

HEALING HEREAFTER



**Finding Rational and Refreshing Answers
for Why We're Here
and Where We're Headed**

Jason Dykstra, MD

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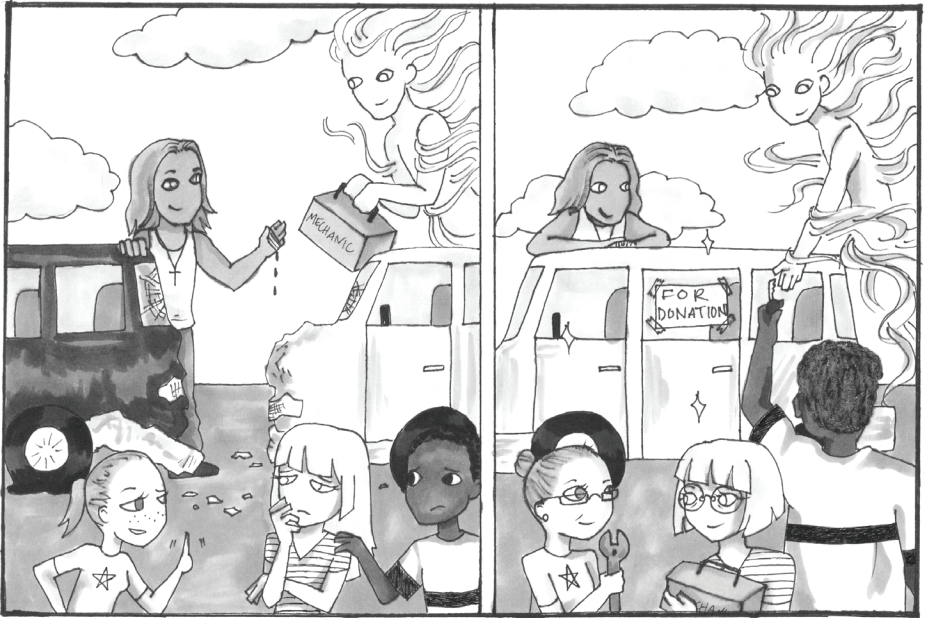
*For everyone who wonders
what the hereafter has in store for us,
and especially for those who want to know why*

*With deep gratitude and love
to my Savior, spouse, and sons,
who all significantly gave of themselves
to make this possible*

Booklet 5

The King of Spring

*Questions about suffering, hypocrisy, the assurance or loss of salvation,
and the role good deeds play in salvation by grace through faith*



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One lesson in my life that has taken me—and is still taking me—way too long to learn is that people’s lives are often the way they are largely because of circumstances that seem to be or are beyond their control. Yes, they still are responsible for their decisions and need to understand that, in the end, they do have the ability to do what is right, despite their predicaments. However, whenever I see someone in a situation that I’m tempted to be critical of, God reminds me that I very well might be doing a lot worse than they are if I were given the same lot in life. It’s truly impressive to see how some folks endure under pressures I could never even imagine, and for me, one particular patient encounter was the most impressive of all.

As she was being admitted for pregnancy-related issues, I noticed in her chart that she had been pregnant eight times. One look at her told me that she was way too young to have been pregnant that many times for typical family planning reasons, not to mention that her socioeconomic situation was not likely to be one that could support that many children. Immediately, my mind foolishly jumped to conclusions. What on earth does she keep getting pregnant for? Why isn’t she at least using birth control? Can’t she demonstrate a little sexual restraint? Perhaps my thoughts betrayed me, because something compelled her to answer my unspoken questions. She looked straight at me with an expression of sadness, annoyance, and resolve that I will never forget and explained that the reason she has been pregnant so often is because her partner keeps raping her. Something inside me broke. When your brain has so much reconfiguring to do in so little time, you can only stand there speechless. When I finally recovered, we spoke for a while about it, getting her some resources to help her take the next step. And when I walked in the room the next day and *he* was there, my perception of her completed its transformation from contempt to compassion. Her world was full of

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suffering, and much of it could not be directly traced to any particular thing that she had done.

So it is with everyone's world, because so much of our physical existence has become cold and dead. It might be rape, or it might be the disdain of a wife and children for the wealthy executive who never sees his family. It might be poverty, or it might be the silent bitterness and hatred of jealousy. It might be political oppression, or it might be anxiety and depression. Obviously, I could go on and on describing the winter of suffering that freezes all of us in some way.

Or instead I could describe the bloom I see when my social worker pal helps the elderly pay their bills in the name of Jesus. Or the blossoms opening when the unemployed and hungry are regularly given free food at our church. Or the leaves unfurling when pastors tirelessly visit the sick and imprisoned. Or the shrubs that flower when my physician friends move their families to Africa to bring God's health and hope to the people of Kenya, and soon Burundi. Or the trees that expand toward the sun as Christian professionals generate millions of dollars to make higher education accessible. Or the meadows bursting with color as a congregation collaborates with local businesses to buy shoes for Guatemalan orphans and wells for the thirsty in Zambia. Or the vast forest teeming with life as God works through all of his people through all of history to create growth from decay and satisfaction from suffering. Many folks—religious or not—alleviate pain in this world, and more power to ya! But the God of the Bible has been generating restoration from the very beginning, both acting through humans and on his own as well. He is the King of Spring and is always at work transforming death into life and humans into healers . . .

1

Faith convinces God to lead a person to the gospel, but it doesn't just retire after that. So what does this faith look like once it is confirmed and enlightened by the message of Jesus? Well, first and foremost, we know from God's purpose for us that the tangible expression of the faith that God requires from us will most closely resemble a relationship. Spending time getting to know God and more intimately understanding him is the primary hallmark of such faith. Paul couldn't state this more obviously than he does in Philip-pians 3:8-11. "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead." Faith is practically applied in knowing God, which culminates in eternal community with him in Heaven.

Some of you may be feeling a touch uneasy, as you always thought you'll go to Heaven because you're a good person, because you go to church, because you're kind to the less fortunate, or because you do whatever x, y, and z that you feel is required for Heaven. But an honest survey of your desires and actions might demonstrate that you don't have much interest in making time to forge a relationship with God. Heaven is not a beach resort reward for successfully checking items off a list, even though to-do list addicts like myself thrive on this kind of self-achievement. God has no place in that Heaven, so why would that be his primary and eternal residence? Heaven is a place where we can fully know God and completely enjoy community with him forever. "Union with God is the central integrating pleasure of heaven and....all other things are enjoyed in such a way that God is recognized as their source and glorified thereby."¹ Perhaps you

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have been taught to be or are more excited about the beach resort than being with God, which is why you're willing to undergo whatever stepwise process to get to the sand instead of talking and listening to God. However, it's not faith in doing deserving deeds, having things, or following humans that God is looking for. It's faith in *him* that he wants, faith that he is worth getting to know because he knows what's best, faith that he can be trusted, the core of a healthy relationship. "Let him who boasts boast in this: that he understands and knows me" (Jeremiah 9:24).

Jesus starkly distinguishes this Godmade requirement for salvation with the manmade one, a list of deeds to boast about, in a parable concerning people with plenty of great credentials. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never *knew* you. Away from me, you evildoers'" (Matthew 7:21-23)! Jesus is quite stern with these folks, who have crossed off an even more "spiritual" checklist than most of us, because they are depending on these things to get them into Heaven, rather than exhibiting any desire to know God. They don't have the faith that God is looking for, they don't think that they need Jesus, and they don't want God, so they're not going to Heaven, however impressive their resume might be. But that's OK, because if the purpose for humans and Heaven is to finally, fully know God, these folks don't really *want* to go there anyway, do they? Individuals who do have the faith that God seeks, who do know that they need Jesus, who do want God, and who truly do want to go to Heaven and fulfill God's purpose for them will desire and act to know God as well as possible, starting now. "One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord" (Psalm 27:4). Building this intimacy is the primary way that such faith is visible in everyday life. Besides, monotonously completing some to-do list is so boring compared to friending the fascinating God who created you and everything else!

