



Why Do Bad Things Happen?

Here's how to handle
one of life's toughest
questions.



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That Haunting Question

By Karen Arneson

"God's in control—it will all turn out OK."

"God will protect your baby, you just need to have faith."

"God has good plans for you—to prosper you, not to harm you. You need to trust His promises."



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These were just a few of the well-intentioned words of encouragement people in my church family offered me as my husband and I navigated two long months of worry during my first pregnancy. We'd learned that our baby's brain development wasn't within normal limits; tests revealed that he may have a mentally disabling and lifethreatening problem.

Though I appreciated my friends' attempts to offer reassuring words—trust me, I felt *desperate* for reassurance—they rang hollow. I knew the platitudes weren't quite true. God *might* allow my son to have a damaged brain, or worse. Things *don't* always "turn out OK" and God doesn't guarantee that if we just trust Him hard enough, there will be a happy ending. After all, I knew devoted, prayerful Christians whose children had birth defects.

I eventually got the news I'd longed for: my baby's brain development turned out to be healthy and within normal limits. But during those months of tests and waiting, I'd faced an important reality: we don't decide God's trustworthy once we can look back at a situation and say everything turned out OK. God calls us to trust Him *before* the "happy ending." We're called to trust Him during those moments when we know in our gut that things may turn out horribly and painfully wrong.

The truth is that God *does* allow bad things to happen, from personal hardships to national tragedies and disasters. No amount of great faith will prevent tragedy from touching us. And if our belief is built on the false hope that God will always keep us safe and happy, it





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will be a faith that won't pass the test of life. Jesus promised, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33). But alongside that declaration of reality stands another truth from Scripture, "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...Do not be afraid, for I am with you" (Isaiah 43:2, 5).

Events of war, horrors of terrorism, and devastating tragedies like the recent campus shooting at Virginia Tech University, force us to face the haunting question: "Why does God let bad things happen?" In the following articles, you'll wrestle through this issue with those who've endured painful personal tragedies; you'll explore the theological issues involved in this question; and you'll consider ways God can use bad things in our lives to develop our relationship with Him and enable us to minister to others.

Whether you're facing a tough time now or you simply want to understand this difficult question better in order to prepare yourself for future hardships, in these articles you'll find encouragement and inspiration from the lives of people who've clung to God's love and presence in times of pain.

Blessings,

Karen Arneson

Contributing Editor, KYRIA downloads,
Christianity Today International





How to use “Why Do Bad Things Happen?” for a group study

“**W**hy Do Bad Things Happen?” can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

1. **Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
2. **Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
3. **Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
4. **Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
5. **When working through the “Reflect” questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
6. **End the session in prayer.**

Mourning a Miscarriage



When we lost our baby, I was haunted by the question *why?*

By Laura L. Mills

I knew the bright red blood shouldn't be there. The day before, I'd discovered that I was certainly six weeks pregnant. Now, as I stared at the widening stain of blood that soaked through my pajamas, my stomach tightened and my neck burned.

No, God! I want to be a mother!

In a matter of seconds, I hurried from the bathroom, woke my husband, and dialed my physician. The diagnosis: spontaneous miscarriage.



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"Is there anything we can do?" I squeaked.

"Unfortunately, no," my ob/gyn replied. "I'm sorry."

The date was March 9, 2003. I'd awoken, pregnant, at 6 A.M. I'd thanked God for answering my prayers, wondered whether the baby was a boy or a girl, and dreamed about what my child would look like at his or her birth in October.

When I hung up the phone, the clock read 7:30 A.M.

And my baby was dead.

When God Says "No"

My body recovered almost immediately. However, my spirit writhed during the months that followed. I'd always pictured God as the religious equivalent of a fairy godfather, a granter of wishes who gives us the important things we pray for.. For six hopeful months, I'd begged Him to let us have a baby. Now I brooded over the fact He'd responded with a "no." It was more than God taking His time with our baby's conception; our baby actually had died. How much more obvious could a "no" be?

While I never thought God caused my miscarriage, I despaired over realizing the same God who said, "Seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7) had allowed it to happen. I wondered if perhaps I'd prayed wrongly when I asked Him for a baby, or if I hadn't prayed enough. Did God even care that I'd prayed? With the world so full of trouble, perhaps my prayers were too insignificant for God's attention.





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Or maybe, I thought as tears flowed day after day, God didn't want me to have a baby at all.

I found little solace in the world around me. Though relatively common, miscarriage is a topic whispered around obstetricians' offices and rarely discussed in a society that regards the unborn—especially at the earliest stages of pregnancy—as disposable nonentities. Many people undermined my feelings with platitudes like "You can always get pregnant again" or "These things just happen." But I believe human life begins at conception; my unborn child was a person with a soul. The loss of that unique person left an enormous void in my life, leaving me physically and emotionally empty, and lonelier than I'd ever been before. The only thing I could do was cry.

Since my childhood I'd been taught to turn to God at such times, but I figured I already knew His opinion on the matter. I couldn't ask Him for help—after all, I knew He wouldn't return my baby to me. What I wanted from Him now was an answer: I wanted to know why He'd allowed my baby to die. The question plagued me. I read book after book about miscarriage. I half expected a clue to turn up every time I answered the phone or checked the mail, but none did.

Glimpses of Grace

By summer, an invitation to a friend's baby shower and the knowledge that I would have been halfway through my pregnancy accentuated my loss. One day at work, I noticed a thank-you note posted beside a colleague's





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desk. The card included Isaiah 55:8, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord."

I read the words several times and marveled at their timeliness. Had I seen them by chance or was God speaking to me? Hoping for the latter, I decided to give God another chance. Maybe I didn't understand Him as well as I'd thought I did. During the next several months I prayed for greater faith and deeper understanding. I wasn't sure what to expect. In the meantime, my grief continued. Every time I looked in the mirror, I wondered how large my pregnant belly would have been. When I walked past our empty spare bedroom—I couldn't bear to go in—I wondered how we would have decorated it as our baby's nursery. What names would we have considered? Would we have learned out baby's gender by now? Would our baby have looked more like my husband, or me? Oh, how I wished March 9, 2003 had never happened.

At the same time, through a support group and a network of friends, I met other women who'd lost their babies as well. Their stories showed me no matter how hard you pray, tragedies happen—even to good, God-fearing people. In other words, I wasn't the only Christian woman to whom God had said "no." In these women I found compassion and validation of my continued grief. And in their desire to hold onto the remnants of their faith, I found the courage to gather mine and—with God's help—to rebuild it.





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I stopped looking for answers and started looking for God himself. To my amazement, I found Him. I suddenly recognized Him in my husband, James, who never gave up trying to comfort me. I also recognized God in some family members and friends who, though they admittedly didn't understand my feelings, always listened when I cried. God spoke from the pages of the books I read about grief and healing. And as I closed my eyes and imagined Him with my baby in His arms, He showed me a peace beyond any I'd ever known.

Moving Forward

The void in my life still exists and it always will. Nothing will ever replace my child who died on March 9, 2003, who should have been born that October. And nothing will ever cause me to cease wondering about my child's gender, looks, personality, and future. As the months roll by, I wonder what my baby, my "Little Soul," would be doing now. I continue to wonder why God allowed him or her to die in light of my prayers.

But despite my lingering questions, I've learned important lessons, too. God isn't a fairy godfather; He's a teacher. And He's with me as I grieve my loss. As I continue to look for Him in the people and the world around me, I find the grace of His touch. God says it Himself in Isaiah 49:15, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you."





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My faith tells me that, in the midst of what I perceive as the upheaval of my life, God has everything under control. It tells me that He, more than anyone, feels my pain, understands the void my miscarriage left, and counts my tears. It reassures me I'm never alone. And it tells me that as long as I remain open to God, He'll continue rebuilding my heart—still, and ever-more, the heart of a mother—one piece at a time.

