

**BIBLICAL-THEOLOGICAL PILLARS
NEEDED TO SUPPORT FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN
REFLECTION ON SUFFERING AND EVIL**

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If you live long enough, you will suffer. You will contract cancer or Alzheimer's or both. Or you will be hit by a bus. You may lose your job or your spouse or a child, perhaps through a miscarriage. All you have to do is live long enough. The only alternative is not living long enough, which usually means you are making other people suffer. The forms of suffering are extraordinarily diverse: wretched diseases like cancer, Huntington's Chorea, MS, typhoid, meningitis, severe spina bifida, AIDS; suffering from violence, shootings, war, cruelty, torture; from nature—so-called cat-5 hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, tornadoes, fires; the increasing decrepitude of age—the pain of arthritis, the despair of dementia; suffering and persecution that arise because we are Christians. Every worldview faces questions arising from the diverse suffering that people face; these are not questions that only Christians must confront. They are questions that arise simply because we are human beings and we live in a world that delivers a great deal of pain.

Of course, the Bible itself raises many questions regarding suffering and evil. Many psalms, for example, breathe near-despair, chief among them Ps 88. Or consider Jeremiah: not for nothing is he labeled the weeping prophet. He is not at all sure that God has dealt with him quite fairly. We cannot forget Job, of course, and Habakkuk, who understands how God could use a nation to chastise another nation, but finds it utterly mystifying that God could use a more wicked nation to chastise what seems to be a less wicked nation. The book of Revelation depicts saints under the throne, crying, "How long, Sovereign Lord?" (6:10).

I hasten to make clear the aim of this essay. It is less about guidelines for helping people going through such suffering (though I will drop a few hints toward the end) than an outline of biblical-theological pillars needed to support faithful Christian reflection on suffering and evil.¹ One might properly view this as a kind of

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¹After drafting this essay, I came across a somewhat similar approach to questions of theodicy, dependent on biblical-theological turning-points: Rolf Hille, "A Biblical-Theological Response to the Problem of Theodicy in the Context of the

prophylactic medicine. These are the things we should think about before the evil day comes, the theological structures that should be a part of our mental architecture before we are called upon to suffer. Here are six pillars to hammer deeply into the soil of our thinking, pillars that together support a God-centered, biblically-driven framework that Christians need when the inevitable days of suffering dawn.

I. INSIGHTS FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE BIBLE'S STORYLINE

The Bible insists that when God made everything, he made everything good—indeed, very good (Gen 1:25, 31). Moreover, the Bible insists that the created order is different from God. God made everything: this doctrine of creation, deeply embedded in Scripture, establishes our fundamental obligation to God, the basis of our accountability to God. He made us; we owe him everything, beginning with our very existence. He designed us for his own glory, for our good, and he knows what is best. To act, not as his unique image-bearers should, joyfully in line with his good purposes, but selfishly, as if we are self-created and self-determining, is not only stupid, but viciously evil.

Thus we come to the fall. Genesis 3 is crucial for our understanding of what is wrong with the world—that is, for our understanding of the nature and origin of suffering and evil. This is not going to be the same as the outlook found in philosophical naturalism, where, strictly speaking, it is difficult to speak of evil in any sort of transcendent sense, because at the end of the day what happens is nothing more than quarks with half-lives in nanoseconds banging into each other, and the statistical probability of quantum bits of energy doing this as opposed to that. The biblical picture is also different from the various kinds of ontological dualism. Think of “the Force” in Star Wars. It seems to be pretty neutral until you decide to opt for the good side or the dark side of it. The Bible does not conjure up a sovereign God and a sovereign devil, both sovereigns biting against other and neither absolute. From the Bible’s perspective, suffering and evil are bound up with our sin and the curse of God that our sin has attracted. Directly or indirectly, things track back to the fall.

On the whole, then, the Bible expresses surprise not that we suffer, but that we are not wiped out. God is a consuming fire (Deut 4:24). It is of the Lord’s mercy that we are not consumed (Lam 3:23). Romans makes it clear that the fundamental reason why the final judgment has not yet fallen on this damned world is the Lord’s forbearance (Rom 2:4).

Modern Criticism of Religion,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 40 (2016): 247–63. Both the similarities and the differences are instructive.