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And if this relationship is eternal, it certainly doesn't stop at the acquaintance level. As you discover more of who God is, you begin to appreciate him more, and as you appreciate him more, you begin to see the value in what he values. And as those values are consistently confirmed, you begin to assimilate them into your life, desiring to become more and more like him. This happens all the time in healthy human relationships. You meet someone, learn to appreciate them, understand why they value what they value, start to see the value in similar things, and often times end up retaining a great new habit or hobby as a result! You didn't retain it *to get to* know the person; you retained it *because* you knew them. Assimilating such values is not a *prerequisite* for the relationship; it's the *inevitable result* of a healthy relationship.

This is how doing good deeds fits into Christianity. The Bible clearly does not support taking a lifetime spiritual retreat with just you and God getting to know each other somewhere in the wilderness, or in the comfort of your own home for that matter. Christians need to regularly associate with other Christians to encourage them and to be encouraged by them to continue doing these deeds (Hebrews 10:24-25). Perhaps even more importantly, they also need to regularly be practicing these deeds among non-Christians (Matthew 5:14-16, 1 Peter 2:11-12, 3:15-16). We are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:10). Maybe you're still wondering why having faith to devote time to knowing God or why doing these good deeds doesn't simply reflect another stepwise manmade pathway to salvation. We explain in Booklet 4 that God had to create us with the capability to have faith and that this faith is not something we specifically know is part of our salvation when God sees it, so it clearly is not a do-it-yourself means to salvation. And now we've explained why the good works that are part of every true Christian's life are also not a human-made highway to Heaven. Not only does the Holy Spirit play a role in assisting us to accomplish them, they are not done *to get* salvation in the first place; they are the *inevitable natural progression* of the faith-based relationship with God fostered by those who will be saved.

And sometimes these deeds are more inevitable than we realize.

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Once a person becomes a Christian, God prepares good works for him to do in advance, before they're actually done. This doesn't mean every positive impact Christians have is predetermined by God, but it does mean that he will accomplish through us the ones that are, no matter what. But even the ones that we perform by our own free will are not done with the purpose of earning a relationship with God or a ticket to Heaven. They will be done because the natural progression of a true relationship with God always leads to them, "the obedience that comes through faith (Romans 16:26)." A person who knows God is motivated to obey him, compelled to become more like him, and can't help but do the good deeds that are consistent with what God values. Even when part of her would like to disagree with God or isn't excited about something he values, she follows him anyway, because her knowledge of, appreciation for, and repeated assurance of God's perfect will and wisdom inspire her to do so, as does God's Spirit within her. "We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands" (1 John 2:3).

You can either *find yourself* doing good works fueled by the faith God is looking for, or you can *force yourself* to do good works apart from the faith that God is looking for. This is the difference between Christians doing the good deeds they were created for and legalism—religion focused entirely on obeying a set of rules. The good works are present either way, which is exactly why God doesn't use them as his prerequisite to determine salvation. He uses faith in him, and an intimate relationship with resultant good works inevitably ensues. In this book I am not telling you *to become* a Christian by mustering up the faith and deeds you need to make yourself one; I am saying that you eventually *will become* a Christian and do these deeds if you have that faith in the first place. If you truly trust that God can and will do what he says, and that what he says is the best, you *will* believe what he says about his best and only solution of Jesus and you *will* give him your time and believe that pursuing such a relationship is forever valuable, which *will* produce the good deeds that express your incorporation of what God values. Faith and these deeds are inseparable (James 2:18-19, Acts 26:20). The faith that God is looking for will always lead to the deeds he values, which is why he can be confident

in specially predestining a person to salvation once he finds that faith in them.

2

Because only genuine faith leads to legitimate salvation, the good works that inevitably arise from that faith must—and will—persist to the end of a saved person’s life (Romans 2:7-8). Paul, who suffered so much for the cause of Christ, exemplifies this well as his time on earth comes to a close. “The time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, *I have kept the faith*. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:6-8). Numerous times throughout the Bible we are told that God will judge humans according to what they have done, probably most significantly in Revelation 20:12, when the actual event is described. Jesus leaves no doubt that those who think they are Christians will not be saved if they abandon their work for God to indulge themselves and refuse to be productive (Matthew 25:14-30, Luke 12:42-46). Now we know why. Our deeds are a direct reflection of our faith, and Paul directly links his deeds—fighting the good fight—with keeping the faith. Moreover, it’s not just any faith for which God awards him and others with righteousness; it’s the faith that longs for God’s appearing, the faith that exposes a desire for eternal community with God, the faith that accomplishes his purpose for humanity, the faith that he seeks as the criterion for salvation. And that faith—along with its unavoidable deeds—must and will persist throughout life if it is genuine. “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith *from first to last*, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith”” (Romans 1:17). Paul confirmed this in deed above but in word here as well. “I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken

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your stand. By this gospel you are saved, *if you hold firmly* to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). He reaffirms the need for such perseverance in Colossians 1:22-23, and Jesus agrees. “He *who stands firm to the end* will be saved” (Matthew 24:13).

Am I saying that people can lose their salvation? No. Once God sees the faith that he seeks, the salvation that he specially predestines for that person through his one solution of Jesus is unavoidable and irrevocable (Romans 11:29). When humans apply that genuine faith to the gospel as God presents it to them, his Holy Spirit permanently dwells within them to begin fostering an intimate relationship and to assure that they can and will stand “firm to the end.” “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1:21-22). Hebrews 6:4-6 tells us that people “who have shared in the Holy Spirit” cannot fall away or lose their salvation, because if they did, they would never be able “to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again.” In other words, if people with the Holy Spirit could fall away, there would be no way for them to be saved, even though they’re still alive and can still develop the faith to initiate salvation. This would be unacceptable to a God who “wants all men to be saved,” because it prohibits his salvation process from occurring, even if all the components are present (1 Timothy 2:3-4). And how can the Holy Spirit be a person’s guarantee of salvation if that person falls away and can never be saved again? How can the Holy Spirit indwell that unsaved person in Hell, where God is absent? Therefore, once the Holy Spirit permanently indwells a person for salvation, that person is saved, and the Holy Spirit never leaves. This is why blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, which according to the dictionary is speaking evil of and reviling him,² is the one “eternal sin” that “will never be forgiven” (Mark 3:28-29). We need him to be saved, so reviling him prevents salvation. Salvation is only secure upon accommodating—not rejecting—God’s Spirit and letting him produce persistent fruit in our lives. Once he truly indwells those who have genuinely come to Jesus,

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nothing will ever reverse that (John 6:37-39, Romans 8:38-39).

So no, I'm not saying that people can lose their salvation. What I *am* saying is that a person who does not increasingly demonstrate a lifestyle that reflects the faith that God seeks never had that faith to begin with, since that faith will always be expressed by the deeds that God values (contrast Matthew 13:20-21 with 13:23). Those who do not produce fruit, who "turn away," who make a point to do evil in God's name, who do not remain in Jesus, who are "cut off," who "have fallen away," and who "shipwrecked," "abandon," "denied," or "wandered from" faith are all examples of those who don't truly believe that God can and will do what he says, and that what he says is the best (Matthew 21:43, 24:10, Luke 12:46, John 15:1-6, Romans 11:19-23, Galatians 5:4, 1 Timothy 1:19, 4:1, 5:8, 6:10). This does not mean that one sin or one season of doubt verifies that you don't have saving faith, but it does mean that if you do have that faith, you will genuinely desire and act to eliminate that sin and find and accept God's answers to your doubts. In several of these passages, it is the Jews who thought that they were saved, but Jesus explains to them, "You do not *believe* because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, *and they follow me*. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:26-28). "We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end" (Hebrews 3:14). If such belief isn't held to the end, then we never had received the anointing of the Holy Spirit, attained salvation, or come to share in Christ in the first place, right (1 John 2:19-20)? But if the persistent deeds that are expressed by faith are present to the end, our election will finally and completely be confirmed to us at that time, and we "will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and savior Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:5-11).

