

TO WHOM SHALL I GO?:
Making Your Way
Through Painful Providence

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CHAPTER 1. - PROLOGUE

John 6:68

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

“Not again!” That was the thought running through my mind as the doctor told me the news. Our son did not make it. We had lost one child before this – a son. He was born prematurely and lived only a short time. But this time the situation was worse. Once again my wife had gone into premature labor but they were able to get it stopped with medication. The day she went off of the meds, she went into labor. That is when it all went wrong.

She insisted that it felt as if something had ripped. We took off for the hospital. The words still ring in my ears as she lay in the back seat as my father sped us to the hospital - “I think I am dying.” We tried to reassure her that she was not, but she knew more than we did. At the hospital, they rushed her in to the delivery room after having checked for the baby’s heart beat. It was only when the doctor came out that I found out the news. Her uterus had ruptured, the placenta had pulled away, and our son suffocated to death before he could be born. To make matters worse, my wife should have bled to death. Although there were no external signs, she had lost a lot of blood. By the grace of God, my wife was spared.

A plethora of emotions and thoughts ran through my head. Why would God do this again? Hadn’t we been through enough? I was in my mid-twenties and had already lost two children. This was not the plan that I had in mind, but it was the plan that God had. One scripture rang through my mind on each occasion - John 6:68 *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”* Granted the context of Peter’s declaration was much different than mine, but idea still applied. Though everything had fallen apart around me, though nothing made sense to me, Jesus Christ still held the words of eternal life. Whatever disasters may fall upon us, he still gives eternal life. These words have become words of great hope to me throughout my life.

While most Christians have not been in these specific circumstances, there is something familiar about them. It is a time when the circumstances do not seem to be consistent with God’s character or with what he has revealed to you. It is a time when we are left with many questions about what God is doing. How are we to react in these circumstances? What is proper in terms of our prayers about the situation? What are we to say to God when it feels like he’s not paying attention? My desire is that you would learn to see God even when you can not trace His hand through the cloud and smoke of a painful providence.

CHAPTER 2. – THREE BIBLICAL PICTURES

DAVID

In order to understand how to respond Biblically in these situations, we are going to look at three people from the scriptures with differing circumstances, but with a confusion and pain in their hearts. First is the “man after God’s own heart”- David. David early in life became convinced that Yahweh was the Lord, and that He was sovereign over Israel and over him. David was so loyal to the Lord, that when Goliath made challenges against Israel and Israel’s God, the young Israelite demanded the opportunity to face off against the Philistine. With faith in God, the young boy slew the Giant. David was very aware of the faithfulness of God.

Later in his life, the prophet Samuel anointed the young David to be the next king. David remembered this promise. He was certain that what God had said would come to pass, but then the trouble started.

King Saul began his attempts on David’s life. He pinned him to the palace wall with a spear. He hunted him all over the country side. David was forced to hide for his life in the wilderness, and to hide out in caves. And all of this time, David had in the back of his mind, the promise of God that he would be king.

It was clear to David that God had made certain promises regarding him, but he did seriously wonder what was going on during these times of persecution. David recorded some of his thoughts about these times for us in the Psalms. His Psalms on many occasions reflect the heart of one in pain. In the following chapters, we will look at Psalms 12 and 13 to see how David felt and what David said to God during his confusion.

JOB

Our second person is Job. From the world’s perspective, Job had it all. Job was a righteous, wealthy man with a large family. Most of all, he was a man that feared the Lord. From Satan’s perspective, it seemed that Job only follows God because of what he has. A kind of contest results between God and Satan. God allows Satan to take away all that Job has in order to prove Job’s character and faithfulness.

As the story builds we see that God is sovereign and in complete control as He interacts with Satan. Satan is not able to do anything without God’s permission. Through a series of events, everything is taken away from Job except for his wife and his life.

At times like these, we look to our friends for comfort and support. Unfortunately, Job’s friends do not offer the kind of support that he needs. They are willing to assert that God is sovereign, which is true. They also acknowledge that God is just and punishes sin, which is also true. However, their conclusion is faulty. They conclude that Job must have sinned and that

what has happened to him is a punishment from God. We know that this is not the case. This kind of thinking is seen from Job's friend Bildad in Job 8:2-7.