Laura L. Mills is a writer who lives in Illinois. This article first appeared in the January/February 2007 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *Can you relate to the author's feelings and questions? If so, how?*
- *When have events or tough circumstances in your life caused you to wonder why? How did the difficulty you faced negatively impact your view of God or your relationship with Him?*
- *How do you respond to Isaiah 55:8? Does it bring you comfort? Frustration? Serenity? How can this passage help you face tragedy, pain, or heartache in your life?*



My New View of God



How devastating tragedy affected one man's relationship with God.

By Marshall Shelley

Within a three-month period, Marshall and Susan Shelley saw two of their children die. In November 1991, son Toby succumbed to birth defects after two minutes of life. Then in February 1992, daughter Mandy, almost 2, died of pneumonia. Here Marshall, LEADERSHIP's senior editor, reflects on how these losses have affected his relationship with God.

After losing two children, and four years of reflection, I see some aspects of God's character in much sharper focus than before, while others are still behind a glass dimly.



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Serving God Demands More

I hadn't realized the cost of discipleship. God assigns some people incredibly tough situations.

Since our two children died, I can't help but pause and wince each time I read the Bible and see afresh the ordeals children faced, often at the hand of God. Sometimes His ways are severe.

At God's direction, Ishmael and his mother are evicted from their home into the desert. Young Isaac is bound as a human sacrifice (though soon released). All firstborn sons of the Egyptians are slain by the death angel. Job's children (though probably grown) are killed in Satan's test, sanctioned by God.

And this doesn't include the children killed in God's broader judgments, such as the flood of Noah's day, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, or the conquest of Canaan.

In the story of David and Bathsheba, the adultery and the murder of Uriah no longer hold much interest for me—simply more evidence of human sinfulness. Now I fixate on God's treatment of the two sons produced by David and Bathsheba's union—one, a nameless son, died as God's judgment on David's sin; the second, Jedidiah (meaning "loved by God"), became Solomon and enjoyed God's most lavish blessing. I ponder that first son's destiny—dying as punishment for David's sin, even though David apparently didn't grieve his death.





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In Matthew, all boys in Bethlehem under age 2 are murdered, in fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy.

In John, in front of a man blind since birth, Jesus is asked if this suffering is due to the man's own sins or to those of his parents. Jesus explains it is neither but rather "that the work of God might be displayed in his life." A childhood of blindness for God's greater glory? That answer-especially from Jesus, known for His love of children-causes me to tremble.

Ultimately, of course, God's own Son is sent to die upon a cross.

Living for God's glory is not for sissies.

The only way I can gaze upon such severe treatment of children, without becoming catatonic, is trusting that God's purposes require a stiff price. Redemption must be ever so much costlier than I imagine. Earth's contamination by sin must be so severe that equally strong medicine is required.

And even trusting God's purpose, I still occasionally flinch.

Eternity is Nearer

Before my children died, I considered the doctrines of resurrection and heaven pleasant but remote, and a bit quaint. Now, they are central and strategic.





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As I held both Toby and Mandy within seconds of their deaths, I was overwhelmed by a sense of how close every one of us is to eternity. I was cheek to cheek with a child now entering everlasting life. That sense, though sometimes overshadowed by the busyness of life, is never far away.

Many times now, heaven seems so much more substantial than earth. My wife, Susan, sometimes says, "I have one foot in heaven and one foot on earth." We've already sent part of ourselves on ahead and we better understand what Jesus meant when He said, "Where your treasure is, there will your hearts be also." Our hearts are continually drawn heavenward.

While I still dread the process of dying, the fact that my children have preceded me gives me greater resolve. If my child can go through death's door, certainly I can.

A friend put the issue clearly: "To enter eternity, you must (1) be born, and (2) die. That's the process for every one of us, including Mandy and Toby." After your child enters eternity, it seems amazingly close.

Prayer is Less Specific, More Intense

After desperate pleas for our children's healing, for the ability to swallow, for lungs to breathe, for an end to seizures- and then to see Toby and Mandy's days on earth end-my prayer life has changed.

It's harder to confidently make specific requests. It's now clear that God's redemptive agenda may, or may not, include granting my current passionate desire even a passionate desire for my child to breathe.





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The day after Toby's birth/death, one of the labor-and-delivery nurses gave us a cassette by Wayne Watson; the title song, "Home Free," described us with uncanny accuracy.

God's clear answer to our prayers was not to provide additional heartbeats. It was "Toby and Mandy will live-but with resurrected bodies in heaven with Me." If His answer was so much deeper than what we requested, then it's hard not to imagine Him also reconfiguring our more mundane requests about jobs, relationships, schedules, and surgeries.

Now, I'm not sure I even want Him to grant my daily wish list. What I really want is to see God's eternal work and to be a part of it. Prayer is now an intense desire to know God, to understand His ways, and to see good come out of pain.

Faith is More Intentional

Do you remember the classical distinction between virtue and innocence? Virtue, unlike innocence, has successfully passed a point of temptation.

Perhaps a similar distinction can be found in faith- innocent faith can trust God because it hasn't seen the abyss; virtuous faith has known the terror and chooses to trust God.

As Abraham Heschel observed, "Job's faith was unshakable because it was the result of being shaken."





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Even as a child, I loved to read, and I quickly learned that I would most likely be confused during the opening chapters of a novel. New characters were introduced. Disparate, seemingly random events took place. Subplots were complicated and didn't seem to make any sense in relation to the main plot.

But I learned to keep reading. Why? Because you know that the author will weave them all together by the end of the book. Eventually, each element will be meaningful.

At times, such faith has to be a conscious choice.

Even when I can't explain why a chromosomal abnormality develops in my son, which prevents him from living on earth more than two minutes ...

Even when I can't fathom why our daughter has to endure two years of severe and profound retardation and continual seizures ...

I choose to trust that before the book closes, the Author will make things clear. And to remember His words through the prophet: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" (Jer. 29:11, NKJV).

Clinging to that promise, even when the weight of sorrow makes our knees buckle, makes faith intentional and, I trust, unshakable.

Marshall Shelley is senior editor of Leadership Journal. This article first appeared the October 1996 issue of LEADERSHIP JOURNAL.





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Reflect

- *The author cites several biblical tragedies that God allowed to happen, such as the death of all the Egyptian first-born children. What other biblical accounts of tragedy or trial are difficult for you to swallow? Why?*
- *How do you usually react to pain and hardship? How do you most often respond to God when bad things happen in your life?*
- *The author explains that after his children's deaths, "my prayer life has changed. It's harder to confidently make specific requests. It's now clear that God's redemptive agenda may, or may not, include granting my current passionate desire—even a passionate desire for my child to breathe." What might it look like to pray honestly about your feelings and desires, yet at the same time surrender yourself to God's plans—even if those plans may involve pain or tragedy?*



Can God Be Trusted?

What do God's promises of protection mean in the face of tragedy and suffering?

By Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.



Many adults can recall a certain childhood feeling that has now pretty much faded away. Unhappily, one of the things that fades away is a feeling of security in the nest. It's a sense that you are loved, protected, and perfectly safe. It's a sense, above all, that somebody else is in charge. In properly functioning homes, children often have this feeling. Adults do not, and they miss it.



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When you are a child, and if your family is running the right way, your burdens are usually small. You can go to bed without worrying about ice backup under your shingles. You don't wonder if the tingling in your leg might be a symptom of some exotic nerve disease. You don't wrestle half the night with a tax deduction you claimed, wondering whether a federal investigator might find it a little too creative. No, you squirm deliciously in your bed, drowsily aware of the murmur of adult conversations elsewhere in the house. You hover wonderfully at the edge of slumber. Then you let go and fall away.