But wait, if the faith that's associated with salvation can't be absolutely proven to humans without the lifetime's worth of deeds that it will generate, can people ever know that they're saved before they die? To answer this question, it's very important to understand the difference between subjective opinion about the status of one's salvation and objective fact about the status of one's salvation. To claim

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that I trust, believe, am convinced, am convicted, or am assured that I am saved is very different than the claim that it is *true* that I'm saved. The first claim depends entirely on my opinion of the matter; whereas the second claim depends entirely on proven, unalterable fact, regardless of my opinion on the matter. Even if I say that I *know* that I'm saved, that too is an opinion I have, subject to the validity of the *knowledge* on which I base that claim. To know something is still not as certain as for something to be true.

Let me illustrate. I trust, believe, am convinced, am convicted, and am assured that my wife's first name is Laura. I *know* that her first name is Laura, because I have the knowledge that everybody has always called her that since I met her, that she has always called herself that, and that there is a genuine-appearing birth certificate in the drawer right next to me that states her first name as Laura. This is a totally reasonable opinion, right? However, does that mean that it's *true* that her first name is Laura? Could she have been fooling everyone this whole time, or if she's really good, just me (hey, I don't put anything past her, she *did* sneak bagpipers into our wedding without me knowing, after all!)? Could she have fabricated her birth certificate? Could she even have been incorrectly convinced herself that her name was Laura? Of course. All of these scenarios are exceedingly unlikely; however, I can only reliably claim that I believe or know that her name is Laura, not that it is true that her name is Laura.

Likewise, people can trust, believe, be convinced, be convicted, be assured, and even know that they or others are saved (1 John 5:11-13), and their subjective opinion, their assurance of salvation, may very well be true. But they cannot reliably and objectively claim that it is true, until God factually proves it to them in one of three ways. First, he identifies a few specific individuals who are irrevocably saved in the Bible, as he obviously knows who has the saving presence of the Holy Spirit that perpetuates the lifelong deeds associated with salvation (Job 19:25-27, Psalm 17:13-15, Matthew 19:27-28, Philippians 4:3, Hebrews 11:4-40). However, we are not named with those individuals. Second, he can undeniably confirm that his Holy Spirit permanently resides within people, guaranteeing their salvation (Acts 15:8,

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2 Corinthians 1:21-22). But it's not a simple thing to undeniably validate this indwelling in us, is it? Even for those who believe that the Holy Spirit within them has done some miraculous deed to prove they're saved—and maybe he has—there are often explanations around it, like coincidence, natural phenomena, supernatural phenomena not involving God (e.g. 1 Samuel 28:4-19), acts of God not associated with the Holy Spirit's indwelling (e.g. John 2:1-11), and his recurrent temporary presence in both unsaved and saved humans throughout the Bible that we learn about in Booklet 3 (e.g. Numbers 24:2-3, Jude 1:7-13). Of course, this does not mean the Holy Spirit isn't doing miraculous and persistent deeds in those who are saved all the time; it just means we need to be able to undeniably validate his lasting presence in us if we claim it as proof of salvation. Third, God can and will confirm to people in Paradise, and eventually to them in Heaven, that they "share in Christ," having held their "original conviction firmly to the very end" (Hebrews 3:14). But once again, such certainty is not offered to us currently.

And that's OK. People can be satisfied believing and having the assurance that it's most likely that they're saved—based on their current knowledge—without making the claim that it's true that they are saved, an assertion they will probably not be able to undeniably validate during their lives. In fact, it's both honest and humble to admit that the knowledge you base your assurance of salvation on may not be accurate or enduring. After all, perhaps you've met people who used to be just as assured of their salvation as you might be of your own today, except now they would confidently say they no longer believe in Christianity and wouldn't claim such salvation anymore. I certainly have met such folks. This is precisely why persistent deeds arising from genuine faith in God is a necessary part of our salvation process! If Jesus himself warned his disciples—of all people the ones most likely to be saved—against falling away and not being able to be with him at "the end" (Luke 21:5-9, 27-36), we should be extremely hesitant during this life to ever consider it an incontrovertible truth that we are saved. As he says to them, so he says to us, "*Stand firm, and you will win life*" (Luke 21:19).

And as always, God has great reasons for making it this way. First,

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consider the temptations that await people who could claim that their salvation is an unequivocal truth: pride and complacency. Our world offers every motivation for people who think they're saved to lord it over others, doesn't it? Unfortunately, many wrongly do, even though they really only subjectively believe or know that they're saved. Even the biblical terms "chosen" and "elect" make me wince because of the connotations of pride, condescension, and exclusion with which they have become associated, whether fairly or unfairly. Let's be honest, if you're a person who considers yourself saved, you can probably identify at least one time when you thought better of yourself than someone else as a result. I can, and it was wrong for me to do so.

But even for the most humble, there is still the danger of complacency. If it's true that I am saved no matter what, then it's going to be much harder to motivate myself to follow God in any way that opposes my feelings or desires. I fully realize—and by now I hope you do too—that our primary motivation for following God should not be to be saved, but to further our relationship with him as we approach perfect community with him in Heaven. However, speaking very practically, having it in the back of our minds that we are saved no matter what makes it quite a bit harder to resist emotions or wants that draw us away from God, doesn't it? Again, if you're a person who considers yourself saved, you can probably come up with an example of this from your own life. I know that I can. In fact, such distractions were the very things Jesus said the disciples would avoid by exercising the persistence associated with salvation (Luke 21:34-36)! It makes sense then, that God would encourage the assurance of our salvation, but stop short of proving it to us. He's not big into pride or complacency, and he knows that our relationship with him and our good deeds for others are more fruitful without them (Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 6:11-12).

The second reason God would make it impossible for us to prove the status of our salvation is to keep us focused on him instead of on achieving salvation. If there were a point that we could get to during this life that would conclusively prove that we were saved, most of us would focus all our efforts on getting there, wouldn't we? Who gets left out in the process? God. But the purpose for which we were

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created was not to be saved, was it? It was to seek, reach out for, and find perfect community with God (Acts 17:26-28, 1 Thessalonians 5:10). And the only essential human contribution in accomplishing that purpose is faith in God, that he can and will do what he says, and that what he says is the best. As we would expect, this faith—just like our purpose—is also focused squarely on God, not on getting saved. All people who truly possess this faith *will* hear the message of Jesus and accept it, which will initiate the forging of a growing relationship with God, which *will* generate good deeds, which *will* persevere throughout their lives. Upon dying, such deeds are proof that these folks have kept the faith, have held firmly to the word that was preached to them, and have stood firm to the end, sharing in Christ's salvation, "the end result of your faith" (1 Peter 1:9). The God-focused faith that he requires to accomplish his purpose for us is the one human component necessary and present throughout the entire Christian life, isn't it?

If we have that faith, the other aspects of the Christian life—believing the gospel, getting to know God, and persistently doing good works—will inevitably occur without us focusing specifically on them to be saved. Again, we will *find* ourselves doing them, rather than forcing ourselves to do them. If we do not have that faith, these other aspects of the Christian life become the focus for us, the means by which we try so hard to be saved or prove our salvation, and they will fail. There are many who have "prayed the prayer" who are not saved, and several of them would openly acknowledge that. There are many who have gotten to know an awful lot *about* God who are not saved, because they do not know *him*. And there are many who motivate themselves to do good deeds who are not saved, because they are trying to accomplish their own salvation. It's not accurate to claim that it's true that we're saved, it's not helpful to claim that it's true that we're saved, and it can be downright dangerous to claim that it's true that we're saved. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell

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them plainly, ‘I never knew you’” (Matthew 7:21-23). The Father’s will is not for people to try to be saved; it’s for them to possess the faith that God can and will do what he says, and that what he says is the best. The faith that welcomes the gospel, that trusts that God is worth getting to know, and that allows his Spirit to persistently produce the deeds that he values. The faith that allows him to accomplish his purpose for us by focusing us on eternal, perfect community with him. “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Romans 1:17). You might truly believe Jesus’ message, you might have a wonderful relationship with God, and you might have the fingerprints of the Holy Spirit all over your life; but if you do, it’s because you’ve kept your focus on faith, not on using these items as a checklist to prove your salvation.