That is entirely alien to the way most of us think about suffering and evil. While we're saying, "Why me?," many parts of the Bible are saying, "You really deserve to go to hell." To put it another way, in much of the Bible what provokes wondering reflection is not human suffering, but God's grace.

A remarkable passage that gets this point across in a telling way is **Luke 13:1-5**:

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."²

Placing the two stories back to back makes them doubly interesting. **In the one story, suffering comes about because a wicked man**—that is, Pilate—has attacked people in their temple worship, mixing their blood with the blood of the animals that were being offered. In other words, this suffering is the direct result of a wicked person. But **the other suffering is what we often call an act of nature** or, in some insurance documents, "an act of God"—specifically, a tower falls and it kills eighteen people. Nobody blew it up. Nobody flew a plane into it. It just happened.

In both cases, Jesus is concerned that people do not draw the wrong inference. In both cases, Jesus teaches, we must not conclude that those who were killed were more wicked than people who were not killed, even though those who were not killed might well have been offering sacrifices or standing under the tower. Equally important, Jesus does not take the next step that our generation would almost certainly adopt and say, "Those who died were just as good as the rest of you." Rather, what he says is precisely the opposite: "You all deserve the same thing and unless you repent you will all perish." So this violence and this accident, like all violence and accidents, are merely a foretaste of the universal suffering that is brought about on the last day. And we all deserve it.

These are insights from the beginning of the Bible's story line. The first pillar—the accumulated insights from the beginning of the Bible's storyline—cannot address all our questions. It is, after all, only one of six pillars. But it does orientate us toward the recognition that in the light of the creation and the fall **we human beings deserve condemnation, and that what is fundamentally surprising in biblical terms is not that there is suffering and evil, but that by God's grace we are not utterly condemned.**

²All scriptural citations are from the *New International Version*.

II. INSIGHTS FROM THE END OF THE BIBLE'S STORYLINE

Eschatology teaches us what happens at the end, with the coming of a new heaven and a new earth to be cherished, and a hell to be feared. I suspect we do not think enough about either today.

One reason we don't think enough about the new heaven and the new earth is that we haven't spent enough time on the biblical passages that depict this vision, passages that are in fact exceedingly diverse. If I were to mention heaven casually, I suspect that many would instantly call to mind one of those silly little line diagrams in which heaven is represented by somebody wearing a white nightgown, sitting on a puffy cloud and playing a harp. This cartoon image is a wretched betrayal of what we should be imagining when we conjure up the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness, a place of praise, of the *visio dei* ("the vision of God" – "they will see my face"), a place of work—hard work—"You have been faithful with few things; I will put you in charge of many things" (Matt 25:21, 23). This latter image, drawn from the parable of the "talents" (Matt 25:14-30; better, the parable of the bags of gold, as the 2011 NIV puts it), finds God saying, in effect, "All you've done is multiply five bags of gold. You've doubled 50 million dollars, turning it into 100 million dollars—small potatoes. Now I'm going to give you a real job." Negatively, there will be no more death, no more decay, no more sorrow, no more tears, no more jealousy, no more hate, no more lust, no more war, no more fear, no more crying; positively, we will love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and we will love our neighbors as ourselves. Isn't that a vision worth pursuing with panting zeal? As for hell, it is regularly displayed as a place of torment—not something you can easily excise from the Bible when the one who speaks about it the most is the Lord Jesus himself. Read the end of Rev 20:10 if you need to be convinced that there is conscious, on-going, eternal torment; read Rev 14:17-20 and take in truly horrific images.

What must we learn from all these depictions of the end? For one thing, there is no utopia here and now. As I write these words, we are in the midst of the silly political season again. Politicians on all sides stridently advance their ideas, presenting them in such a way as to suggest, "Provided you follow my policies, we will have peace on earth, justice in the country, and national prosperity. The rising tide will lift all boats, there will be justice and order, racism will die, peace both at home and abroad will prevail, and poverty will be abolished." Do not misunderstand me. Not for a moment am I suggesting that there is no difference between better policies and worse policies. Nor am I suggesting that Christians shouldn't enter into politics. But Christians who enter into politics should never for a moment give the false impression that if we follow their policies

soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Matt 16:26). In fact, even disasters such as earthquakes, the Bible can view as the mere beginning of sorrows (Luke 21:9). Often the large-scale disasters disturb us in our generation because they challenge our desire for stability, our expectation that the status quo should be preserved. That's why the tsunami that hit Japan made worldwide headlines, even though in terms of death toll, the equivalent of three tsunamis hit Africa every year in conjunction with the AIDS crisis, famine, and tribal strife. But we are not all that upset about those things because they are perceived to be part of the status quo.