*"How long will you say these things,
and the words of your mouth be a great wind?
Does God pervert justice?
Or does the Almighty pervert the right?
If your children have sinned against him,
he has delivered them into the hand of their transgression.
If you will seek God
and plead with the Almighty for mercy,
if you are pure and upright,
surely then he will rouse himself for you
and restore your rightful habitation.
And though your beginning was small,
your latter days will be very great.*

Job's experience will serve as an example of submission and trust, but only after Job works through some issues regarding the character of God and His sovereignty.

NAOMI

Now we come to another Biblical account of someone in distress, Naomi. Let's review her situation.

Ruth 1:1-5

In the days when the judges ruled there was a famine in the land, and a man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he and his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. They lived there about ten years, and both Mahlon and Chilion died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband.

Her circumstances might not have been as bad as Job's, but they were close. Things were bad in Bethlehem, famine in fact. So Elimelech takes his whole family to Moab. Moab was no place for an Israelite. The Moabites were the result of an incestuous union between Lot and his older daughter. Add to that the Moabite women had been a source of stumbling to the Israelites during the wilderness wanderings, Elimelech and family could have picked a better place. Then, while they are there, Naomi loses her husband and two sons. She is left with two Moabite daughter-in-laws and little else. In Naomi, we see a person who goes from bitterness to joy, and emptiness to plenty. Her feelings will resemble much of what we experience during the times when God's actions make no sense to us.

Chapter 3- HONEST FEELINGS

The first thing we must deal with in the midst of crushing circumstances is our honest feelings. Let's begin with David's words in Psalm 12:1-4.

*Help, Lord, for the godly man ceases!
For the faithful disappear from among the sons of men.
They speak idly everyone with his neighbor;
With flattering lips and double heart they speak.
May the Lord cut off all flattering lips,
And the tongue that speaks proud things,
Who have said, "With our tongue we will prevail;
Our lips are our own; Who is lord over us?"*

Look also at Psalm 13:3-4.

*Consider and hear me, O Lord my God;
Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death;
Lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed against him";
Lest those who trouble me rejoice when I am moved.*

What is David doing here? David is telling God how he feels. It was told to me some years ago by a friend that "Just tell God what you're feeling, He already knows, and He can take it." That is exactly what David does here. Sometimes our circumstances blind us to the fact that God does care, and that God is omniscient. We are fooled into thinking that He does not notice our pain. Nothing is further from the truth. Job experiences some of that through the poor counsel of his friends.

Maybe David is thinking something like "God, I am tired from running. Someone whom you anointed king before me is now trying to kill me. I know he once seemed faithful, now he seems crazy. I know that he is just waiting for me to make a mistake, so that he can rub my nose in it, along with the rest of my enemies." This is the type of thought that is behind David's words. He is expressing his feelings before God. I know that when we experienced the loss of our sons, I poured out my heart before the Lord. The anguish of losing a child is unimaginable. Your emotions are pulling you in a million different directions. Pain, confusion, hurt, anger, sorrow, and hopelessness were all there. Each one waiting to be poured out before the Throne of Grace. The hurt was great, but God is greater.

When we go through times of confusion, and circumstances don't add up right. We are free to tell God that we are confused, tired, hurt, frustrated, hungry, alone, or whatever. As a matter of fact, we must. To begin with God already knows. As hard as it is to swallow, it was part of His plan. It is for His glory and our good. Also, we lay our hurts at His feet if we desire to find the healing, comfort, grace, and love that only He can give. Do not forget He is not just our sovereign God, but also our loving heavenly father.

But notice what David is not doing. David never blames God for the mess that he is in. Blaming God is different from acknowledging God's sovereign control in all things. Acknowledging His sovereignty is to recognize of His holiness, love, and power. Blaming makes God the bad-guy. It ascribes to God evil or uncaring intentions. If you are a child of God, His intentions and actions toward you are always out of His immense love and grace. David's prayer reflects this. Never once does David say, "Look God, you are the reason that I am in this mess. This is your fault!" David does not do this. Why? Because even in these circumstances, David knew that God was in control, whether it felt like it or not.