Hey, I know that this might make you uncomfortable or even upset. Perhaps you have worked hard to spend a lot of time and effort doing things for God but haven’t really been with him. Or possibly you were hoping your significant religious knowledge or experience in the past would guarantee salvation even though your current lifestyle or worldview no longer reflects them. Or maybe you know how the gospel goes and have convinced yourself that you believe it, but the deeds that should be accompanying this conviction are few and far between. Now you know the problems with each of these scenarios. The faith that God seeks is the starting point for the deeds that follow, not vice versa. And if that faith is truly present, the deeds will be consistent and persistent; they cannot be sparse in the present or sequestered in the past. Your faith will not be perfect, but the effects of it will continually increase as you seek God more and more (Mark 9:23-24). Those who try to jump into the plan of salvation at some point *after* faith needs to be demonstrated will bypass God’s special predestination for them and won’t be indwelt with the Holy Spirit’s seal of salvation. Eventually, they’ll “fall away” without the “root” of faith that God seeks (Matthew 13:20-21). Therefore, “since the promise of entering his rest (*Heaven*) still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message

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they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share *the faith* of those who obeyed” (Hebrews 4:1-2).

Which brings us to the good news. If you *do* share in the faith that God can and will do what he says is best, God will see it and begin his work of salvation in you. You will welcome the gospel, enjoy a new relationship together, and watch great deeds in your life blossom as a result—in addition to the admirable ones you’ve mustered up the resolve to do already! This is the critical concept to remember: it’s not how hard you work for God, how much you knew or know about God, or how many of the right things you believe; what God wants to know is how much you trust what he says. Instead of asking yourself if you’re doing all the right things, if you know about all the right things, or if you believe all the right things, truly and introspectively ask yourself this: Do I have the faith that God can and will do what he says, and that what he says is the best? Maybe while reading this book this faith has arisen in you. If so, it will trigger God’s work in you to accept the solution of Jesus, which triggers the Holy Spirit to dwell within you to enable an intimate relationship between you and God. This frees you from humanity’s natural inclination toward evil, so that you can live according to God’s perfect inclinations. From that moment on you both are at work together to transform your faith into deeds (2 Corinthians 1:21-22, Ephesians 1:13-14)! “Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12-13).

There is no paradox between faith and deeds; they are one and the same (James 2:14-26). A person’s deeds are simply his faith after the gospel and getting to know God have allowed it to be made applicable to everyday life (1 Timothy 1:4). A person’s faith is simply his deed that convinces God to bring him the gospel and initiate that relationship in the first place. “‘What must we do to do the works God requires?’ Jesus answered, ‘The *work* of God is this: to *believe* in the one he has sent’” (John 6:28-29). Faith is the work that wants—not earns—perfect community with God. It initiates his work to help us accept the message of Jesus, enter into a relationship with him, and desire to imitate his values and deeds more and more.

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Consequently, when applied to everyday life, this faith-wrought relationship will inevitably embrace these good deeds; when applied to the hereafter, it will inevitably embrace Heaven.

3

Obviously, it's beyond the scope of this book to list every single one of the values and deeds that God has exemplified and that our faith will assimilate. Besides, doing so now would quite defeat the purpose of you and him spending the time getting to know each other later well enough to discover these on your own. However, I will give you a small sampling of attributes that his Holy Spirit teaches us to emulate. Aptly named the "fruit of the Spirit," they are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These *will* be increasingly apparent in the lives of those who are saved, because the Holy Spirit *will* be working with them to persist in good deeds, standing firm to the end. You are likely aware that there are many other values that God encourages and many deeds that he forbids in the Bible, and the list above is not meant to be a comprehensive summary of biblical morals. However, if we obeyed all God's commands, and did so according to these virtues that reflect the Spirit of God himself, you can imagine how much better every aspect of our world would be. God doesn't want us to find ourselves doing good works merely as evidence of our faith; he wants this emulation of his values to bring his spring to the world! This is not surprising at all. If the perfect bliss of Heaven is generated by perfect community with God, wouldn't happiness on earth also result from as many people as possible being as close to God as possible? It's no wonder that the growth of our relationship to God is directly linked to the transformation of our faith into deeds! The more we think and act like the King of Spring, the more like Heaven earth gets!

Obviously, Heaven itself isn't literally here on earth no matter how much good we do, just as Hell itself isn't literally here on earth

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no matter how much evil we do. Our existence on this planet is certainly both heavenly and hellish in many ways, but we do not live in some sort of actual earth/Hell/Heaven fusion.* However, even though the free will of humanity will never allow this earth to become fully Heavenly, there are still several reasons God would specifically encourage and enable humans to perform deeds of restoration anyway. First and already stated, these deeds are a necessary consequence of having the faith God is looking for and deepening a person's relationship with him. Second, this restoration shows humans, both those doing the deeds and those watching, why the things that God values are truly good and make sense. It's not until you see the positive effects of godly behavior that you really appreciate these values and the God behind them. Doing things that God would do and observing the resultant benefits strengthens your trust in and relationship with God, but it also serves to communicate him and his wisdom to others who don't yet know him, so that they might. Finally, God uses the good works of his people to relieve suffering in this world. The deeper the community is between a person and God's Holy Spirit inside of her, the more her obedience to God will reflect the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. When the world sees these attributes in Christians, the world sees God's work and his wisdom, and suffering subsides. The poor are fed, women and children are supported, prisoners are visited, the sick are healed, the elderly are sustained, the disabled are befriended, the homeless are sheltered, and the rejected are loved. Sounds a lot like what God uses his words to tell us to do. Sounds a lot like what Jesus spent his time to do. Sounds a lot like the fruitful deeds that his Spirit helps us to do. Sounds a lot like Heaven. Not Heaven, but a pretty darn good glimpse of it!

The purpose of this book is obviously not to describe the nuts and bolts of how Christians can practically or optimally live according to the Holy Spirit and his fruit; it's to demonstrate how such a life

* Such a composite earth/Hell/Heaven has been argued in an effort to redefine what Hell and Heaven are, and both the inconsistencies and futility of such a place are highlighted here.³

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is related to people's salvation and subsequent eternal destination in the hereafter. Therefore, even though our focus is on making sense of our beliefs rather than how to live our lives, this book in no way minimizes the importance of a godly, Christlike, Spirit-filled existence here and now. Rather, it infinitely amplifies this importance, because such a life is not merely necessary to help the old lady cross the street or even end world hunger, sex-trafficking, or some other great evil; it's also absolutely essential for any of us to be saved! If perfect community with God someday makes Heaven unmatched once we're there, then perfecting community with God must make Heaven unmistakable while we're here. In a growing relationship with God, faith always leads to fruit, and this fruit looks and tastes Heavenly. Anyone who looks at the life of a genuine Christian will get an unmistakable glimpse of the true Heaven. It won't be perfect, but it will be a consistent vista of blissful intimacy between a person and God. And the observer of this who then chooses to taste that life for himself will begin an unmistakable experience of perfect community that never ends!

This perpetuation of God's work, wisdom, and salvation on earth introduces us to the reasons why it remains vitally important for Christians to share the gospel, both in word and in deed. The biblical salvation process necessarily includes understanding and accepting the gospel *as well as* persistent good works, so Christians cannot completely share this salvation with others by only including one or the other. Words and deeds are *both always* necessary for evangelism to be fully successful. But given what we learn in Booklet 3 about God's ultimate publicity stunt and the existence of Lugg, you may have been wondering why Christians need to evangelize at all. If Jesus' preaching is going to take care of those who aren't provided with access to the gospel here, then is evangelism necessary? Of course, for three important reasons!

First, there is a freeing, beautiful, and fulfilling joy to becoming and being a Christian. Lifelong devotees and brand-new converts alike consistently share how thankful and excited they are to have either avoided or escaped the inevitably unsatisfying and often catastrophic habits associated with a life lived apart from God and his goodness.

