you to God. It was a good kind of sorrow you felt, the kind of sorrow God wants His people to have, so that I need not come to you with harshness. For God sometimes uses sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin and seek eternal life. We should never regret His sending it.”

Paul summarizes the role of suffering when he says, “the pain turned you to God.” The emphasis here is not on the cause of, or the reason for, the suffering (where most of us want to camp out) but rather, the emphasis is on what our response to suffering should be. For the non-Christian, the response to suffering should be to turn in repentance to God who

offers eternal life. For the Christian, the response to suffering should be to turn to our Heavenly Father in trust.

Making the choice to trust God will eliminate the strong feelings of fear and helplessness that so often accompany suffering. This may be one of the most important lessons a Christian can ever learn. It is important because in the midst of suffering, if we aren’t able to totally depend on God, what limited physical, emotional, and psychological resources we have will be divided even more. Our strength must come from God and God alone. It is crucial at times like these to focus on what we do know about God and not on what we don’t know or understand. Unless we do that, we won’t be able to turn to Him for the strength, comfort, and hope we need.

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Faith is born from a belief system which is built on the Word of God. It is only in the Bible that we find an accurate picture of who God is and what He is really like. Three of the most important truths we must nail down about God are:

1. God loves us and He understands.

The Bible affirms the love of God again and again. We know this love is unconditional and unending because Jesus demonstrated God's love to us. I John 4:9 and 16 says, "This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him." Psalm 145 speaks of God's abundant goodness and of His being loving toward all He has made. Jeremiah 32:41 tells us that because God loves us, He rejoices in doing good for us. The Bible says that God is love, and that He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, so we can depend on God's love and goodness being unconditional and unchanging.

The Bible tells us in Psalm 34:18: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit." Jesus is not removed from our pain. He understands what it is like to suffer because the Bible reminds us in the book of Hebrews that Jesus has faced every heartache and pain that we face. Jesus came as a response to human suffering, to experience it, to absorb it, and to earn the right to say, "I understand."

Even in His resurrected, perfect body, Jesus chose to keep the scars from the nails in His hands. He chose to carry the marks of suffering for eternity, so He could continue to understand and identify with us when we suffer. Isaiah 49:15-16, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands..."

2. God is too wise to make a mistake.

Psalm 147:5 says, "His wisdom has no limit." Unlike a human parent, God is too wise to make a mistake where His children are concerned. He always knows what's best for us and the best way to bring about that result in our lives. Our Heavenly Father has the "big picture" for our lives, and therefore, is the only One who can know what is best for us. God is so wise that He automatically knows what we need, when we need it. He can separate our needs from our wants and knows whether what we want would be good for us to have or whether it would harm us. God's wisdom and ways are so far beyond our limited understanding that the only way we will find peace in times of suffering is to let go and trust Him.

3. God is in control of everything in our world.

Many times all we can see are the circumstances or people in our lives who seem to be controlling our destinies. But the wise, good

God who loves and understands us is a sovereign God. This means that God is in complete control of everything at all times and is in charge of the final outcome. There is not one single event in all the

universe which can occur outside of God's sovereign control. Not even willful, malicious acts, or the mistakes of other people, can change God's purpose for us. No detail of our lives is too insignificant for our Heavenly Father's attention and no circumstance is so big that He cannot control it. Nothing happens in our life without a reason. When we are in a situation over which we have little control, fear will often rob us of our ability to "Be still (rest, cease from striving, be at peace) and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10) Reminding ourselves that God is in control will help us rest and have peace in times of suffering.

Author Margaret Clarkson wrote, "The sovereignty of God is the one impregnable rock to which the suffering human heart must cling. The circumstances surrounding our lives are no accident: they may be the work of evil, but that evil is held firmly within the mighty hand of our sovereign God...All evil is subject to Him, and evil cannot touch his children unless he permits

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it. God is the Lord of human history and of the personal history of every member of His redeemed family."