You dare to do this not only because you fully expect that in the morning you shall be resurrected. You also dare to do it because you are sleeping under your parents' wings. If parents take proper care of you, you can give yourself up to sleep, secure in the knowledge that somebody else is in charge; somebody big and strong and experienced. As far as children know, parents stay up all night, checking doors and windows, adjusting temperature controls, fearlessly driving away marauders. They never go off duty. If a shadow falls over the house, or demons begin to stir, or a storm rises- parents will handle it. That's one reason children sleep so well. Their nest is sheltered and feathered.

I think children might be alarmed to discover how much adults crave this same sense of security. Adults need to be sheltered, warmed, embraced. Some of us have been betrayed. Some of us have grown old and are not happy about it.





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People get betrayed, or they get old or sick. Some are deeply disappointed that their lives have not turned out as they had hoped. Others have been staggered by a report that has just come back from a pathology lab. Still others are unspeakably ignored by people they treasure. Some are simply high-tension human beings, strung tight as piano wire.

To all such people, the psalmist speaks a word of comfort. It is one of the great themes of the Scriptures: God is our shelter. "He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge" (Ps. 91:4, NRSV).

The image here is that of an eagle, or maybe a hen, in any case, it's a picture of a bird that senses danger and then protectively spreads its wings over its young. An expert on birds once told me that this move is very common. A bird senses the approach of a predator, or the threat of something falling from above, and instinctively spreads out its wings like a canopy. The fledglings scuttle underneath for shelter. The move is so deeply instinctive that an adult bird will spread those wings even when no fledglings are around.

And the psalmist—who has almost surely seen this happen—thinks of God. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge. The point is that God is our shelter when the winds begin to howl; under God's providence we are defended, protected, perfectly safe—someone else is in charge—someone big, strong, and experienced, who never goes off duty.





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In one of his books, John Timmer, my former pastor, tells of his experience as a boy in the Netherlands at the start of World War II. German troops had invaded Holland a few days before, but nobody knew what to expect. Then, on the second Sunday of May 1940, as the Timmer family was sitting around the dinner table in their home in Haarlem, they suddenly heard the eerie whining of an air-raid siren and then the droning of German bombers.

Of course, all of them were scared out of their minds. "Let's go stand in the hallway," John's father said. "They say it's the safest place in the house." Once in the hall, John's father suggested, "Why don't we pray? There's nothing else we can do."

John says he has long ago forgotten the exact wording of his father's prayer—all except for one phrase. Somewhere in that prayer to God to protect his family from Hitler's Luftwaffe, Mr. Timmer said, "O God, in the shadow of Your wings we take refuge."

God spreads His wings over us. Here is a picture that all the Jewish and Christian generations have cherished, in part because it invites us to recover our childhood feeling of security in the nest. Or, to discover it for the first time if we have had a terrorized childhood. It's a picture that offers sublime comfort, and only a pretty numb Christian would fail to be touched by it.

Still, a disturbing question pricks us. How true is the picture of a sheltering God? How secure are we in the nest? I wonder whether in 1940, on the second Sunday of May, some other Dutch family begged God to spread His





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wings over their house. And I wonder if a German bomb pierced those wings and blew that house and its people to rubble.

You read Psalm 91 and begin to wonder. It offers such comprehensive coverage. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge. ... You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, or the pestilence that stalks in darkness, or the destruction that wastes at noonday.

Really? I need not fear any of these things? I can sleep in a dangerous neighborhood with my windows open? I shall not fear the terror of the night? My child's temperature soars and his white blood count plummets- I shall not fear the pestilence that stalks in darkness? I can plunge into my work at an AIDS clinic- I shall not fear the destruction that wastes at midday? Really? Is there a level of faith that can honestly say such things, even after all allowance has been made for poetic exaggeration?

Let's face the truth. Faith in the sheltering wings of God does not remove physical danger or the need for precaution against it. We cannot ignore tourist advisories, or feed wild animals on our camping trips, or jump a hot motorcycle over a row of parked cars and trust God to keep us safe. We cannot smoke cigarettes like the Marlboro man and then claim the promises of Psalm 91 as our protection against lung cancer. A person who did these things would be a foolish believer and a foolish reader of Psalm 91.





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You may recall that in Matthew's gospel Satan quotes this psalm to Jesus in the temptation at the pinnacle of the temple. "Throw yourself down," says Satan. After all, it says right in Psalm 91 that "God will give His angels charge over you." And Jesus replies that it is not right to put God to the test. God's protection is good only for certain events, and restrictions may apply. Jesus was teaching us that we cannot act like a fool and then count on God to bail us out. God may do it—and some of us can recall times when we acted like fools and God bailed us out. But we can't count on it.

But, of course, some believers get hurt, terribly hurt, by no folly of their own. Suppose a drunk driver smashes into your family car. Suppose an I-beam falls on you in a storm. What if you make the mistake of visiting a great city during tourist hunting season?

Or suppose you are a devout middle-aged Christian woman who lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. One June you start to feel sick. So you visit your primary-care physician, who sends you for tests, and then a visit to a specialist, and then more tests. Finally you go back to your own physician, and she says, "Ma'am, I'm sorry to say that you had better get your affairs in order." She says more, far more, about treatments and research and making you as comfortable as possible and on and on with all kinds of stuff that is well-meant. But you have grown deaf. All you can think is that you are 46 years old and you are going to die before your parents do and before your children get married.





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Whatever happened to the wings of God? Can you get brain cancer under those wings? Get molested by a family member? Get knifed by some emotionless teenager in a subway in New York? Can you find, suddenly one summer, that your own 17-year-old has become a stranger and that everything in your family seems to be cascading out of control?

Where are those wings?

What troubles us is not so much the sheer fact that believers suffer along with everybody else. C. S. Lewis once pondered this. If the children of God were always saved from floods like Noah and his family; if every time somebody pointed a gun at a Christian, the gun just turned to salami; if we really had a money-back guarantee against hatred, disease, and the acts of terrorists, then we wouldn't have to worry about church growth. Our churches would fill with people attracted to the faith for secondary reasons. These are people who want an insurance agent, not God. We already have people becoming Christians because they want to get rich or get happy. What would happen to people's integrity if becoming a believer really did give you blanket protection against poverty, accident, and the wages of sin?

No, it's not the fact that we have to take our share of the world's suffering that surprises us. After all, our experience and the rest of Scripture have taught us to expect hardship. What worries us is that Psalm 91 tells us not to worry. It says "a thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." This is advertising that sounds too good to be true. In





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fact, the psalmist says, "Because you have made the Lord your refuge ... no evil shall befall you." And the statement troubles us. What about Paul? What about Stephen? What about our Lord Himself? He wanted to gather the citizens of Jerusalem as a hen gathers her chicks. But some of those citizens took Him outside of town one day and nailed His wings to some two-by-fours.

So what is going on in Psalm 91? How are its extravagant promises God's Word to us?

What Psalm 91 does is express one—one of the loveliest, one of the most treasured—but just one of the moods of faith. It's a mood of exuberant confidence in the sheltering providence of God. Probably the psalmist has been protected by God in some dangerous incident, and he is celebrating.

On other days, and in other moods—in other and darker seasons of his life—this same psalmist might have called to God out of despair and a sense of abandonment. Remember that when our Lord was crucified, when our Lord shouted at our God, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"—when Jesus shouted this, remember that He was quoting another psalm (22). Despair or astonishment at what can happen to us under God's providence—that too is natural and biblical.

Psalm 91 gives us only part of the picture and only one of the moods of faith. With a kind of quiet amazement, the psalmist bears witness that under the wings of God good things happen to bad people. You need another psalm or two to fill in the picture, to cry out that under those same wings sometimes bad things happen to good people.