Some years ago I read the little essay by C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time." Doubtless you will recall that during WWI Lewis fought in the trenches. When his unit was wiped out, he was providentially spared. So when WWII broke out a bare twenty years later, the chaplain of the university chapel in Oxford, somewhat at a loss as to what to say, asked Lewis to speak. (Lewis was already known as an apologist for the Christian cause.) The place was packed out that Sunday evening as Lewis climbed into the pulpit. He began:

A university is a society for the pursuit of learning. As students, you will be expected to make yourselves, or to start making yourselves, into what the Middle Ages called clerks: into philosophers, scientists, scholars, critics, or historians. And at first sight, this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war. What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing? Or, even if we ourselves should happen not to be interrupted by death or military service, why should we—indeed how can we—continue to take an interest in these placid occupations when the lives of our friends and the liberties of Europe are in the balance? Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns?⁴

As already evident in these opening remarks, Lewis is responding to the sense among students that intellectual pursuit somehow loses its meaning when compared to the state of the war-time world. You will not be surprised that Lewis goes on to provide a reason why such intellectual pursuits not only can but must continue.

For our purposes, what is more interesting is how Lewis understands the weight of the war in comparison to the teaching of Christianity, whereby the questions that confront us persist even in peace-time. To the Christian, says Lewis, "the true tragedy of Nero" is not that someone fiddles while the city burns, but that he fiddles while the city is "on the brink of hell," that "crude monosyllable" that modern "prudence" tries to cover up. Despite our modern sensibilities, says Lewis, teaching on heaven and hell is the teaching of Christ and his church: "If we do not believe them, our presence in

⁴C. S. Lewis, "Learning in War-Time," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 41.

everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face'" (1:11). God grants Satan's request. Bands of marauding Sabceans and Chaldeans attack, the cattle and the sheep and the herds of donkeys are all taken away or struck by lightning. A violent storm tears apart the oldest son's house, the very place where Job's ten children are having a party, the house collapses and all ten of Job's children are killed. In scarcely imaginable distress, Job tears his clothes, shaves his head, and falls to the ground in worship. "Naked I came from my mother's womb," he declares, "and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (1:21). The author quietly comments, "In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (1:22).

Satan is not impressed. "Skin for skin!" he replies. "A man will give all he has for his own life. But now stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face" (2:4-5). The Lord grants Satan's request with the caveat that Job's life must be spared. Pretty soon Job is sitting on an ash pit, scraping his scabs with broken pottery. Aflame with her own agony and despair, his wife says, "Curse God and die!" (2:9). Job replies, "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (2:10). The author comments, "In all this, Job did not sin in what he said" (2:10).

That's the background. Job does not know what is at stake at the cosmic level. He is simply hurting, the quintessential example of innocent suffering.

And then the three miserable comforters fly in. They do one wise thing: they shut up for the first week. Then the theological drama begins. The debate runs from ch. 3 to ch. 31. Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite take their turns speaking, with Job replying to each. We might summarize their complex arguments rather simply. After Job bemoans his sad state and wishes he had never been born (ch. 3), the arguments of the three "comforters" run along the following lines:

"Job, do you believe that God is sovereign?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe that God is good?"

"Yes."

"So if God is sovereign and God is good and he's clobbering you, what does that say about who you are?"

"Well, I know that God is sovereign and I know that God is good. 'Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble' (14:1). But I must add that I really don't deserve this."

"Job, do you hear what you are saying? You are insinuating that God is doing something unjust. You just said that God is good. If God is sovereign and God is good, then he is not unjust. Therefore, any judgment he makes against you must be just, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, I agree that God is just, but I still have to say that what I'm suffering isn't really, you know, quite fair. I'd really like to have a chat with God, but he's hiding his face from me. He won't answer me. He is all powerful, and I'm just a worm in comparison. How can I possibly respond to him? But I insist that I don't deserve this suffering."