THE BITTERNESS OF NAOMI'S HEART

When we look at Naomi, the situation is a little different. Naomi decides that it is time to go back to Bethlehem. Along the way, one daughter-in-law goes back to Moab. The other, Ruth, decides to go with her even though Naomi paints a bleak picture of what lies ahead. "*No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone out against me.*" (Ruth 1:13) Once Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem, she tells the women of the town. "*Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?*" (Ruth 1:20-21)

Bitter. That is the state of Naomi's heart. That can be the state of our heart, too. Losing things that are very precious to us does not leave a pleasant taste in our mouths. That is the way Naomi saw the situation. Look at how she describes it. "The hand of the Lord has gone out against me." "The Lord has testified against me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?" Is Naomi right in what she says? Has the Lord done these things to her? Yes, God is responsible. His finger prints are all over it. But why? Is the Lord "against" Naomi? Is this some kind of punishment? Does God have something against her? Sounds somewhat like Job. Unlike Job, she has no friends trying to blame her misfortune on her sinfulness. There are no answers given by anyone else. Some try to say that this is the result of her family's sinful choices in going to Moab, but I think that misses the point. This is a case of not being able to see the end from the beginning. God's plan was not clear yet.

GOD'S PLAN UNFOLDS

As the story unfolds, God's plans become clearer. God had not abandoned Naomi or Ruth. In fact, He had provided for them before they were ever born by a provision in His law called the Levirate Marriage Laws.

"If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead man shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her and take her as his wife and perform the duty of a husband's brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel. (Deut. 25:5-6)

Enter Boaz. Ruth "happens" onto the field of Boaz who is a kinsman-redeemer. Isn't it fun how things just "happen" in our lives. Those things that just happen from our perspective are really evidences to us of God's sovereign hand. God has directed the steps of Ruth to the field of the one whom God would use to resolve their hurt and take away their bitterness.

Boaz is used of God first to provide for their immediate, physical need – food. Ruth gleaned from Boaz for months. But food is only part of the problem. Ruth still needs a husband, and Naomi still needs someone to redeem her land. Of course, Boaz becomes that man. Naomi's bitter heart becomes sweet again. It is a long road from a bitter heart to a sweet heart, but it begins with expressing our honest feelings before God.

Chapter 4-HONEST QUESTIONS

Along with our feelings, we have a lot of questions on our hearts. So why not ask them? David does just that in Psalm 13:1-2.

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long shall I take counsel in my soul
Having sorrow in my heart daily?
How long will my enemy be exalted over me?*

David had some serious questions about what was going on. He wanted to know how long this was going to go on. He wanted to know why God was doing this. He wanted answers. He wanted to understand.

If before David was expressing how he felt, here he is expressing his doubts. Let me be really clear here, David's doubts were not sin. David was saying that in the light of these circumstances this is what it seems like God is doing. David knew that God was in control, but wondered what His plan was. We will all face times when we have questions about what God is doing. We are free to ask them. The psalms in particular are full of different kinds of questions we may have.

HOW LONG? (WHEN WILL YOU?)

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I take counsel in my soul
and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?*

David asks God "How long?" The agony, loneliness, grief, and sorrow from these painful providences can seem to go on forever. No wonder David, just like us, asks how long. We can feel as if our suffering will never end, as if joy will never return, or even as if God will never shine His face upon us again. These are powerful feelings, and they are very real to the person experiencing them. We must cry out to God to seek the answers. God alone knows the length of our suffering, as well as the agony of our heart. God is fully aware that it seems like the clouds will never lift from our experience. Only He knows "How long."

ARE YOU WHAT YOU SAY YOU ARE?

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

This question goes much deeper. This is where our circumstances collide with our theology. David certainly did not believe that God had forgotten him, did He? I guarantee it felt like it. These experiences put our faith to the test. We ask: *God, where has your mercy gone? Where is the justice? Are you still paying attention? Do you still love me?* I remember these feelings. I remember feeling abandoned and alone, wondering whether God had forgotten me. I knew that the scripture said “I will never leave you, nor forsake you.” But I also knew how I felt. Leaving this unresolved with give Satan a foothold on our soul that he will use over and over again.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

This question is related to the previous one. This is not so much about God’s character as much as it deals with His purposes. We can not see what God is really doing behind the plume of smoke and ash that surrounds our lives when God brings a painful providence. Even if there were no smoke, we still would have trouble seeing what He is doing. When it hurts, we want to know why? “Give me the reason. Show me the purpose.” God does not need to give us the answer for us to be satisfied. We must learn to be settled in knowing that He knows what He is doing. While we learn, we many ask, “what are you doing?”

WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

We do not have to be going through a painful providence to have this question on our hearts, but it will come up then too. A form of this question popped into my head every time I saw someone mistreat their child. “*God, why would you give this person a child when they mistreat them, yet you took mine away?*” Every story I heard of a neglected or abandoned child brought this question fresh into my mind. It is a real concern for those who follow God and suffer while the wicked prosper.

These questions will slowly be resolved in our hearts as we learn to trust in God's sovereign purposes. The questions will remain for quite a while. As a matter of fact, they may never get resolved for us this side of glory. It takes time and effort. I will talk more in depth about how I learned to trust again that later on in book. In the mean time, ask the questions and seek the peace of God.

SEEKING GOD VS. SEEKING TO BLAME GOD

There is a difference between seeking God in our questions and seeking to blame God in some angry fashion. David is not saying that this is how God is. David is not saying that God has abandoned him. David is simply expressing his doubts and fears as questions. David is also careful not to question God's right to act as He has. We may wonder about why, but we are not free to question His right to act according to His will.

When we face confusing circumstances, we have doubts and questions too. So is it appropriate to express those doubts and fears to God? Yes. I Peter 5:7 tells us to cast all our fears on him, for he cares for us. When we cast our doubts and fears before God, he will address them. He already knows them, but when we give them over to him in prayer, we surrender ourselves to His sovereign control.

Chapter 5 -HONEST PRAISE

Praising God is hard in midst of calamity, but it is critical if we are ever to move beyond our feelings and questions. David gives honest Praise in Psalm 12:5-8.

*For the oppression of the weak, for the sighing of the needy,
Now I will arise," says the Lord.
"I will set him in the safety for which he yearns."
The words of the Lord are pure words,
like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times.
You will keep them, O Lord
You shall preserve them from this generation forever.
The wicked prowl on every side,
when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.*

David does two things here. First, he is telling God that he still knows what is true about Him, despite His circumstances. Second, David is reminding himself of what is true about God. David knew that God's word was true, and that when He made a promise He would keep it. So, David tells God how wonderful He is, and gives thanks for His faithfulness.

On the other hand Job's responses seem to vary. Sometimes Job declares the excellencies of God.

*Job 19:23-27
"Oh that my words were written!
Oh that they were inscribed in a book!
Oh that with an iron pen and lead
they were engraved in the rock forever!
For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and at the last he will stand upon the earth.
And after my skin has been thus destroyed,
yet in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see for myself,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.
My heart faints within me!*

But yet Job ends up challenging God at one point!

Job 23:1-7

Then Job answered and said:

"Today also my complaint is bitter;

my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.

Oh, that I knew where I might find him,

that I might come even to his seat!

I would lay my case before him

and fill my mouth with arguments.

I would know what he would answer me

and understand what he would say to me.

Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?

No; he would pay attention to me.

There an upright man could argue with him,

and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.

The truth is that seemingly good theology can sometimes come up with bad conclusions. Job's comforters conclude that his misfortune must be because of Job's great sin. Job denies that. In fact Job's righteousness, not his sin, brought this about. Eventually, Elihu chimes in to rebuke Job and his comforters. THEN, it is God's turn to speak.

God lays out His power and character in chapters 38-42. In Job 38:4-11 God reminds them that He made the Earth and sky. In 38:12-38 God relates His control over climate and weather. Think about how much trouble it can be predicting the weather. I used to work for a meteorological company. I saw on a daily basis how much trouble a group of men with the same information can have agreeing on what will happen. Sometimes it seemed like five guys came up with seven different forecasts. And how much does weather impact our daily life? Weather can even be a matter of life and death. Yet God is in control of every drop of rain and every flake of snow. In 38:39-41 God describes how He provides food for animals that they might have life. Sometimes God even refers to attributes mentioned by Job and the others in His response. God needed to remind Job of His character, heart, power, and purpose. It was for Job's good and God's glory that God spoke up.

When we face such circumstances, our tendency is to become stuck on the circumstances, and to not move on to the praise. We must not let that happen. It is the praise and thanksgiving that keeps fresh in our minds that God is faithful, powerful, and in control, no matter what seems to be going on. Dig deeply into God's word to remind yourself of God's character. Rehearse

God's past faithfulness to His people. Rehearse God's past faithfulness to you. Most of all, praise God for the wonderful gift of salvation by His free grace.

Chapter 6- SUBMISSION and SURRENDER

If praise is hard, submission might seem impossible aside from the grace of God. It will take that. Look again at David in Psalm 13:5-6.