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Psalm 91 says no evil shall befall us. When we have hashed out some of the poetry and then added in the witness of the rest of Scripture, what we get, I believe, is the conclusion that no final evil shall ever befall us. We know that we can believe God with all our heart, and yet have our heart broken by the loss of a child or the treachery of a spouse or the menace of a fatal disease. We know this is true—everyone in the church knows it. And yet, generation after generation of bruised saints have known something else and spoken of it. In the mystery of faith, we find a hand on us in the darkness, a voice that calls our name, and the sheer certainty that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God—not for this life and not for the life to come. We may be scarred and shaken, but, as Lewis Smedes says in one of his luminous sermons, we come to know that it's all right, even when everything is all wrong.

We are like fledglings who scuttle under the wings of their parent. The forces of evil beat on those wings with everything they have. The pitchfork of the Evil One, falling tree limbs in the storm, merciless rain and hail—everything beats on those wings. When it is finished, when evil has done its worst, those wings are all bloodied and busted and hanging at wrong angles. And, to tell you the truth, in all the commotion we too get roughed up quite a lot.

But we are alright, because those wings have never folded. They are spread out to be wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities. And when the feathers stop flying, we peep out and discover that we have been in the only place that was not leveled. Yes, we have been bumped and bruised and hurt. Sometimes badly hurt. But the other choice was to be killed—the other choice was to break out





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of the embrace of God. If we had not stayed under those wings, we could never have felt the body shudders and heard the groans of the One who loved us so much that those wings stayed out there no matter what came whistling in. This is the One who protects us from final evil, now and in the life to come—the life in which, at last, it is safe for God to fold His wings.

He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you will find refuge. It's not a simple truth, but it is the truth. And we ought to believe it with everything that is in us.

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., is dean of the chapel at Calvin Theological Seminary and author of Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin (Eerdmans). This article adapted from "Can God Be Trusted?" which first appeared in the June 1998 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.





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Can God Be Trusted?

Reflect

- *When bad things happen to us, to our loved ones, or to our fellow man, can we still trust in God as a sovereign protector? If so, what does God's protection really mean?*
- *Read Psalm 91. In what ways have you experienced God's protection from bad things happening to you or your loved ones? Now read Psalm 22 and consider times you may have felt that God did not protect you as you would have liked.*
- *The author reminds us that "No final evil shall befall us. We know that we can believe God with all our heart and yet have our heart broken by the loss of a child or the treachery of a spouse or the menace of a fatal disease... [Yet] we find a hand on us in the darkness, a voice that calls our name, and the sheer certainty that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God—not for this life and not for the life to come." When have you experienced this type of hope in God, despite the sense that "everything is all wrong" in your life or in the world?*



Where is God When it Hurts?



A sermon given on the Virginia Tech campus two weeks after the shootings.

By Philip Yancey

We gather here still trying to make sense of what happened in Blacksburg, still trying to process the unprocessable. We come together in this place, as a Christian community, partly because we know of no better place to bring our questions and our grief and partly because we don't know where else to turn. As the apostle Peter once said to Jesus, in a moment of confusion and doubt, "Lord, to whom else can we go?"



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In considering how to begin today, I found myself following two different threads. The first thread is what I would like to say, the words I wish I could say. The second thread is the truth.

I wish I could say that the pain you feel will disappear, vanish, never to return. I'm sure you've heard comments like these from parents and others: "Things will get better." "You'll get past this." "This too shall pass." Those who offer such comfort mean well, and it's true that what you feel now you will not always feel. Yet, it's also true that what happened on April 16, 2007, will stay with you forever. You are a different person because of that day, because of one troubled young man's actions.

I remember one year when three of my friends died. In my thirties then, I had little experience with death. In the midst of my grief, I came across these lines from George Herbert that gave me solace: "Grief melts away / Like snow in May / As if there were no such cold thing." I clung to that hope, even as grief smothered me like an avalanche. Indeed, the grief did melt away but, like snow, it also came back, in fierce and unexpected ways, triggered by a sound, a smell, some fragment of memory of my friends.

So I cannot say what I want to say, that this too shall pass. Instead, I point to the pain you feel, and will continue to feel, as a sign of life and love. I'm wearing a neck brace because I broke my neck in an auto accident. For the first few hours as I lay strapped to a body board, medical workers refused to give me pain medication because they needed my response. The doctor kept





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probing, moving my limbs, asking, "Does this hurt? Do you feel that?" The correct answer, the answer both he and I desperately wanted, was, "Yes. It hurts. I can feel it." Each sensation gave proof that my spinal cord had not been severed. Pain offered proof of life, of connection—a sign that my body remained whole.

Love and Pain

In grief, love and pain converge. Cho felt no grief as he gunned down your classmates because he felt no love for them. You feel grief because you did have a connection. Some of you had closer ties to the victims, but all of you belong to a body to which they too belonged. When that body suffers, you suffer. Remember that as you cope with the pain. Don't try to numb it. Instead, acknowledge it as a perception of life and of love.

Medical students will tell you that in a deep wound, two kinds of tissue must heal- the connective tissue beneath the surface and the outer, protective layer of skin. If the protective tissue heals too quickly, the connective tissue will not heal properly, leading to complications later on. The reason this church and other ministries on campus offer counseling and hold services like this one is to help the deep, connective tissue heal. Only later will the protective layer of tissue grow back in the form of a scar.

We gather here as Christians, and as such we aspire to follow a man who came from God 2,000 years ago. Read through the Gospels, and you'll find only one scene in which someone addresses Jesus directly as God: "My Lord and my God!" Do you know who said that? It was doubting Thomas, the disciple stuck in grief, the last holdout against believing the incredible news of the Resurrection.





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In a tender scene, Jesus appeared to Thomas in his newly transformed body, obliterating Thomas's doubts. What prompted that outburst of belief, however—"My Lord and my God!"—was the presence of Jesus' scars. "Feel my hands," Jesus told him. "Touch my side." In a flash of revelation, Thomas saw the wonder of Almighty God, the Lord of the universe, stooping to take on our pain.

God doesn't exempt even Himself from pain. God joined us and shared our human condition, including its great grief. Thomas recognized in that pattern the most foundational truth of the universe: that God is love. To love means to hurt, to grieve. Pain is a mark of life.

The Jews, schooled in the Old Testament, had a saying: "Where Messiah is, there is no misery." After Jesus, you could change that saying to: "Where misery is, there is the Messiah." "Blessed are the poor," Jesus said, and those who hunger and thirst, and those who mourn, and those who are persecuted. Jesus voluntarily embraced every one of these hurts.

So where is God when it hurts? We know where God is because He came to earth and showed us His face. You need only follow Jesus around and note how He responded to the tragedies of His day: with compassion—which simply means "to suffer with"—and with comfort and healing.

I would also like to answer the question *why*? Why this campus rather than Virginia Commonwealth or William and Mary? Why these 33 people? I cannot tell you, and I encourage you to resist anyone who offers a confident answer. God Himself did not answer that question for Job,





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nor did Jesus answer why questions. We have hints, but no one knows the full answer. What we do know, with full confidence, is how God feels. We know how God looks on the campus of Virginia Tech right now because God gave us a face, a face that was streaked with tears. Where misery is, there is the Messiah.

Not everyone will find that answer sufficient. When we hurt, sometimes we want revenge. We want a more decisive answer. Frederick Buechner said, "I am not the Almighty God, but if I were, maybe I would in mercy either heal the unutterable pain of the world or in mercy kick the world to pieces in its pain." God did neither. He sent Jesus. God joined our world in all its unutterable pain in order to set in motion a slower, less dramatic solution, one that involves us.

One day a man said to me, "You wrote a book called *Where Is God When It Hurts*, right?" Yes. "Well, I don't have much time to read. Can you just answer that question for me in a sentence or two?" I thought for a second and said, "I guess I'd have to answer that with another question: 'Where is the church when it hurts?'"