When we understand the nature and character of our Heavenly Father we can have

the peace that comes from knowing that our suffering is under the control of an all-powerful, all-wise, and all-loving God. We don't have to understand why God allows bad things to happen, and we certainly don't have to like what has happened in order to trust God. Trusting God is never about how we feel; it is an act of our wills. We can choose to trust God, even when we don't feel like it, if our faith is based on the truth of God's Word.

Sometimes we are quick to ask the "why" question, when perhaps it is the "why not" question we should be asking. R. C. Sproul said, "We are puzzled and bewildered whenever we see suffering in the world because we have become accustomed to the mercy and long-suffering of God. Amazing grace is no longer amazing to us. So our astonishment is in the wrong place. The real question is "Why hasn't God destroyed ALL of us? Why does God tolerate us as we continue our work of sin and destruction upon His planet?"

Phillip Yancey said, “The world is in revolt. God has already hung a “Condemned” sign above the earth, and He has promised judgement. That this world full of evil and suffering still exists at all is an example of God’s mercy, not His cruelty.” It is incredible that God bothers to put up with this world at all. We should never forget that the amazing thing is not that sinners go to hell, but that sinners can go to heaven, which is more proof of the love and goodness of God. Reminding ourselves that we all deserve only God’s justice and wrath, but instead have received His grace and mercy, will change our perspective about suffering.

Life is unfair, no one would argue that. Our problem comes, Philip Yancey says, when we make the mistake of confusing life with God. We tend to think that life should be fair because God is fair, but God is not life. God’s existence and His goodness do not depend on life being fair. We can learn to trust God despite all the unfairness of life. Faith with a condition—“I’ll follow God if He treats me well”—is no faith at all. We must develop a relationship with God apart from our life’s circumstances if we are going to hang on when life falls apart.

Someone has said that Christians are like school children who want to look up the answers to their math problems in the back of the book instead of working them out for themselves. We want shortcuts, but shortcuts never help us grow. The way we express our love for God is to exercise our faith even when He seems absent, silent, or unfair. The cross of Christ proved that God doesn’t abandon us in our pain. Jesus willingly shared our suffering and endured all the evil and unfairness that afflicts our lives. He suffered separation from His Father so we would never have to. The cross demolishes any notion that life will be fair because what could be more unfair than a Savior dying for sins He didn’t commit. Jesus’ death settled forever the issue of the goodness of God. The sacrificial love of Christ is our way through the unfairness of life.

Philip Yancey says that before creation there was only eternity and eternity for God is a never-ending present. God invented time when He created the world. God lives outside of time, as we know it, so we can’t apply our simplistic rules and human logic to God. We can only comprehend and make sense out of what occurs in this dimension. In another dimension, we will see things differently but

now, to those of us trapped in time, God will sometimes seem unfair. Only at the end of time, when we have God’s eternal perspective and every wrong has been righted, will fairness reign. Then and only then will we understand what part the Fall of man, natural laws, and evil played in the gross unfairness of this life. God understands it all but we are creatures who can’t understand because we are bound by time and our limited minds.

The Bible traces the entrance of suffering into the world back to mankind’s misuse of his gift of freedom. God created Adam and Eve with a free will, but they chose to use it to rebel against God. When the man and woman decided to play god in their own lives, suffering was unleashed on the world, and now as a result, we all live in a world stained by sin. C. S. Lewis said, “Pain is the megaphone of God.” Every time we witness or experience suffering of any

kind, it should be a scream in our ears to remind us all that something is terribly wrong. The bad news is that the wrong won’t be righted until this present world is no more. The good news is that God is preparing a new, perfect place for those who love Him.

To refugees, a new country means an escape from war, violence, hunger, crime, and pain. To a Christian, heaven represents a new country where we have never been, but are longing to be. To people trapped in pain, broken marriages or homes, economic misery, or fear, heaven promises an eternity of wholeness, health, pleasure, and peace. In Hebrew 11:16, the Bible says that those heroes of faith were “longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.” Our questions are in fact, a sign, an aching, a hunger for something better. And faith is, in the end, a kind of homesickness.

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