*But I trust in your mercy,
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.
I will sing to the Lord,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.*

David submits to what God wants to do in his life, again despite his circumstances, but in the light of His faithfulness and sovereignty. Notice one other thing here. His submission is not conditional. David never says, “But I trust in your unfailing love, only if you get me out of this mess.” David knows that God’s plan is ultimately the best, and surrenders to God no matter how things look.

How willing are we to surrender to God’s will when things look bad? That is why submission follows praise. We remind ourselves of God’s faithfulness, and then once reminded of His faithfulness, we are more confident in submitting to His will.

It may take some time for us to work through the process of being able to submit to God in the face of ‘bad’ circumstances, but as we tell him our feelings and fears, praise Him for who He is and what He has done, and submit to His sovereign will; we can trust that He will work out the circumstances in our lives and be faithful to His character and His Word.

Remember from the last chapter where Job ends up challenging God.

Job 23:1-7

*Then Job answered and said:
"Today also my complaint is bitter;
my hand is heavy on account of my groaning.
Oh, that I knew where I might find him,
that I might come even to his seat!
I would lay my case before him
and fill my mouth with arguments.
I would know what he would answer me
and understand what he would say to me.
Would he contend with me in the greatness of his power?
No; he would pay attention to me.*

*There an upright man could argue with him,
and I would be acquitted forever by my judge.*

God eventually calls Job out saying *"Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it."* (40:2). Of course, Job has nothing to say. The Lord continues on with His charges, going on in 41:15-41:34 to describe the largest of His creatures -Behemoth and Leviathan. But even their power is no match for the power of God. Job finally surrenders to the sovereignty of God *"I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."* (42:2)

GOD'S PURPOSE AND ACTIONS

During the course of His response to Job and his comforters, God reveals some of His purposes in His actions. In Job 40:10-14 God essentially says to Job, "Do you think you can do my job?"

Job 40:10-14

*"Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity;
clothe yourself with glory and splendor.
Pour out the overflowings of your anger,
and look on everyone who is proud and abase him.
Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low
and tread down the wicked where they stand.
Hide them all in the dust together;
bind their faces in the world below.
Then will I also acknowledge to you
that your own right hand can save you.*

Job finally relents.

Job 42:2-5

*"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

*'Hear, and I will speak;
I will question you, and you make it known to me.'
I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
but now my eye sees you;*

Think back to the beginning of the story. God's purposes in this were much different that Job or his associates thought. God's purpose and actions are not always made known to us. God acts to redirect the course of our lives and even the course of history sometimes. But His purposes are hidden in the Heavens. God never lets Job in on what has occurred in the Heavens. And He may never let us in on it either. All we need to know is that God is sovereign in order to submit.

CHAPTER 7: LEARNING to TRUST

Psalm 52:8-9 (ESV)

But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.

I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.

I will thank you forever, because you have done it.

I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly.

Thinking back to the loss of my children, one of the hardest things for me to work out was learning to trust God again. Although submission and trust are related, in my experience you can submit and still have problems trusting. Let me explain. As I said at the beginning of the book, the words of Peter quickly came to mind, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.*” (John 6:68) That came quickly. Whatever God was doing in my life, it did not change His eternal purposes toward me. He did not, nor would not, take eternal life from me. Therefore, I was not about to leave Him. But that only settled part of the issue in my heart.

Following the loss of our second son, I began to experience the inability to really trust God. I would not describe myself as bitter like Naomi. I could easily trust Him regarding my salvation, but in the daily things of life, it became a really challenge. If things looked as if they were going well, I waited for God to pull the rug out from under my feet. If I was praying to God about something, I expected Him to answer the prayer in some way that was unpleasant or even painful. What a poor concept of the God of the Universe. When I look at Job and Naomi, I get how they must have felt. “What’s next God? What else do you have planned for me? What other calamity waits for me?”

I do not think any of us mean to or want to have that kind of view of God. I was ascribing to God the character of a cruel trickster. Where had my theology gone wrong? I had become like Job’s comforters. Good theology had come to bad conclusions. I was basing my understanding of God’s character and actions solely on what my senses could perceive and what my brain could process. The problem is that when we do that we are running on limited information. We do not know what God knows. We do not see what God sees. We have not planned as God has planned. We can not just base our expectations of God on our experiences, but must take into account the truth His Word reveals about him.