The eyes of the world are trained on this campus. You've seen satellite trucks parked around town, reporters prowling the grounds of your school. Last fall, I visited Amish country near the site of the Nickel Mines school shootings. As happened here, reporters from every major country swarmed the hills of Pennsylvania, looking for an angle. They came to report on evil and instead ended up reporting on the church. The Amish were not asking, "Where is God when it hurts?" They knew where God was.





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With their long history of persecution, the Amish weren't for a minute surprised by an outbreak of evil. They rallied together, embraced the killer's family, ministered to each other, and healed wounds by relying on a sense of community strengthened over centuries.

Something similar has taken place here in Blacksburg. You have shown outrage against the evil deed, yes, but you've also shown sympathy and sadness for the family of the one who committed it. Cho, too, has a memorial on this campus.

Life Matters

The future lies ahead, and you're just awakening to the fact that you are an independent moral being. Until now, other people have been running your life. Your parents told you what to do and made decisions for you. Teachers ordered you around in grammar school, and the pattern continued in high school and even into college. You now inhabit a kind of halfway house on the way to adulthood, waiting for the real life of career and, perhaps, marriage and children to begin.

What happened in Blacksburg on April 16 demonstrates beyond all doubt that your life—the decisions you make, the kind of person you are—matters now. There are 28 students and 5 faculty members who have no future in this world.

That reality came starkly home to me nine weeks ago today when I was driving on a winding road in Colorado. Suddenly, I missed a curve and my Ford Explorer slipped off the pavement and started tumbling side to side at 60





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miles per hour. An ambulance appeared, and I spent the next seven hours strapped to a body board, with duct tape across my head to keep it from moving. A cat scan showed that a vertebra high on my neck had been shattered, and sharp bone fragments were poking out next to a major artery. The hospital had a jet to fly me to Denver for emergency surgery.

I had one arm free, with a cell phone and little battery time left. I spent those tense hours calling people close to me, knowing it might be the last time I would ever hear their voices. It was an odd sensation to lie there helpless, aware that though I was fully conscious, at any moment I could die.

Samuel Johnson said when a man is about to be hanged, "it concentrates his mind wonderfully." When you're strapped to a body board after a serious accident, it concentrates the mind. When you survive a massacre at Virginia Tech, it concentrates the mind. I realized how much of my life focused on trivial things. During those seven hours, I didn't think about how many books I had sold or what kind of car I drove, it was being towed to a junkyard anyway. All that mattered boiled down to four questions. *Whom do I love? Whom will I miss? What have I done with my life? And am I ready for what's next?* Ever since that day, I've tried to live with those questions at the forefront.

I would like to promise you a long, pain-free life, but I cannot. God has not promised us that. Rather, the Christian view of the world reduces everything to this





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formula: The world is good. The world has fallen. The world will be redeemed. Creation, the Fall, redemption—that's the Christian story in a nutshell.

You know that the world is good. Look around you at the blaze of spring in the hills of Virginia. Look around you at the friends you love. Though overwhelmed with grief right now, you will learn to laugh again, to play again, to climb up mountains and kayak down rivers again, to love, to rear children. The world is good.

You know, too, that the world has fallen. Here at Virginia Tech, you know that as acutely as anyone on this planet.

I ask you also to trust that the world, your world, will be redeemed. This is not the world God wants or is satisfied with. God has promised a time when evil will be defeated, when events like the shootings at Nickel Mines and Columbine and Virginia Tech will come to an end. More, God has promised that even the scars we accumulate on this fallen planet will be redeemed, as Jesus demonstrated to Thomas.

I once was part of a small group with a Christian leader whose name you would likely recognize. He went through a hard time as his adult children got into trouble, bringing him sleepless nights and expensive attorney fees. Worse, my friend was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. Nothing in his life seemed to work out. "I have no problem believing in a good God," he said to us one night. "My question is, 'What is God good for?'" We listened to his complaints and tried various responses, but he batted them all away.





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A few weeks later, I came across a little phrase by Dallas Willard, "For those who love God, nothing irredeemable can happen to you." I went back to my friend. "What about that?" I asked. "Is God good for that promise?"

I would like to promise you an end to pain and grief, a guarantee that you will never again hurt as you hurt now. I cannot. I can, however, stand behind the promise that the apostle Paul made in Romans 8, that *all* things can be redeemed, can work together for your good. In another passage, Paul spells out some of the things he encountered, which included beatings, imprisonment, and shipwreck. As he looked back, he could see that somehow God had redeemed even those crisis events in his life.

"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us," Paul concluded. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38). God's love is the foundational truth of the universe.

Clinging to Hope

Trust a God who can redeem what now seems unredeemable. Ten days before the shootings on this campus, Christians around the world remembered the darkest day of human history, the day in which evil human beings violently rose up against God's Son and murdered the only truly innocent human being who has ever lived. We remember that day not as Dark Friday, Tragic Friday, or





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Disaster Friday—but rather as *Good* Friday. That awful day led to the salvation of the world and to Easter, an echo in advance of God's bright promise to make all things new.

Honor the grief you feel. The pain is a way of honoring those who died, your friends and classmates and professors. It represents life and love. The pain will fade over time, but it will never fully disappear.

Do not attempt healing alone. The real healing of deep connective tissue takes place in community. Where is God when it hurts? Where God's people are. Where misery is, there is the Messiah, and on this earth, the Messiah takes form in the shape of His church. That's what the body of Christ means.

Finally, cling to the hope that nothing that happens, not even this terrible tragedy, is irredeemable. We serve a God who has vowed to make all things new. J. R. R. Tolkien once spoke of "joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief." You know well the poignancy of grief. As healing progresses, may you know, too, that joy, a foretaste of the world redeemed.

Philip Yancey is a CT editor at large. This article first appeared in the June 2007 issue of CHRISTIANITY TODAY.





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Reflect

- *The author encourages the mourners at Virginia Tech to resist those who offer confident answer to the question "Why?" What is tempting about believing simplistic answer to the question, "Why did God let _____ happen?" What is often wrong with answers to this question?*
- *The author quotes Frederick Buechner as saying, "I am not the Almighty God, but if I were, maybe I would in mercy either heal the unutterable pain of the world or in mercy kick the world to pieces in its pain." When have you felt either of these responses to cruelty or suffering in the world?*
- *How does Romans 8:37-39 influence your understanding of bad things that have happened in your life? Is it true that, as the author quotes Dallas Willard, "for those who love God, nothing irredeemable can happen to you"?*



How Could God Allow Katrina?



The problem of evil forcefully reasserts itself.

By Will Reaves

As we look back at Hurricane Katrina—the dead, the injured, the displaced, the demolished homes and businesses, the political wrangling—it's clear that the aftermath of this tragedy will be with us for years. Recriminations for Katrina are continue, as the federal, state, and city governments are each being blamed for playing a role in the disaster response, and occasionally blaming each other in turn. The promises of reconstruction and hope seem, for many, to come up empty.



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For Christians, however, the primary focus should not be assigning blame but being salt and light in the midst of the crisis and ongoing needs for reconstruction and ministry. Beyond the practical help, there are two particularly pressing questions of faith. The first is, as many have asked after other natural disasters like tsunamis, earthquakes, and hurricanes, "How could God let such horrid things happen?" The second, after witnessing the breakdown of order and civility in the hours following the storm, is, "How could we let such horrid things happen?"

Both of these questions deal with what theologians call "theodicy"—the way Christianity attempts to logically defend God's existence and God's all-powerful, all-loving, and completely just nature co-existing in the face of the evil and tragic realities of this world. Theodicy wrestles with questions like: Why does God allow evil to exist? Can't God stop both human and natural evil? If He can, why doesn't He? That these perennial questions arise in response to every tragedy, war, and disaster shows the enduring nature of our doubt and the magnitude of the question. Both "natural" evil- natural disasters, disease, suffering of animals- and "human" evil- wars, genocides, injustice- mock our ability to make the reality of an omnipotent, loving God sensible in the wake of suffering.