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The countless stories of deliverance that I've heard throughout the years are so restorative and life-giving that waiting for these lives to linger in less than they were created for until Jesus finally reaches them in Lugg is not an option. Christians need to share the gospel, so that others can experience life-changing glimpses of an unmistakable Heaven, both now and later. Second, Christians themselves benefit from communicating God's solution to others. For example, me! As I have described to you the message of Jesus and God's salvation process throughout this book, I cannot tell you how much I have gained! My understanding of God's goodness, fairness, and rationality have hugely increased. Several doubts I could never quite put to rest have now been eliminated. I have new and better reasons to live how he created and commands me to live, and I know why his way is better than any other way that I have been able to find. I can explain my existence, my purpose, and my future in ways that are consistent with God's words and works. Understandably, I'm pretty pumped at what this testimony has produced in me! No wonder "you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ" if you are "active in sharing your faith" (Philemon 1:6). The third reason evangelism is necessary for Christians is simply because God commanded it. But his commands have never been arbitrary or pointless, and now we know why this one isn't either. *Everyone* benefits from it. Non-Christians hear about, see, and hopefully experience firsthand hints of the Heaven that is being made available to them. Christians also continue to be reminded of these as they share, increasingly eliminating drudgery and doubt. God gets to see his purpose for humans fulfilled in a sooner and more satisfying way for everyone involved. And everyone can enjoy the decreased suffering and separation resulting from the fruit of the Spirit being produced in greater measure!

The world has continually and definitively seen this fruit from Christians, making Heaven unmistakable for thousands of years, whether it wants to acknowledge it or not. Extensive secular research has proven that—even with all other demographic factors being equal—Christians relatively and absolutely give far more of their money and time than the secular population to both religious

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and secular organizations helping people in need.¹⁴ The secularists who have joined the increasingly popular social justice movement (welcome!) attribute the trend to an emergent progressive society, when in reality, the progress has already been proven and perpetuated by Jesus' followers for millennia, and by many others in the Bible long before that. Of course, this does not *at all* mean that there aren't many secular individuals who have given generously to society, nor is it intended to assert that Christians care more about those in need than other religious groups. I *only* mention it in response to those who teach or have been taught that Christianity has a negative impact on society—that we would be better off without it. There are mountains of data and deeds proving the exact opposite. And as long as the world lasts, it will continue to see Christians producing this fruit, with even the charity benefit of the *Healing Hereafter* paperback edition as one small example.

But the world has seen hypocrisy as well, and this cannot be ignored or denied. It's present no doubt, but the ironic thing about hypocrisy is this: the person who claims that it's bad for Christians to do the opposite of what their God tells them to do actually agrees with their God, doesn't she? Those who say they're not Christians because there are so many hypocrites have more reason to become Christians than anyone else! They're essentially arguing that they *would* become Christians if Christians acted more like genuine Christians. I have one question for these folks: what are you waiting for? Show these hypocrites what genuine Christianity really looks like! Commit to the Christianity you already agree with and help them abandon their duplicity in the process. After all, God remains God, his purpose for you remains his purpose for you, and his solution of Jesus remains the solution for you, whether those who claim to be his people all use their free will to perfectly follow him or poorly follow him. If a surgeon uses suture to hurt his patient, do you blame the manufacturer who—with every good intention—is responsible for creating the suture? No. Do you blame the suture itself, the misused tool that was designed to bring healing and life? Of course not. Nor would you cease to recognize the vital roles that the manufacturer and the suture both play in restoring wellness, right? God is the

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manufacturer of Christianity, the tool he designed to bring healing and life. Humans are the surgeons that have the free will to use or abuse this tool, but God and Christianity remain both blameless and vital regardless of which choice humans make (Zephaniah 3:1-5).

Keep in mind as well that the hypocrites most likely to turn you from Christianity are those who are definitely not consistently exhibiting the faith or deeds associated with a growing relationship with God. They're probably not Christians to begin with. No wonder you agree with God and Christianity, yet are at odds with them. Embrace that agreement, show them how to do it right, and help save two people instead of none! Of course, neither you nor they will be perfect in your pursuit of God, but you should always see progress in becoming more like him. For those who have been hurt by newer Christians, I do humbly ask that you give them time to pattern their life after Christ's before your expectations get too high; after all, most turn to him precisely *because* of how morally insufficient they realize they are! This is not to excuse or encourage hypocrisy one bit; although it will inevitably be spotted, it should be increasingly scarce in a person who has the faith that God seeks. As this hypocrisy heals, genuine deeds from a genuine faith will produce genuine fruit to represent God accurately and relieve suffering ardently. I know that this may not emotionally help if you've been hurt by a hypocrite, if there is pain and betrayal that is still hard to bear. But there is also God and his solution for you that remain uncorrupted, and Jesus also bore severe pain and betrayal at the hands of many hypocrites. He understands those emotions and has endured that evil. He can help.

In fact, he has endured evil from and offered help in many other scenarios of suffering besides hypocrisy. He knows that while his people have and will bring spring to this world in increasing measure, they will never be able to do it perfectly or completely, regardless of their devotion or numbers. So what does *he* do to make up the difference? Does God step in to save the day or does he keep the world from seeing May? We cannot deny that there are still huge piles of snow-snot wherever we turn in our world, so let's discover how the King of Spring *himself* deals with them.

4

Where is God in despair? How can a good God let people suffer? You may have started to piece together an answer from our discussion already, but these questions merit a more dedicated treatment. However, before we go any further, I want to take a moment to acknowledge that some of you have gone or are going through incredible hardships. All of us experience heartbreak and difficulty in life, but I fully admit that I cannot possibly imagine much of what you are enduring. I apologize that I cannot empathize with you fully as I write this. Unfortunately, compassion doesn't translate well across the written page, but I in no way desire to undermine your feelings or struggles. They are real and they are important, but as God's presence and work within suffering become more understandable, you will become not just mentally equipped—but emotionally equipped as well—to cope with such difficulty and disappointment, both now and in the future. This has been validated in my own experiences of suffering and failure, and I *cannot emphasize enough* how beneficial the following material has been to me during these times, both mentally and emotionally. In fact, as we explore, we'll find that God is actually far more antagonistic to suffering than we are, that he makes a lot of sense in his response to suffering, and that he is never satisfied with giving it free reign. Nevertheless, if you are hurting right now—even as you read this—it may be helpful to take a minute to prepare your mind for our plunge into this topic, as I have no idea how it might affect you emotionally, given the very legitimate and horrible difficulties people face.

Alright, let's do this. To address the adequacy of God's response to suffering, we need to revisit the question of where suffering came from in the first place. The answer is not pleasant, but we need to come to grips with it. As elaborated upon in Booklet 2, humans choose to suffer. God created each one of us in his image, as a "self" with free will and therefore with the ability to make decisions independently of his control (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). The first sin—clearly

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warned and commanded against by God—was to choose to pursue the knowledge of evil, independent of a knowledge of good (Genesis 2:16-17, 3:1-7). Humanity's downfall was wanting to understand what evil was, not trusting that God's perfectly good design was the best that could be experienced. Each sin we've committed since then is no different. As a result, this world has turned into one giant comprehensive educational experience of evil, complete with unjust suffering, hate, sex-trafficking, violence, ending life, oppression, envy, disaster, lust, hunger, pain, rape, depression, sickness, prejudice, etc. Some argue that human sin is not the only cause of suffering, as Satan, his demons, and creation itself generate suffering. It is true that they do, but only because we use our free will to ask for knowledge of evil, and the suffering these non-human entities cause are simply consequences of our request. If they were causes of suffering that couldn't be traced back to humans, then why would God allow them to continue? He didn't allow such suffering before sin occurred. The serpent could only tempt Adam and Eve in the perfect garden of Eden, not cause suffering there. It wasn't until after they wanted to know evil that we see Satan and his demons wreaking havoc (Luke 13:10-17, Mark 5:1-20, 9:17-27). Likewise, creation produced no suffering to humans before Adam and Eve sinned, but once they did, the ground is cursed, necessitating painful toil (Genesis 3:17-19).