But let me be honest, this is an on-going battle from me. I am 10-years removed from it at the point of writing this book and I still have to struggle with it. I still find myself sometimes waiting for God to give me another whammy. When we adopted our son Jacob, I remember thinking in the back of my mind many times that something was going to go wrong because that is how God operates in my life. Truth be told, I had “friends” growing up who treated me with a

degree of cruelty. Maybe that is what I expected of God. He liked me, but he really liked to mess with me. For a long time, things that went wrong were just another evidence of God's cruel jokes. I could not be hopeful, because I was always expecting the calamity.

How do I deal with that now? I take the attitude of the Psalmist.

Psalm 52:8-9

But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.

I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.

I will thank you forever, because you have done it.

I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly.

I have rooted myself in God, His Word, and His people. I have had to be a Psalm 1 man and planted myself firmly where God would feed and nourish me. When we remain rooted in the Lord God, we can not be moved. Firmly rooted trees are not easily knocked over, and God certainly does not knock over that which is rooted in Him.

The steadfast love of God has become important to me as well. His "steadfast love" is unmoving, unchanging, always faithful, constant and sure. He is not like us. He is faithful to us. He does not gain enjoyment out of messing with us. What he does toward us is with great faithfulness and purpose. Look at how God speaks regarding His people as they prepared to enter the promised land.

Deut. 30:9-10

The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb and in the fruit of your cattle and in the fruit of your ground. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

That is someone to trust. It is only regarding his disobedient and rebellious people that God speaks in terms of destruction.

Deut. 28:63

And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you. And you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to take possession of it.

As His people, we need not fear the ruin and destruction of God. It is only the unrepentant and rebellious that need fear his wrath.

Thankfulness plays a big part in keeping things in perspective. When we focus on the goodness of God, especially toward us, we are less likely to look for God to act cruelly. I find it most beneficial to focus on the spiritual blessings and the future hope I have in Christ. The spiritual blessings are the ones that last and have real value.

Finally, I have had to learn to wait on God. I have learned to look for where God is taking me when things happen. When my plans get changed, it is because God is changing and taking me somewhere that I would not have gone on my own. I have learned to believe that God is intentional. Every move God makes in my life is because He is accomplishing something for His glory and my good. Paul was not just spouting greeting card theology when he said, “*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.*” (Romans 8:28) He knew it from experience. God used shipwrecks to change Paul’s plans. He knew that every step of His was directed by God with great love and purpose. We so easily quote this verse in times of catastrophe, we need to stop throwing it around like it is Hallmark’s best, and start believing it and living it. It will change how we view our world, and the things that happen in our world.

LEARNING FROM NAOMI

What do we learn from Naomi? The truth is we will not always understand what God is doing. Sometimes, God’s purposes will be revealed over time. That is some of what we see with Naomi and Ruth. It was only after many months that God brought their bitterness to sweetness. Sometimes we will not see God’s purposes even in our lifetime.

Ruth 4:18-22

Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez fathered Hezron, Hezron fathered Ram, Ram fathered Amminadab, Amminadab fathered Nahshon, Nahshon fathered Salmon, Salmon fathered Boaz, Boaz fathered Obed, Obed fathered Jesse, and Jesse fathered David.

God purpose was much larger than Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. God’s purpose was to create the line of David. A Moabite is in the line of the King of Israel. Even further out, Ruth is part of the human lineage of Christ. God’s purposes are more far reaching that we will ever be able to see with our limited eyes. God’s ultimate purpose in everything that He does is always the

redemption of a people for Himself. As so it was with Naomi and Ruth. Sometimes we need to be content with the fact that God would do nothing in our lives that was not absolutely necessary.

What should we take from this? Let's take a couple of lessons from the world of art. During the times of extreme pain in our lives we need to be as granite or marble for the chiseling. God is carving us to display his mercy, grace, love, sovereignty, etc. Sometimes it is by hard pounding, others by fine detail work. Not a work of demolition, but a work of art. It is a hard, but necessary, act of submission. It must be done if we desire to be men and women of Godly character and bright testimony to the grace of God in our lives.

Another analogy I often use (and I am not sure where I got this from) is that of a mosaic. Mosaics are beautiful pictures and patterns made up from smaller pieces, often they are broken pieces of stone or glass. When you look at a mosaic up close, it may not look like much. In fact it may look like a bit of a mess. That is our perspective on the events God brings into our lives. We can only see a small section made up of the broken pieces. Only God has the perspective of the grand picture. Only God can see what He has made so far. Only God knows what He is making. It is impossible for us to get that kind of view on things. Even with time, we may only see a little more. Over time the picture may become more clear. We must trust that the divine artist knows what He is making.