Is Human Sin God's Design?

With human evil, the explanation comes slightly easier: God allows us freedom. Thus, we are free to choose to do evil. Dating back to Augustine of Hippo, Christian theodicy has frequently declared evil to be the lack of good, a perversion of the blessings of life and freedom that God generously granted to us. By describing evil as a





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"non-thing" Augustine absolved God of the responsibility of creating it. By making evil the result of creaturely freedom, the blame shifts to us creatures. Augustine's teachings on the inherent depravity of the human will seem particularly justified in the wake of the collapse of order in New Orleans.

As Christians, we should not respond smugly to such events; Augustine, along with more recent writers like C.S. Lewis, emphasized that Christians are frequently just as weak-hearted and needing of God's sanctifying grace. Both Lewis and Augustine agree that, as Kenneth Kantzer put it, "The Christian life then becomes a slow, painstaking, often very painful, and always infinitely complex process by which God structures within us the perfect goodness of Christ." Only by seeking and yearning for God's will to be done in our lives can we begin to combat the evils of the world.

When Blame Cannot Suffice

But even with the issue of human evil "settled," the issue of "acts of God" remains. We can plausibly blame the evils of Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot on Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot. But who could be at fault for cancer or hurricanes or earthquakes but God? How does theodicy ultimately answer the question "Why is life unfair?"

As it was in the days of Job, it is somewhat faddish to assume that even illness or sudden misfortune must somehow be the fault of the sufferer. Thus, such events are God's righteous anger bearing down upon the wicked; there is no evil or unfairness because the suffering is just punishment. But the illusion that affliction only





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happens to those who really, in some unknown way, deserve it cannot bear up under scrutiny. Kathryn Lindskoog dismantles this line of thought in *Building Your Church Through Counsel and Care*. There comes a point where the issue of blame simply must be left aside. Only then can we truly begin to serve those who are suffering.

John Stackhouse, summarizing what he calls the "challenge of evil," notes the ultimate impossibility of understanding the plan of God. He argues that trust in God must come first, and only then can we begin to learn to accept His purposes. The inherently subjective and personal nature of the problem serves to keep us humble and avoid pat answers to explain away the pain of others.

In the end, he suggests that the question "Where is God when people suffer?" was best answered by Mother Teresa, "God is there, suffering with [them]. The question really is, where are you?" The true answer to the problem of evil is not an intellectual defense of God but an active expression of Christian love. We can hope, pray, and act to show that love in the days ahead as future tragedies affect our neighbors or our nation.

Will Reaves, a graduate of Wheaton College, works as a freelancer for Christianity Today International and Tyndale House Publishers. This article first appeared in the September 2005 issue of CHRISTIAN NEWS & RESEARCH.





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Reflect

- *Natural disasters like (hurricanes, tornadoes, and tsunamis) as well as large-scale tragedies caused by humans (like terrorism, war, and genocide) both pose what theologians call "The Problem of Evil." In essence, it's the apparent paradox between the existence of a sovereign God who is loving and benevolent and the persistent existence of evil and suffering on earth. Or, as atheists and agnostics often put it, "If there really were a loving God, then He wouldn't allow such suffering in this world." How would you describe this "problem" in your own words?*
- *When has "The Problem of Evil" been a faith-problem in your life? When have you questioned God's goodness or God's control over human events? How did you deal with those questions and emotions?*
- *Mother Teresa emphasized God's presence with those who suffer. Read Isaiah 43:2; what does this passage mean to you in light of tragedy or suffering in your own life?*
- *How might God be calling you to respond to a bad or hurtful situation in your family, among your friends, or in your community?*



Finding Purpose in Pain



Evelyn Husband shares her message about God's healing hand.

By Corrie Cutrer

A love note is still visible on Evelyn Husband's makeup mirror in her bathroom. The words were written with a bar of soap by her husband, astronaut Rick Husband, shortly before his departure as commander of the space shuttle Columbia on January 16, 2003. It reads, "I love you Evey, love Rick." It was only meant to appear there temporarily.



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"Of course I can't wash that off," Evelyn says.

It's been nearly a year since Evelyn stood with the other families of the space shuttle Columbia's crew at the landing site in Cape Canaveral, Florida, waiting for her husband to return home. The shuttle was just minutes from landing when NASA's Mission Control lost contact with the Columbia crew. The next few moments were a blur of events: video images of Columbia breaking apart over the Texas skyline, NASA officials scrambling to move the family members away from view of television cameras. Evelyn remembers looking at the faces of her son, Matthew, and daughter, Laura, then 7 and 12. Matthew turned to his mother.

"He said, 'I guess I'm not going to be in Indian Guides with Dad at the YMCA anymore.' It was the first thing that hit him," Evelyn says.

Laura also was trying to process this new gap in her life. "Who's going to walk me down the aisle one day, Mamma?" she asked, teary-eyed. "Who's going to help me with my math homework?"

"They were instantly aware we were a different unit," Evelyn, 45, says of her children.

So began the Husbands' painful journey of loss. In the months following the accident, Evelyn, a committed Christian, spoke openly about how the faith she found as a 13-year-old girl had sustained her. Two days after the accident, she appeared on the *Today* show and shared how she was trusting in God to give her strength through this difficult time. As Evelyn recited the words of Proverbs 3:5-6, the show's producers flashed the verses on the screen.





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That was the beginning of Evelyn's efforts to deliver a powerful message: Even in the midst of intense suffering, God is faithful. In recent months, she's told her story to tens of thousands of women across the country at Women of Faith conferences.

"Most of you aren't going to lose the person you love most on national television," she told an audience of women in California last summer. "But every person will face big tragedies and little everyday crises. Your only consistency is Jesus Christ."

Where did this incredible strength in the face of pain and loss come from? For Evelyn, it was partly from experiencing God's comfort in the past.

"Deep inside, I knew God was going to walk me through this somehow," she says. "I knew it because he'd walked with me through other crises earlier in my life."

One of those crises began shortly after Texas Tech University sweethearts Rick and Evelyn were married in 1982. They'd been trying to start a family without success. During the couple's first five years of marriage, Evelyn miscarried twice and began infertility treatments.

"After the second miscarriage, I went through depression," Evelyn says. "I prayed, 'God, take away my desire to be a mom if it isn't your will, because this is just so painful.' I had to let go and trust God with my future."

That experience helped Evelyn deal with the loss of her husband. "The past year I've had to take hold of God's hand and step out in faith into absolute blackness," she says. "I've gone way beyond the polite stages with God. I've yelled and cried out to him with a deeper,





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gut-wrenching cry than ever before. But he's proven to me he's there, holding my hand as I take each step forward. That's why when you walk through a crisis, it's so important to have a foundation of faith already established. Because you have to know *whose* hand you're holding in order to step into the darkness of an uncertain future."

The moments when she's been overwhelmed with unexpected grief have been hardest to bear. "I remember one day shortly after the accident when we'd run out of milk," Evelyn says. "I walked in the grocery store and saw a magazine with a picture of Rick on the front and a headline that read, 'The last seven horrifying minutes for the space shuttle crew.' I saw Matthew looking at it. By the time we checked out, I was a hysterical, sobbing mess.

"Going to the grocery store is still one of the hardest things for me to do," Evelyn adds. "Rick used to buy this weird non-fat peanut butter that he loved to put in smoothies. And he loved to eat almonds. I go down the aisle now and think, *I don't need to get those things*. It's so painful."

The same pain that makes mundane tasks such as grocery shopping so draining has become the catalyst for Evelyn to reach others who suffer or who are struggling with their faith.

Women of Faith President Mary Graham says conference attendees love listening to Evelyn because she's honest about her imperfections and has a wonderful sense of humor. She's also the image of a survivor to women facing uncertain times.