All the things that we would consider suffering—ultimately including death—result from this desire to understand evil. Even though we typically don't directly say we want to personally encounter disease, hurricanes, murder, etc., we do want to know what evil is, and experiencing these things is the consequence of that knowledge (Psalm 106:13-15). The only way to prove that we don't want to understand evil is to stop doing it. But with each of our myriad sins, we affirm our longing to know evil, something other than God and his provision. *Any* hardship, whether endured, observed, permitted, or inflicted, is part of gaining a true understanding of evil. Experiencing suffering is all part of the package, the inevitable consequence of our rebellious desires. Please, please understand, I am *not* claiming that specifically because Vijay lied, he gets bullied at school or specifically because Nia gossiped, she has a learning disorder. I am only

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claiming that because they both have chosen to know and experience evil, they will. And some will experience it more or less than others, as humans can't know evil without enduring inequality and injustice. So when it seems that people are hurt in ways that they can't control or are senselessly suffering undeservedly, it's almost certainly *not* because they asked God to endure these specific torments or because of one specific sin they committed. Obviously, people don't choose to be molested, mocked, raped, or robbed. However, people do choose—freely and frequently—to know and understand evil, which ultimately results in every event of suffering people face. And as we learn in Booklet 3, this suffering extends to those whose spirits may not have—even though they may have—freely sinned yet, because the rest of us who have sinned perpetuate the sinful nature that *all* of us possess. As we continue to make these sinful decisions every day, multiple times, we continue to be responsible for the general suffering throughout our world. Even though we say that we want it to stop and blame God for not making it stop, *we* are the ones who continuously perpetuate it. The only aspect of suffering that God is responsible for is giving us free will in the first place. We know he had to do this to accomplish his purpose for us, to allow us to truly choose—or chose not—to pursue eternal, perfect community with him. Would any of us have him take back that free will and make Heaven impossible or meaningless? Of course not! Yet ironically, it is often those who seem to value personal choice the most who are the first to blame God for giving us the free choice we've misused to usher in suffering! Would they rather have God acquiesce and take their ability to freely choose away? God is not to blame for human suffering, humans are.

Many are uncomfortable with this realization and attempt to avoid human culpability by answering *why God allows* suffering solely with descriptions of *how God works through* suffering. God is very active when we hurt, in the many ways that we'll explore soon, but his response to suffering is not an adequate explanation for why it exists in the first place. Ignoring its origin leaves whoever asked you about suffering to assume that you believe that God both wanted and caused suffering, so that he could demonstrate his provision through

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it. Maybe you do believe that. But if God is ultimately responsible for suffering because it so vitally enables him to ironically demonstrate his grace or encourage our growth, then why was there no suffering in the garden of Eden, and why will there be no suffering on the New Earth? If God did not deem suffering necessary for manifesting his glory or nurturing our maturity in these perfect places, then why is it necessary here? It's not. Humans made suffering a part of their experience here, not God, and avoiding this truth ultimately helps no one quench doubt related to suffering.

Rather than desiring it, God has longed through all of human history for us to stop pursuing sin, to stop wanting to know evil, and to stop suffering, but we never cease to keep him waiting, do we? God laments, "All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good, pursuing their own imaginations" (Isaiah 65:2). "Ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. But you said, 'We will not walk in it'" (Jeremiah 6:16). "Seek good, not evil, that you may live" (Amos 5:14). "'Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall . . . for I take no pleasure in the death of anyone,' declares the Sovereign Lord. 'Repent and live'" (Ezekiel 18:30-32)! "Your sins have deprived you of good" (Jeremiah 5:25). "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it" (Haggai 1:5-6). "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare" (Isaiah 55:1-2). "I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea" (Isaiah 48:17-18). If only. Suffering was not God's will for us. Suffering is not God's will for us, "for he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone" (Lamentations 3:33). He clearly didn't create sin and suffering, and he clearly didn't create us to sin and suffer either. God's will for us has *never, ever* been anything but the most satisfying, the richest, and

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the best for our peace and well being. If only we would freely will for the same.

Already we are forced to admit that our accusations against God are starting to unravel, that perhaps we have been projecting our guilt on him. But even though God isn't at fault for human suffering, wouldn't he at least do something about it? Why does he let it go on? One reason God is justified in allowing suffering is simply because humans don't really deserve *anything* from him, let alone his deliverance from affliction. God reminds us of this, asking, "Who has a claim against me that I must pay? Everything under heaven belongs to me" (Job 41:11). Created beings have no inherent rights, only those that their creator gives to them. God never promises us the right to be free from suffering on earth, and we're in about the worst bargaining position possible to demand that right, aren't we? We've all been fed the lie over and over by people who wish to manipulate us that we deserve this and that, but are we ever given any reason why? No, because there isn't one. Most of the time people tell us this to make us want what we "deserve" so badly—even though we often didn't want it at all beforehand—that we'll vote for them to provide it for us or buy it from them to finally possess it. But if we really did deserve it, shouldn't they be giving it to us and expecting nothing in return? The only thing we ever really innately deserved was to not exist, because that's all we "had" before God exercised his grace in creating our lives and all of our abilities. So our existence, talents, and anything beyond that is a gift that we don't deserve (Romans 11:35-36). "All that we have accomplished you have done for us" (Isaiah 26:12). "Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14).

This explains how God could possibly allow a guy in the Bible named Job to be tested, taking away *everything* that he had, short of his life and his ability to ponder it. Unlike what my probable reaction would have been, Job amazingly acknowledged God's justice in the midst of his anguish. "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:21). Impressive, and absolutely true, isn't it? This means that even if we're barely clinging to

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life, and it seems that God has caused us great suffering, we all still possess infinitely more than we have a right to (Habakkuk 3:17-18, 1 Timothy 6:6-7). It is a false sense of entitlement to a life free from pain and sorrow that causes us to feel that God is unfair. We, in and of ourselves, don't deserve anything from him, especially relief from suffering, given how we've used our free will. If you think you do deserve such a life, simply ask yourself why (an excellent habit to get into by the way), and you will find that there are really no good answers. Dang it. So is that the end of our exploration? God allows suffering simply because we don't deserve to be delivered from it? Well, he could stop there, he would be perfectly justified in doing so, and we would have no good reason to be dissatisfied. Accepting this truth is crucial, as it is an extremely powerful weapon against the discontentment, bitterness, and fury that we often have when something goes wrong, three things that never do us or those around us a bit of good.

But that isn't the end. Even though we have no right to complain, God is dissatisfied to stop there. *He* is unwilling to let suffering run its course, and there is much more to him than only his justice. God may be just and we may deserve nothing, but God is also mercy and love, and simply because of that fact, he refuses to remain idle in the midst of our pain. This merciful and loving nature permits him to respond in one of two ways. He can *take away* our suffering completely, or he can *transform* our suffering into something better. Which option makes more sense? To take away our suffering would either require God to eliminate our free will or to constantly remove every experience of evil associated with every one of our free-willed sins. He can't do the first if he wishes to accomplish his purpose for creating humans. And it's irrational to do the second, not only because it's tediously tiresome, but also because mere seconds after God removes suffering from the world, billions of humans would just reinstate it by sinning again! In the hospital we must adhere to the Mr. Miyagi-like mantra "Wash in, wash out," cleaning our hands before and after every patient encounter, because it's futile and foolish to think that bacteria won't start doing their dirty deeds again immediately after we've been cleansed of them. At least *they're* not using

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free will to cause suffering, right? Also, taking away our suffering would negate any benefit that might result from suffering. There's no question that enduring difficulty brings valuable experience, wisdom, and personal development; in fact, it often changes entire lives for the better, doesn't it? Learning the hard way in the school of hard knocks isn't optimal and certainly wasn't God's preferred path to maturity for us, but if humans are insistent on keeping the school open, why wouldn't God take advantage of it and make the best of it? So God's first option for a response to suffering—taking it away—makes no sense for free-willed humans, and for reasons that lead us straight to the second option.

God transforms our suffering into something better, often times something that is less likely to occur without suffering. And there are many ways that he does so. They do not, however, all necessarily apply in any given example. Maybe we suffer directly because of a specific action, maybe not. Maybe hard times are being used to teach us something, maybe not, etc. Obviously, God may allow what we consider "bad" things to happen to us for one reason, multiple reasons, or for every reason that exists. So how does he transform our despair to hope, suffering to blessing, the bad to the good?