Chapter 8: REPENTANCE

We may find ourselves having sinned against God in the process of working through our pain. Repentance may become necessary. Elihu gives us some help in understanding how Job should have reacted, and how we should react when the providence of God toward us does not match with what we think it ought to be. *"Then Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, burned with anger. He burned with anger at Job because he justified himself rather than God."* (Job 32:2) Isn't that our tendency in those times, to justify ourselves rather than God? Job even begins this ordeal that way saying *"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."* (Job 1:21) and *"Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?"* (Job 2:10) But eventually God has to set Job right.

Job 40:3-5

Then Job answered the Lord and said:

"Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?

I lay my hand on my mouth.

I have spoken once, and I will not answer;

twice, but I will proceed no further."

How much could we learn from Job here? We like to run our mouths, especially when we hurt. We may need to learn to keep our mouth shut instead of complain or make accusations at God. Job seems to have learned that lesson and shows repentance over how he has acted and spoken.

Job 42:3-6

'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?' quotes God

*Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.*

'Hear, and I will speak;

I will question you, and you make it known to me.' –quotes God again

I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,

but now my eye sees you;

therefore I despise myself,

and repent in dust and ashes."

Our sin may be that we have cursed God, or that we have ascribed evil to Him. What have we done against Him in the rebellion of our aching hearts. The wonderful news is always the same. God's grace covers our sin. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness. God can comfort the pain of what has happened to us, and God can comfort us in our rebellion with the good news of Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER 9. “WHAT IS MY ONLY COMFORT IN LIFE AND DEATH?”

Heidelberg Catechism Question 1. What is your only comfort in life and death?

Answer.

That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully made satisfaction for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yes, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

When anyone goes through trials and tribulations in this life, the thing they want and need most is comfort. Comfort that will last. Comfort that is real. Comfort that has something behind it. Up until now, we have talked much about comfort. How we can receive comfort through prayer. How we can receive comfort through a right understanding of the providence and sovereignty of God. Now we turn to the basis of all comfort we have. Comfort that as the Heidelberg Catechism says covers both “life and death.”

Our true comfort comes from belonging to Jesus Christ by faith. Whatever comfort we receive on this side of eternity would be for nothing if we do not have the comfort that lasts beyond the grave. Comfort that comes from having a hope and future. We are a people that the Apostle Paul says “*You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.*” (1 Cor. 6:19-20) That price was Jesus Christ “*who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.*” (Titus 2:14)

Even greater comfort comes when we realize that everything that happens to us serves the purpose of “working together for my salvation.” Hear the testimony of Scripture regarding those who have been called to Christ Jesus.

Luke 21:16-18 (ESV)

You will be delivered up even by parents and brothers and relatives and friends, and some of you they will put to death. You will be hated by all for my name's sake. But not a hair of your head will perish.

Matthew 10:29-31 (ESV)

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

Romans 8:28 (ESV)

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

No matter what is brought our way, God is at work to accomplish the purposes of saving a people for Himself. Sometimes we lose sight of that. We can be so caught up in the moment that we fail to see the end of the story. We are called to Christ for eternal purposes. We are called to Christ to experience the eternal comfort of the presence of God. So whatever happens to us God is at work to bring a people to Himself and to prepare them for their eternal home in glory.

But in order to receive that comfort, we must be made aware of three things. *“The first, how great my sins and miseries are; the second, how I may be delivered from all my sins and miseries; the third, how I shall express my gratitude to God for such deliverance.”* (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 2) We must know that we are lost and hopeless sinners who stand guilty before a holy God. *“None is righteous, no, not one;”* (Romans 3:10) But God in His infinite grace has sent His son Jesus Christ to take that guilt upon Himself at the cross of Calvary. In Him alone we find salvation and forgiveness. *“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”* (Acts 10:43) Then we learn to respond in gratitude for the things Jesus Christ has done for us. *“For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.”* (Ephes. 5:8-10) This is the essence of the gospel message. This is the essence of the comfort we receive that will last for all eternity. This is the essence of the comfort we receive that will last us beyond the grave. When this life seems too much to bear, we find our comfort in the life to come. Amen.