The debate escalates until Job says conflicting things. On the one hand, he says, both humbly and movingly, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (13:15); and on the other hand, he is convinced that God has wronged him (19:6) and denied him justice (27:2). Eventually, the three friends shut up because they can't bring him to any sort of public repentance. But before doing so, they accuse Job of merely having forgotten all the sins that he has committed, sins that God has not forgotten. They say, in effect,

If you just repent of the sins that you've forgotten – the sins that you must have committed for God to bring on this judgment – if you simply repent and tell God you're sorry, then God will take away all the suffering. (ch. 22)

Job replies, in effect,

How can I possibly repent of something that I don't know that I've done? That would be a kind of lie – a kind of criticism of God. It would be a manipulative way of saying, "I must have sinned (though I don't think I have). Therefore, I must repent (though I don't think I need to), in order to get some blessings out of you." That's fundamentally dishonest.

Eventually, Job appears in several immensely moving chapters defending his own integrity (27–31). The friends are silenced. Then Elihu speaks (32–37). Although scholars debate the significance of his contribution, Elihu makes two important points: first, he rightly blames the friends for not being able to answer Job effectively. In that sense, he sides with God at the end. And second, he blames Job for being so critical of God – not for having sinned in the first place, but for setting himself up as if he can answer God. And that sets the stage for God himself to answer in chs. 38 and 39.

In two chapters of wondrous theological poetry, God is presented in his utter uniqueness and transcendence over creation. Through a series of rhetorical questions, God in effect says, "Job, have you ever designed a snowflake? Were you around when I cast Orion to the heavens? How are you at designing the ostrich, Job?" Job responds in the only appropriate way: "I am unworthy – how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth. I spoke once, but I have no answer – twice, but I will say no more" (40:4–5). Apparently he has learned some lessons in humility. God responds to Job a second time "out of the whirlwind" with another round of questioning, calling Job to "stand up on your feet like a man" and be ready to respond (40:6–41:34). Finally we reach ch. 42, where Job, in moving language repents (42:2–6).

Now it is important for the understanding of the entire book to grasp that Job is not repenting of some alleged prior sins that brought about this disaster. What he is repenting of, rather, is his protestations of righteousness so strongly voiced that they look like criticisms of God. He perceives that he should have more quickly come to the place where he recognized there are things he doesn't understand, and his obligation is to trust God even when he doesn't understand.

The book of Job teaches us that there are limits to our knowledge. And sometimes God is more interested in our trust in him than in providing more explanations. At some deep level, we must recognize that omniscience is an incommunicable attribute of God. To act as if we have both the capacity and the right to know everything we want to know approaches blasphemy: we are not God.

Of course, this third pillar—the accumulated insights from reflection on Job and the challenge of innocent suffering—like the first two, cannot address all our questions about suffering and evil. It is, after all, only one of six pillars. Yet by driving us to recognize the severe limitations of our understanding, especially in comparison to God's incomprehensible glory and righteousness, this pillar suggests that God wants our trust even more than our understanding. Indeed, *knowing* that truth is a significant part of what we *should* know about God, grounded in what he has (and has not) revealed about himself. And that prepares us for the next pillar.

IV. INSIGHTS FROM THE MYSTERY OF PROVIDENCE

With the fourth pillar, we shall take one small but important step beyond recognizing the limitations of our knowledge (the third pillar) to the consideration of certain attributes of God that invite us to admit what we do not know. It is important to grasp how these attributes of God do and do not function in our lives. While we shall soon trip over what we do *not* know, at this point our ignorance is constrained by something of what we *should* know. In brief: we now consider the mystery of providence, and think through some of the attributes of God that he has disclosed, and how they should function in our lives.

I begin with two propositions. *First*, in the Bible, God is absolutely and unqualifiedly sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in such a way as to mitigate human responsibility. *Second*, human beings are morally responsible creatures. By morally responsible creatures, I mean that they are creatures who believe and disbelieve, who obey and disobey, who choose, and that such actions are morally significant. Human beings are rightly held accountable for such things. Yet although human beings are morally responsible creatures, such human responsibility never makes God's actions absolutely contingent. Biblical writers not only commonly espouse

both of these propositions, but happily assume they are compatible. The idea that both of these propositions are mutually compatible is often called **compatibilism**. Compatibilism, I shall argue, lies near the heart of the mystery of providence, and it shapes my fourth pillar.