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"Evelyn didn't make it through this by turning out the lights and crawling under her bed, but by taking one tiny baby step of faith at a time," Mary says. "When women hear her stand up and say, 'I can make it through this crisis because what I believed about God in my head now has proven true in my heart,' then they think, *I can trust him with my everyday dramas, too.*"

Evelyn recounts her story of loss in *High Calling: The Courageous Life and Faith of Shuttle Columbia Commander Rick Husband* (Thomas Nelson). In it she describes Rick's faith and how God was at work in the moments leading up to the tragedy, providing precious memories for her and the kids to share with Rick before his mission.

Before he went into quarantine to prepare for the mission, Rick videotaped devotionals for the kids to watch every day during his trip. "Now they have on tape an hour-and-a-half of their dad talking to them about God," Evelyn says.

Rick also left Evelyn a journal he started for her in the weeks leading up to his mission. She keeps it by her nightstand.

"He wrote in it every single day until he left," she says. "It was very unlike him, but God was at work in his heart. Rick ended up giving me an account of the last days we had together."

On February 1, the one-year anniversary of the tragedy, Evelyn and her kids will travel to Washington, D.C., to dedicate a memorial to the Columbia astronauts in Arlington Cemetery. Standing next to the site is another memorial already established for the Challenger crew who perished in 1986.





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"Three years ago, I went with Laura's fifth-grade class on a field trip to D.C., and Laura and I visited the Challenger memorial," Evelyn says. "I remember standing there with my arm around Laura begging God, *Never let it be us.*

"In light of what happened, you'd think I'd be disillusioned with God. But strangely, it hasn't been that way at all," she says. "I've learned Jesus was a man of sorrows who's well acquainted with my grief. He knows how deeply I'm mourning. And he's been with me every moment. He's also given me a real chance to honor him through this situation. That's what I'm trying to do."

Corrie Cutrer, former TCW assistant editor and now a regular contributor, lives with her husband in Illinois. This article first appeared in the January/February 2004 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN magazine.





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Reflect

- *Evelyn described her struggle, saying, "The past year I've had to take hold of God's hand and step out in faith into absolute blackness." What are some specific, practical ways a person can "take hold of God's hand" when facing a serious difficulty?*
- *Read Proverbs 3:5-6. Blind or childish trust in God won't stand the test of intense heartache or tragedy. What kind of trust does it take to make it through really bad times in life? What does that trust look like?*
- *What reasons did Evelyn have to trust God after her husband was killed? What reasons do you have?*



How Katrina Made Me Thankful



When the deadly hurricane tore me apart from my young son, I reached out to God like never before.

By Stacy Nolan as told to Berta Delgado-Young

Hurricane Katrina was like a jagged knife. It cut up our lives in so many ways, I didn't know if we'd ever be able to pick up the pieces. On August 29, the day it sliced across New Orleans and the Gulf Coast, I was on my way to Texas.



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The day before, with the weather forecasters predicting Hurricane Katrina would slam into low-lying New Orleans, police and city officials ordered us to clear out. Before I could exhale, I was in a caravan of three cars with two of my children—4-year-old Jeremiah and 1-year-old Ashanti—and 17 other people from our extended family. The goal was to get out of the city. But first, I had to find my youngest child.

My 7-month-old son, A'Mahd, had been staying with his godmother, my friend Nikolle. When it became clear Katrina was definitely coming, I scrambled to contact Nikolle, who lived on the other side of town. I punched her cell phone number repeatedly and heard the same message over and over—"No signal; call again later." We tried to drive to Nikolle's house, but the streets were too jammed with traffic. My heart raced in panic. I had to get to my son!

The highways were backed up for miles, and the others in our caravan were desperate to get out of New Orleans.

Suddenly, I faced the most painful decision any mother could imagine: Stay or leave?

In my head, I knew I couldn't stay in the city. But my heart told me it was impossible to go.

Yet, as I looked at little Ashanti and Jeremiah, I knew I had to do what was best for them too.

I had to leave.





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Wiping the tears from my eyes, I prayed to God that He would keep A'Mahd and Nikolle safe in His hands. I trusted Him to watch over them.

We left New Orleans for Dallas, Texas, escaping the floods. Nevertheless, my heart was drowning in sadness.

An Angel in Dallas

When we finally arrived in Dallas a couple of days later, we spent the night at a hotel. The next day we went to the Red Cross shelter hastily set up at Reunion Arena to get food, clothing, and other necessities, and to search for anyone who might have seen A'Mahd and Nikolle.

"If they left New Orleans, I have a feeling they're in Baton Rouge," I told my family. "I just need to find my baby."

I asked about filing a missing person report and showed everyone I met a photo of A'Mahd on the tiny screen of my cell phone. It showed a smiling A'Mahd with his brother and sister. It was the only photo that I had of him.

Jeremiah and Ashanti were beginning to sense things weren't right. Besides the trauma of being whisked away to a strange city, they were missing their baby brother. "Where's A'Mahd?" they kept asking. "I want to see A'Mahd!"

At the shelter, an aid worker gave us the address of the Dallas Housing Authority, where workers were scrambling to find more permanent housing for the thousands of evacuees who were suddenly homeless.





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In time, I realized God had been listening to my prayers.

Mike Fechner, the minister of spiritual development at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas, has spent years working with the Dallas Housing Authority and other groups in inner-city Dallas to bring whatever aid necessary to the people who needed it most. With evacuees pouring into North Texas, Mike and a team of volunteers went to the housing authority with an offer to help displaced families like ours.

There, Mike found us.

"Something led me to you," Mike told me later. "Of all the people there, I was led to you."

I truly believe this wonderful man was our angel. He listened quietly as I told my story. Then he gathered my family together, gave us inflatable beds and blankets, food and water, and led us in prayer.

And then he did something that let me know it was going to be okay. He handed me a stuffed animal.

"This is for A'Mahd," he said, "because we're going to put our trust in God that you will be able to give that to him."

He never doubted it would happen.

The Eternal Wait

We set off toward our new home with the peace and assurance that God was taking care of everything. The generous people at Prestonwood Baptist promised they





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would help us meet whatever material need we had. And they did.

But my heart still longed to see A'Mahd. The long wait for news was agonizing. Each hour seemed like an eternity. At moments, doubt slipped into my head. I cried until my eyes ached, and I couldn't eat. But I continued to pray and believe.

I clung to the stuffed dog Mike had given me. Its name was Happy Hank, and he recited Bible verses and said, "Jesus loves you" when you squeezed him. I held Happy Hank and kissed him as if he were A'Mahd.

A Call from Iraq

I discovered later that Mike and his staff at Prestonwood had launched a search of their own, phoning contacts across the country to see if anyone had information about A'Mahd and Nikolle.

Three days later Nikolle called the church. She had found her way to a relative's home near Alexandria, Louisiana.

She and A'Mahd had been trapped in New Orleans by rising water and had to wait there for the flooding to subside. "We stayed with a neighbor who lived on the second floor because water was coming into my first-floor apartment," she said. "I put A'Mahd on one of the floaters I use to take him to the pool, and we swam to the neighbor's apartment."





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She said there were four neighbors left in the whole complex, and they reached out to help each other. With the flood ebbing, Nikolle and A'Mahd were able to flee inland, toward central Louisiana, where Nikolle had family. They located shelter and food, but found there was no way to reach me to let me know A'Mahd was ok.

In a miraculous series of events, Nikolle finally e-mailed her husband, Theo, who was a U.S. Army soldier in Baghdad. Theo called Nikolle and gave her a working number for my family in Louisiana, and they told her to call Mike at Prestonwood.

We were all amazed at how God used so many different people to finally connect us.

God's Jet Plane

The next step was bringing A'Mahd and Nikolle from Louisiana to Dallas. It was a daunting task in the hard days following the hurricane. But God made a way.