First, it is often impossible for us to determine what things are "good" or "bad" at the time that they occur. We all learn to characterize certain situations as "good," like getting a promotion, or "bad," like getting cancer. While we do this for obvious reasons, this blanket categorization often makes it much harder for us to see the potential bad in something "good" or the potential good in something "bad." Only a God who completely understands the big picture behind these circumstances can accurately label them as "good" or "bad." If getting a promotion forces a person to be at work too much, sacrifice family relationships, and constantly experience stress, it's not a good thing. And if getting cancer motivates a person to raise awareness for prevention in others and to use her time and resources in positive ways that she never would have without being faced with her own mortality, it is a good thing. So God transforms hurting to helping first by transforming our minds, teaching them to rethink why things are bad or good and encouraging them to ascertain good from bad.

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Second, God may use suffering to teach us what may be difficult to fully appreciate otherwise. Suffering helps us to define how incredibly enjoyable the good times really are and to get a small taste of the great sacrificial suffering that Jesus endured so that the extent of it actually means something to us.

Third, by undergoing tough times, we can identify with and help others through them as well (2 Corinthians 1:3-7). Isn't it relieving to find someone who has walked in your shoes? Aren't you thankful for those who have gone before you through the storm? You're not alone.

Fourth, many times God allows very difficult trials as a last-resort means to share himself with individuals who are difficult to get through to otherwise. In these cases, he permits suffering because he knows that they would be better off if he does get through to them, as was Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar after he went through quite an ordeal before acknowledging God (Daniel 4:28-37). We see in Booklets 4 and 7 how God punished wayward Jews in order to restore them (Ezekiel 16 and Romans 9-11), and they ended up in a better place than where they started from as well. "It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees" (Psalm 119:71). So if you ever find yourself in a tough spot, and you realize that you've been choosing everything but God's perfect provision, God may be trying to get you back to that! Confess that sin, turn away from it, and find relief (Psalm 32:3-5)!

Finally, occasionally hard times are used by God to accomplish something far greater that would seldom happen any other way, even if the situation were explained to us beforehand. The potential positive implications of getting cancer above are good examples. Even if I were *told* that I'd get cancer, I wouldn't be as motivated to help prevent it in others or to use my limited time left for the greater good until I actually *had* cancer, right? Recall that God will accomplish his purposes in this world (Isaiah 46:10) and frequently uses "bad" things to do so when he must. Of course, the ultimate example of transforming suffering into splendor to fulfill a pretty important purpose of God's was Jesus' death and resurrection itself! But there are many others as well. For example, Joseph was nearly killed by his own brothers, sold into slavery, falsely accused of rape, and then unjustly thrown into jail

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(feel free to read the whole story in Genesis 37, 39-50). But Joseph later tells his brothers what kind of transformation God intends to produce from such suffering. “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). Because of these events, Joseph found himself in a position to save many thousands—if not millions—of people from starving to death (Genesis 41:1-57)! Likewise, God bringing Jonah through a raging storm, certain death by drowning, and part of a fish’s gastrointestinal tract resulted in a huge city repenting of sin (Jonah 1:11-3:10). And even when God decides that it’s time to end a life here, he can do it for that person’s own good (Isaiah 57:1-2), which is not hard to understand when we consider how the peace, comfort, and rest of Paradise would be a welcome alternative to the lives that some of us live here. Even right now he is active in your suffering to produce something better than what you had beforehand, as hard as that may be to believe and as long as that may seem to take. We are promised that he is just in his blessings, that he knows what is best for us, and that he will work everything out for the good of those who love him (Deuteronomy 32:4, Isaiah 48:17, Romans 8:28).

Humans won’t put a rest to suffering, so God makes the best of suffering. God is too wise and loving to merely remove suffering and leave humans with nothing, except the inevitability of choosing it again. Instead, he masterfully morphs suffering into something better, leaving humans with greater understanding, greater appreciation, greater compassion, greater fulfillment in life, and a greater legacy! And these transformations occur countless times throughout the Bible and countless times throughout our world today. Just ask around if you’ve never seen him at work, although I’d bet the farm that you have. If I had a farm, of course. What a brilliant mercy! God works for our good, even through the experience of evil that we have chosen to replace him with. We sustain suffering in us; God sustains us in suffering. Isn’t it amazing that God would constantly use the evil and difficulty that we repeatedly ask for to accomplish great and wonderful blessings that we don’t deserve?

But God gets even *more* awesome. Not only is he not to blame for human suffering, not only is he unwilling to remain justly neutral

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amidst our anguish, not only does he choose to respond to it by salvaging blessing for us through it, and not only does he do all this in spite of our continuous rebellion and unworthiness; he even *enters into* our suffering as intimately and as completely as he can. He doesn't just sympathize; he empathizes. He doesn't just help; he understands. He doesn't just work from a distance; he meets us on our turf. He doesn't just give us a plethora of biblical and contemporary supportive partners in pain (e.g. Psalm 13:1-6, 89:46-52, Habakkuk 1:1-4, Revelation 6:9-11); he comes alongside us *himself*. In the mud and in the rain. Jesus' death and resurrection brought God's solution for us, but Jesus' life brought God's empathy for us, another reason that God came to live as a human. He was tempted in every way that we are, and he suffered in ways greater than we will ever know (Hebrews 2:18, 4:13, Mark 15:12-37, Isaiah 53:3-11). Even now, his Holy Spirit continues to suffer and sympathize within those who welcome his company into their lives. "The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26). God the Son came to suffer alongside us and God the Holy Spirit comes to suffer within us, always there, right where we are amidst trials and tribulations! He *never* forces us to face affliction without him; only we can choose to do that.

Don't! God is the one individual who truly knows all the circumstances surrounding what you're going through, who will always keep them confidential, and who always knows the wisest solution. Remember, he longs to give you the most satisfying, the richest, and the best blessings, but choosing to know him instead of evil is up to you. Perhaps if we acknowledge and embrace his unfathomable love that we don't deserve instead of accusing him in ways that he doesn't deserve, we'll find that our suffering becomes something we decreasingly fear or worry about (Jeremiah 17:7-8). Perhaps even something we find no justification for complaining about at all! We'll find contentment, which is a whole lot better than bitterness and anger, isn't it? Paul, who suffered an awful lot more than almost anyone reading this book, writes, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in

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any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength” (2 Corinthians 11:23-33, Philippians 4:12-13). God is always working and walking with you to turn grief into growth and sorrow into satisfaction, leaving us with no reason to be discontent.

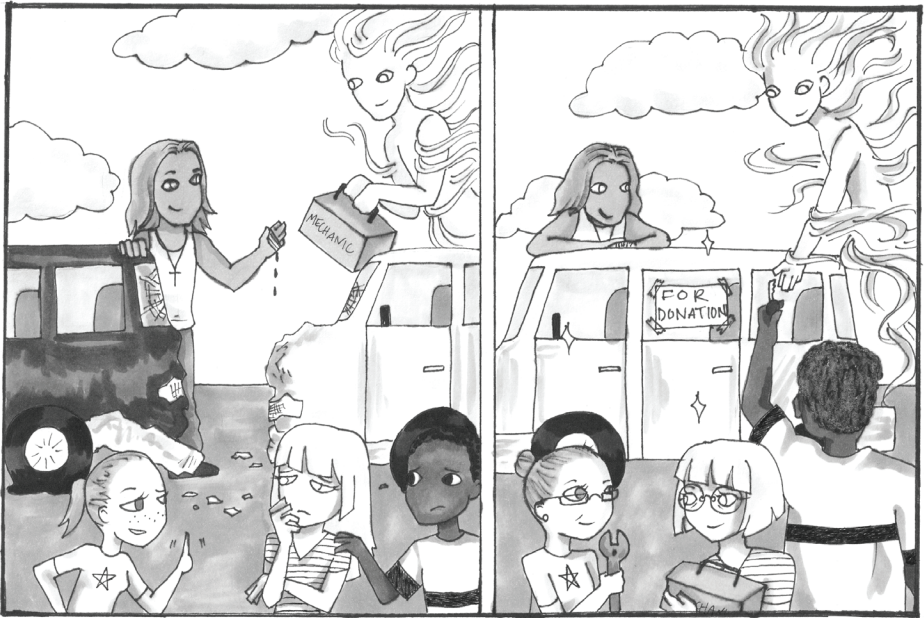
But God still has a reason, and there is still one thing left for him to do so that *he* can be content with his response to suffering. His purpose for us is to choose to enjoy perfect community with him forever. There can be no human suffering in perfect community. Therefore, even though God doesn't cause suffering, even though he brings forth beauty and maturity from suffering, even though he can empathetically encourage us in our suffering, and even though we may be content in his vast undeserved love, he cannot accomplish his purpose for us if we take our suffering to Heaven. The final words of God's response to human suffering are none other than the message of Jesus that makes it possible for us to be made forgiven, perfect, and therefore free of the experience of evil and suffering. Only when Heaven is available to humans—and still remains Heaven—is God satisfied, for only then can those who choose to fulfill their purpose enter into perfect community with him. Such hope allows them to realize how transient earthly suffering truly is—even when it feels quite the opposite—because it will give way to eternal freedom from it (Romans 8:18)! Human suffering loses and God wins in every step of the process.