While this topic is massive, for the sake of brevity, I shall begin by focusing rather briefly on only three biblical passages.

A. *Gen 50:19–20*

In this passage, Joseph's brothers beg Joseph to have mercy on them because they're afraid he will now wreak his retribution upon them for having sold him into slavery. But Joseph, by way of reply, says, "Am I in the place of God? When you sold me into slavery, don't you understand? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:19–20). What is so interesting about this way of expressing things is what the text does *not* say. It does not say, "You intended it for evil, and you actually pulled it off because God was taking a walk that day or was having a little snooze and didn't pay much attention to what was going on. Mercifully, however, God is such a good chess player that he came back and fixed it all up with some deft moves. As a result, on the chess board of life I became the prime minister of Egypt." Nor does the text say, "God intended it for good. He was going to send me down to Egypt in an air-conditioned, chauffeur-driven limousine, but unfortunately, you chaps corrupted his plan. He didn't see your trickery coming." Rather, in one and the same event God's intentions were good and the human intentions were evil. There's no speculation about one side not paying attention or being outwitted by the other. God remains sovereign while the brothers remain responsible. Both of the two propositions I've specified are operating in this text.

B. *Isa 10*

Beginning at v. 5, God says through the prophet, "Woe to the Assyrian." Now the Assyrians at this juncture have done a lot of damage in the northern kingdom of Israel and are pressing on down now to the southern kingdom of Judah. They are a bloodthirsty, cruel, powerful, regional superpower. "Woe to the Assyrian," God says, "the rod of my anger" (10:5): that is, God views the Assyrians as the expression of his own wrath: "... in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation" – that is, against his own covenant people. The "wicked nation" against whom God is sending the Assyrians is his own covenant people. "I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets" (10:6). That's what God himself is doing through his "tools," the Assyrians. "But this is not what he intends" (10:7; compare the intention language in

Gen 50, above). "This is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. 'Are not my commanders all kings?' he says" (10:7-8). That is, even Assyria's military officers are equivalent in glory and power to petty kings in other countries. "'Has not Kalno fared like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad, and Samaria like Damascus?" (10:9)—cities that Assyria has already savaged and defeated. "As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols, kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria—shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?" (10:10-11). But, Isaiah predicts (vv. 12-13),

When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes." For he says: "By the strength of my hand I have done this, and by my wisdom because I have understanding. I removed the boundaries of nations, I plundered their treasures; like a mighty one I subdued their kings."

God says more: "Does the ax raise itself above the person who swings it or the saw boast against the one who uses it? As if a rod were to wield the person who lifts it up, or a club brandish the one who is not wood!" (10:15). The language is dramatic; the images conveyed are stunning. God sends in the Assyrians to punish his covenant people, using them as mere tools. Then he turns around and punishes the Assyrians for doing it, because they're doing it in pride, cruelty, and greed. In short: God is utterly sovereign, so much so that he treats the mighty regional superpower as nothing but a tool in his hands, yet nevertheless his sovereignty does not mitigate their human responsibility: they have acted cruelly, and God holds them to account for it. Again, the Assyrians are responsible for what they do, but that fact does not make God absolutely contingent.

C. Acts 4

Perhaps the most dramatic passage that brings these two propositions together is Acts 4:27-28. In Acts 4, Peter and John, having faced threats from the Sanhedrin, return to "their own people" (4:23) and report all that the chief priests and the elders have said. The church responds by raising its voice in prayer (4:24). They say,

Sovereign Lord, you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up and the rulers band together against the Lord and against his anointed one." (4:25-26)

And then come these two verses, which we need to read slowly, one at a time: First verse: "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed" (4:27). So why did Jesus go to the cross? Because there was a two-bit conspiracy in a tiny, politically insignificant kingdom at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. Jesus died because of some corrupt Roman politicians and some angry Jews. Next verse: "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (4:28). So why did Jesus go to the cross? It was all part of God's determinative plan, so forcefully worked out that even the human participants did no more than exactly what God had ordained.