A businessman, who had connections with Prestonwood Baptist, owned a private jet. He had taken a small group of church ministers and staff members to Louisiana that morning to help local churches with aid efforts and to determine the most critical needs there.

After several phone calls and some hurried coordination, the jet was re-routed to make a stop in Alexandria, where the Prestonwood team picked up A'Mahd and Nikolle.





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As the jet rolled to a slow stop at a suburban Dallas airport, five of the six men from Prestonwood stepped out. Nikolle followed them down the steps. Then came Prestonwood's executive pastor Mike Buster, with A'Mahd in his arms.

I couldn't contain my joy. I stretched out my arms and ran to them even before they'd finished coming down the stairs. Tears ran down my face as Pastor Buster handed me my baby.

I held A'Mahd tightly and kissed him over and over, praising God for His miraculous blessing.

Grateful Hearts

Katrina tore us apart for a while, but God brought us back together. He showed us His love through the wonderful Christians at Prestonwood Baptist. He showed us His grace by keeping A'Mahd and Nikolle safe through the deadly waters that rushed through New Orleans. And He showed us His faithfulness by bringing my baby back to me.

This year, it won't be hard at all to list all of the blessings from the past year. Like thousands of others, we've lost so much. Our home was destroyed, and New Orleans will never be the same.

But as we gather with family and friends, we'll know with every moment that God is watching over us and that He has a plan for our future.





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When A'Mahd finally came back to me, I gave him Happy Hank. He squeezed the toy dog joyfully, and a big smile lit up his face when he heard Hank say, "Jesus loves you."

Berta Delgado-Young is a freelance writer and the communications editor at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas. This article first appeared the November/December 2005 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN.

Reflect

- *Why do you believe school violence has escalated in recent years? Is it a lack of caring? What steps can we, as parents, take to make a difference? Be specific.*
- *In today's culture, is it safe to encourage our children to befriend the hurting?*
- *What example are you setting for your children in terms of loving the unlovely? I'm convicted as I think of a particular person on the fringe of my community. It is so easy to distance myself because I find that person difficult, but is it right? Is it right to encourage our children to spend time with children on the fringes? Discuss.*
- *The author suggests six ways to encourage empathy. Which ones are you using? Can you think of more?*



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A Good Cry



God can use anything we surrender to Him—even our tears.

By Liz Curtis Higgs

I cry easily and often. Happy tears, sad tears, over-the-top tears, Hallmark commercial tears—you name it, I've leaked over it.

Hankies up, girlfriends, if you're with me on this.

Out of sheer joy, I cry at church more than anywhere else. When I hear a wondrous truth spoken or a glorious song lifted in praise, when I see a new believer step forward or an old saint read the Scriptures, I'm so overwhelmed with God's presence that tears flow down my cheeks.





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Not little drips—buckets. Sheets of water. A monsoon.

Even after 16 years of marriage, this baffles my husband. He looks over at me, eyes wide with concern, and whispers, "Are you ok?"

"Oh, yeah." I smile blissfully as another waterfall plunges over my chin and pools on my silk blouse. "Couldn't be better."

While I've made peace with my non-stop tears, I know many women are ashamed of their tearfulness. One day I talked with a dear woman in Missouri named Marcia who thought her tears were a stumbling block to serving God. After hearing me teach about the woman in Luke 7 who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears, this leaking sister sought me out.

Between sniffs she explained, "I want more than anything to help hurting people in my church who go to the altar for prayer. But the minute I hear their stories, I start weeping, which embarrasses me to no end. Now I just hide in the pew."

"Aha!" I gave her a big hug. "You have a ministry of tears."

"A what?"

"When you weep right along with people, your tears help keep them from feeling foolish. The Bible tells us to 'mourn with those who mourn' (Romans 12:15), and to 'comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we





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ourselves have received from God' (2 Corinthians 1:4).
See, babe? Your tears don't hurt, they help."

Later, after I printed off all the Bible verses I could find on "leaking" and sent them to my new friend, I discovered that Marcia got the message loud and clear. She wrote back: "During this evening's service, a lady in our church knelt at the altar, praying and crying desperately. Guess who God shoved down the aisle to help her? After she shared her needs with me, I did my usual leaking and a whole lot of blubbering. I had a difficult time speaking above the sobs, but I prayed with her and loved her. And you know what? She knew my heart. And God knew my heart."

(Hang on a second, let me find a tissue.)

She finished with, "One of the verses you sent me said, 'He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy' (Psalm 126:6). All my life, I thought my tears were a curse. I just wanted you to know, I'm reaping a harvest of joy in Missouri!"

Marcia's experience shows God can use anything we surrender to Him. Laughter and tears. Joys and sorrows. Victories and mistakes. Strengths and weaknesses. We minister to others best when we offer our true selves—"as is"—not waiting until we've cleaned up our act or dried up our tears, but right now, leaks and all.





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My role model for crying isn't Mary or Martha from the Bible, it's Marcia from Missouri who bravely gave herself to God and trusted Him to bring the tissues.

Liz Curtis Higgs, author of 19 books, including Mad Mary (WaterBrook Press), lives with her family—and many boxes of tissues—in Louisville, Kentucky. This article first appeared in the July/August 2002 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Reflect

- *How do you often deal with heartache and tragedy? Tears? Stuffing your emotions? Anger?*
- *Read Romans 12:15. How might you be able to commiserate with someone who is suffering?*
- *When bad things happen to those you know, how does God want you to respond? How can you minister to them, even if you don't have all the answers or aren't sure what to say?*



Additional Resources



Can God Be Trusted?—Faith and the Challenge of Evil by John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Oxford University Press, 2000; 196 pages). In a world riddled with disappointment, malice, and tragedy, what rational do we have for believing in a benevolent God? In this book, Stackhouse explores how great thinkers have grappled with this question.

Cries of the Heart by Ravi Zacharias (Thomas Nelson, 2002; 224 pages). In *Cries of the Heart*, Zacharias explores the inner feeling of futility that can overwhelm a human heart and helps us to see a reason in our suffering. This is a book that both inspires and reassures...a search that uncovers our hidden sentiments and reveals God's continual inescapable presence in every moment of our lives...a journey that ends in the consummate answer to the cries of the heart.



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Additional Resources

How Long, O Lord? by D.A. Carson (Baker, 2006; 256 pages). This clear and accessible treatment of key biblical themes related to human suffering and evil is written by one of the most respected evangelical biblical scholars alive today. D.A. Carson brings together a close, careful exposition of key biblical passages with helpful pastoral applications.

The Problem of Pain by C.S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001; 192 pages). For centuries Christians have been tormented by one question above all – If God is good and all-powerful, why does He allow His creatures to suffer pain? C.S. Lewis sets out to disentangle this knotty issue but wisely adds that in the end no intellectual solution can dispense with the necessity for patience and courage.

Startling Beauty: My Journey from Rape to Restoration by Heather Gemmen (David C. Cook, 2004; 224 pages). In the mid-1990s, the author and her family moved into an inner-city neighborhood to minister the love of Christ. When she's raped, Heather and her husband discover that all moral dilemmas look different when "it" happens to you. A gripping true story that reveals unsettling truths about Christians, racism, abortion—and the grace of God.





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Additional Resources

A Step Further: Growing Closer to God Through Hurt and Hardship by Joni Eareckson Tada (Zondervan, 2001; 209 pages). Joni's heartfelt and biblically informed response to thousands of letters from people puzzled about the "whys" of suffering. These questions are answered by taking a personal look at how God has used circumstances, people, and events in Joni's life and others' lives.

Where is God When it Hurts? by Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 1997; 288 pages). "If there is a loving God, then why ... ?" No matter how the question is completed, at its root lies the issue of pain. Does God order suffering? Or did He simply wind up the world's mainspring and now is watching from a distance? Using examples from the Bible and from his own experiences, Yancey looks at pain—physical, emotional, and spiritual—and helps us understand why we suffer.



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