God is never ultimately to blame for suffering, God produces good through it even at this moment, God offers aid from it, God enables contentment despite it, God empathetically immerses himself in it, and God promises banishment of it from Heaven forever for those who truly desire to give it up! And none of us deserve any of that. God never wanted suffering; we keep asking for it. God makes Heaven unmistakable in this life by using his people to alleviate it, and he will make Heaven unmistakable forever by using his power to expel it. In the end, the question of how God is so absent in suffering is overwhelmed by the realization of how God is so awesome in suffering, both in a healed eternal hereafter and in healing every moment here after!

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When you truly know the King of Spring, you won't have to force yourself to generate life from decay and fruit from faith; you already will be doing those things. And the more you know about what God values, the more you will value God. He gives love to the undeserving, he creates growth from grief, he offers empathy alongside us, and he invites us to say good-bye to the cold, dead winter of suffering forever!

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A Christian girl has made a mistake. Two other young Christians are with her, one comforting and the other shaming hypocritically, as her prior jealousy of the girl actually leads her to take pleasure in the girl's suffering. The girl has already recognized that Jesus has taken the hit for her mistake, so he reminds her of the Holy Spirit's presence. Not satisfied to merely remove the wreckage and leave the girl without a net gain, the Holy Spirit equips the three Christians to transform suffering into something more fruitful. His presence and gifts are the tools needed for all three to bring healing to the girl's predicament. Jesus had helped when he was hurt, and the girl learned to value such a good-natured deed, assimilating it into her own life. What she now has is given back to God, so that the Holy Spirit would not only bring spring to her, but to others as well. Hypocrisy is eventually replaced by use of and appreciation for the gifts and blessings God offers people. With the Holy Spirit's saving presence and work, all three find themselves persisting in good deeds throughout their lives, offering unmistakable glimpses of Heaven from a salvation that cannot be lost.

Notes

1. Russell, J.B. (2006). *Paradise Misaid: How We Lost Heaven and How We Can Regain It*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc, p. 159.
2. Morehead, A., Morehead, L. (1981). *The New American Webster Handy College Dictionary*. New York, NY: Penguin Books USA Inc. p. 62.
3. The argument has been made—in *Love Wins* for example—that Hell and Heaven are actually present on earth right now, not clearly distinguishable from the Hell and Heaven that pertain to the afterlife. “Heaven and hell, here, now, around us, upon us, within us.”⁴ Apparently here on earth, “we create hell whenever we fail to trust God’s retelling of our story.”⁵ As for Heaven, “When Jesus talked about heaven, he was talking about our present eternal, intense, real experiences of joy, peace, and love in this life, this side of death and in the age to come. Heaven for Jesus wasn’t just ‘someday,’ it was a present reality.”⁶ However, it’s also claimed that “when Jesus spoke of heaven, he was referring to the future coming together of heaven and earth.”⁷ So, which is it? Is Heaven now or later? Is Jesus contradicting himself, or is the argument contradicting itself? And if Heaven is both now *and* later, what’s the difference? Well, there really can’t be any difference at all, because the argument assumes that humans will always have the free will to sin. “For there to be love, there has to be the option, *both now and then*, to not love.” “That’s how love works. It can’t be forced, manipulated, or coerced. It *always* leaves room for the other to decide. God says yes, we can have what we want, because love wins.”⁸⁻⁹ This means that people could transfer from Hell to Heaven, a central assertion of *Love Wins*, but it also means that people could transfer from Heaven to Hell. Apparently our sins will be “prohibited and removed” in the “later” Heaven, but we are never told how.¹⁰ God certainly can’t keep us from sinning, because love “always” wins, “both now and then!” And if we can sin there just like we can sin here, with people constantly flip-flopping between Hell and Heaven and Heaven and Hell, how

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can the “later” earth, Hell, and Heaven be distinguishable at all? They can’t, just as the alleged “now” earth, Hell, and Heaven are indistinguishable. We will discover how the Bible’s Heaven solves this problem in Booklet 8. A temporary Hell and a “stay as long as you please” Heaven doom us all to an earth/Hell/Heaven that’s essentially the same as humanity’s current situation, except it lasts forever.¹¹ Woo hoo.

To illustrate this present/future earth/Hell/Heaven “hope,” we are offered “The Parable of the Lost Son” (Luke 15:11-32). In a nutshell, the story is about a rebellious son who eventually returns to his forgiving father, which makes another son jealous. Feel free to read the whole thing, as I want you to be able to evaluate what I say. The claim is that “in this story, heaven and hell are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other.”¹² Aside from making Hell and Heaven totally pointless if they are within each other and exist in the same place, we bump up against a much bigger problem. Unless sinning and evil exist in the biblical Heaven—and they don’t—there is no trace of either Hell or Heaven in this parable, literally or symbolically. This story is clearly about one person’s salvation, God’s mercy, and another person’s difficulties with that. No mention of Hell, Heaven, or the hereafter at all. Not even a hint. Apparently, to prove that the actual Hell and the actual Heaven “are within each other, intertwined, interwoven, bumping up against each other” here on earth, all we need to do is find a story that occurs on earth containing something bad and something good. This is the argument we’re given, and the story can even be a parable that doesn’t mention Hell, Heaven, or the hereafter at all! There’s not even an emotional reason to submit to this argument, since such an earth/Hell/Heaven can never be anything different than the world we live in right now! Why would you devote yourself to a hereafter that can only ever lead you to a place you’re already at without it? And why would God devote himself to such an after-life where he can’t fulfill his purpose for us and therefore doesn’t get his way?

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As we'll continue to see, this current earth and God's New Earth are completely separate entities altogether: life in this age versus eternal life in the age to come (Luke 18:30). Paul contrasts life in this age with "the life that is truly life" in "the coming age" (1 Timothy 6:17-19). God's Heaven is new, different, intimate, exciting, and perfect. Forever. *Love Wins'* earth/Hell/Heaven is old, the same, fragmented, monotonous, and flawed. Forever. God's good news is better than that. Ironically, the book unknowingly acknowledges the futility and inconsistency of such a place. After it summarizes this concept of Heaven, it challenges us to "try and paint *that*," as if its cacophony of dual Hells and Heavens here, there, and everywhere is impossible to demonstrate.¹³ It's right, it *is* impossible, at least biblically! So when I claimed that the more we think and act like God, the more like Heaven earth gets, I obviously don't mean Heaven itself comes to earth. I mean that God uses the good works that our faith and relationship with him generate to make the world more like Heaven and less like Hell, more like how earth was originally intended to be and less like how it became.

4. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 190.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 173.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
11. Lewis, C.S. (1946). *The Great Divorce*. New York, NY: Touchstone, p. 29.
12. Bell, R. (2011). *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, p. 170.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

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14. Brooks, A. (1 Oct 2003). "Religious Faith and Charitable Giving". *Policy Review*. Retrieved on 30 Jan 2013 from: <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policy-review/article/6577#nogo>