If you remove the first verse and all of its entailments and concentrate only on the second verse, then you preserve God's plan to bring about the atonement, but then where's the conspiracy? Where's the sin? If these conspirators are innocent because God ordained their actions, then God's sovereignty means that there is no sin anywhere that demands atonement. Conversely, if you remove the second verse to preserve the first, then the reason Jesus died is because of this two-bit conspiracy – but that's got nothing to do with the eternal plan of God or the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the earth (Rev 13:8) or the prophetic significance of Yom Kippur or the Passover Lamb or the messianic understanding of Isa 53 or anything else that announces the atoning suffering of the Redeemer. In short, when we observe that the author of Acts 4:27 and Acts 4:28 has no hesitation in writing both passages, and indeed in juxtaposing them, then we are forced to conclude that in his mind the crucifixion of Jesus Christ testifies both to the malicious intent of the conspirators, which does not make God's action contingent, and to God's sovereign plan and sway, which grounds the importance of Jesus' death but does not mitigate the responsibility of the human conspirators.

Embedded in these Scriptures is the further teaching that God is unqualifiedly good. That was made explicit in our first biblical example: "God intended it for good" (Gen 50:20). The entailment is that however we understand God's sovereignty, God stands *asymmetrically* behind good and evil. He stands behind good in such a way that the good is finally credited to him; he stands behind evil in such a way that, although it never escapes the boundaries of his sovereignty, evil is finally credited only to secondary causalities. And if you think that's just a bit too convenient for God, my answer is: That is the only depiction of God that we've got in the Scriptures. God is always represented as unqualifiedly good. As James puts it, there are no shifting shadows in God; unlike "the Force" in *Star Wars*, there is no dark side in God (Jas 1:17).

Now I shall take the biblical depiction of God's sovereignty one step further, for there is another polarity to recognize. On the one hand, the Bible commonly presents God as utterly transcendent—

suffering, many kinds of poverty, many kinds of opposition, many kinds of discouragement. But instead of trying to justify the ways of God to man, as Milton puts it, they see their own patterned sin in the past and the present, confess this sin, and plead with God for reformation and revival, to the end that he would hear from heaven and would renew them in the covenant. This is of course a practical outworking of the first pillar in my series, and in line with the fifth.

Second, a common category for those who walk closely with God through deep waters is, quite frankly, gratitude. I must tell you about a former student at TEDS, whom we'll call George. George served as a missionary in Bolivia. On the field, he met and married another missionary. After a few years, his mission wanted him to come back to the US and do a PhD at TEDS so that he could return to Bolivia and train people up in better biblical exegesis and theology. They arrived here with their daughter, then a lass of about three and a half. Six months into his studies, his wife was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer. They stopped the academic program while she faced chemo, radical surgery, all the rest. She came through it, supported by caring relatives and by their churches, but it was still a very difficult time. George resumed his studies for another six or nine months, at which point he was diagnosed with advanced stomach cancer. The metro-Chicago cancer hospital doctors said his case was untreatable and recommended hospice care, but the mission decided to send him to the Mayo Clinic for another opinion. The medical staff at Mayo didn't give him much hope either, but they tried some experimental treatments. After removing 90 percent of his stomach, they gave him drugs designed for colon cancer. He came out of it, and slowly regained his health and strength. He came back to Trinity, worked some more on his PhD, and then his wife's cancer returned. This time, she died. Eventually, he came back to Trinity, finished his PhD, then spoke in our church before returning to Bolivia with his then nine-and-a-half year old daughter. He spoke for forty minutes on a couple of texts.

Basically the burden of his message was thankfulness to God. Whether he ever thought of these six pillars as such, I have no idea. But he had absorbed a great deal of biblical theology that had prepared his mind and heart for the evil day, teaching him the unimaginable preciousness of the gospel and the unfathomable pleasure of the glory yet to come. Doubtless there were experiences during the six preceding years that he could not explain. He best knew God in the face of his Son the Lord Jesus, and he was happy to return to the cross; he was happy to trust his heavenly Father with the mysteries of providence, eager to press on to the new heaven and the new earth.

George's response was simply that of a normal Christian; anything less is subnormal.

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