

Chapter 1. We Live in a Different World.

When I married my best friend more than a quarter of a century ago I had no idea what was in store for us. Lisa was healthy and beautiful and full of life. But it wasn't long after marriage that her health took a serious turn for the worse. We had maybe one good year together before chronic illness began to wrap its tentacles around her and drag her down.

She felt sick all the time, had severe pain in her joints, and eventually developed pain that was often debilitating all throughout her body. She said that it felt like her whole body was filled with shards of broken glass. Many other symptoms began to emerge: bizarre nerve pain (she said it felt like bugs were crawling all over the nerves throughout her whole body), severe (and sometimes utterly debilitating) vertigo, horrible stomach and gastrointestinal problems, irregularity in her heartbeat, frequent and extreme migraines, parkinson's-like neurological problems that would sometimes render her unable to walk without assistance, restless leg syndrome, inability to sleep at night, brain fog and loss of short term memory, and I am sure there are plenty of other unpleasant symptoms that I have failed to bring to mind.

I can't begin to recount how many times we had to rush her to the emergency department at the local hospital; how many times her life hung precariously in the balance, and I was quite sure I'd be widowed at a young age; how many times she had to be admitted into the hospital. As the years crawled by she suffered and suffered and suffered, usually with an admirable stoicism that those who knew her best marveled at. Casual acquaintances were unaware of how sick she really was. She would visit with people at church or other functions, smiling, happy and friendly, and then collapse in a heap in bed as soon as she got home. There were frequent spans of time when she would hardly leave bed for days, or even weeks.

About two years after marriage we had our first daughter, Kayla. A couple years later we had our second, Bethany. Both pregnancies were very difficult, with numerous complications. Lisa had "morning sickness" all day every day, to the point where she needed to be admitted into the hospital and nourished intravenously. She had gestational diabetes, life-threatening blood clots, frequent migraines, and other complications. The doctors told us that it was so dangerous for Lisa to ever be pregnant again that we should by no means even consider having more children.

One of the most frustrating things about my Precious One's illness was that no one seemed to have any idea what was wrong with her. The endless battery of tests that doctors kept ordering always produced either negative or inconclusive results. It was sometimes suggested that her illness was psychosomatic, or that she was faking. More than once she was told (sometimes angrily) that she didn't need medical treatment; she needed counseling.

The best that doctors did for her was to prescribe drugs to ease her pain, but none of them ever seemed to do any good. In fact, they did a great deal of harm. They gave her bleeding ulcers in her stomach, and damaged her digestive system. She went through times when she could not eat; she could not even drink water without severe pain. More than once she was hospitalized to save her life from starvation and dehydration.

We live in rural Maine and are avid outdoorsmen. I am a self employed logger, and in our spare time we garden, hunt, fish, forage for wild edible plants, and go camping (not at camp-grounds, but on our own in wild and remote places). Whenever we can be, we are out in the woods and fields. As a consequence of this rugged outdoor lifestyle, we have all been bitten by literally hundreds of ticks.

About the time Lisa and I were first married a strange ailment called Lyme disease was beginning to make its way into the social consciousness. We suspected right from the start that this was the likely cause behind Lisa's problems, but the medical community unanimously dismissed this as impossible.

Most doctors flat out refused to even have her tested for Lyme, and we later learned that the only test they prescribed back then was nearly worthless. So Lisa's Lyme disease went undiagnosed and untreated year after long hard year.

Meanwhile, our girls grew up often caring for the mother who might otherwise have been caring for them. They learned at a very young age to cook and clean and do all the household chores. They took care of our animals; they helped us forage for wild edible plants and grow gardens; they helped us can vegetables and fruits; they helped with the firewood; they helped butcher wild game; they even went hunting and helped supply the family with deer, turkeys and other sources of wild meat.

Both Kayla and Bethany were also very accomplished musicians. Kayla played violin and Bethany played cello. Throughout their childhood and early teen years I was privileged to dwell in a house filled with music. And this was not trite or corny music, but truly rich stuff: the works of the master composers like Arcangelo Corelli, the Bachs, the Mozarts, Vivaldi, Handel, Sammartini, Brahms, Schubert, Beethoven, Dvorak, and many more.

I don't believe it's at all exaggerative to say that both girls excelled in their musical endeavors. They played very difficult music very well, and began making a name for themselves in the classical music community. By their early teen years they were already playing professionally at weddings. Twice Bethany was invited to play her cello in concerts with professionals. The head of the music department at the University of Southern Maine described her as being "scary good", and both girls were offered all-tuition-paid scholarships at the university's School of Music. Both of our daughters could have received a college education without our ever having to pay a penny for it. In many qualified quarters the opinion was freely expressed that they could have enjoyed glorious and prestigious careers as classical musicians.

And then their lives completely fell apart about a year before Kayla graduated from high school, as both girls became seriously ill. Bethany, especially, went down hill very fast. She had showed signs of Lyme disease even as a child, but then at age fifteen her health really crashed. She began to develop strange rashes, excruciating headaches, stomach problems, crippling pain all throughout her body, and strange maladies that the emergency room doctors called "complex migraines". She would wake up at night in severe pain with half her body paralyzed. When the paralysis would wear off she would begin vomiting uncontrollably for hours, retching violently long after there was nothing left to throw up.

Around this same time I had also gotten quite sick, and had actually tested positive for a borrelia infection. The prescribed treatment of antibiotics was remarkably effective, and I soon felt better than I had in years. We insisted that the whole family be tested and my girls all received positive readings. They were given a two week course of Doxycycline, but, unlike me, they did not recover; their symptoms persisted unabated.

The doctors refused to treat them further. They had received the standard treatment, and the mainstream medical community insisted that this was sufficient, never mind that they were still as sick as ever. We were told that, because they had been prescribed a two week course of antibiotics, Lyme was surely eradicated, even though there had never been any change in their symptoms. As was the case with her mother, Bethany (who was much more desperately ill than her sister) was tested for everything else imaginable, and all results were either negative or inconclusive.

In the following months Bethany's stomach problems worsened, and she lost a lot of weight (which she could not afford to lose). The pain throughout her body also intensified, and became excruciating at times. She felt sick constantly. She had severe headaches every day.

In an effort to relieve her constant suffering we did everything the doctors told us to do. We brought her to specialists; we gave her their pills; we tried physical therapy; she was given localized injections; we sent her to rheumatologists; we tried massage therapy and acupuncture, all to no avail. While we spared no expense, she only grew worse and worse. Meanwhile, we were consistently and unanimously told that her problems could not possibly be related in any way to Lyme disease; her Borrelia infection had been treated with a two week course of Doxycycline, and so was no longer a concern. We were told

that there was no such thing as chronic Lyme, and we were told that if she was tested again the results would probably show a false positive.

Her pain and illness were so extreme that she became (understandably) suicidal. I do not believe that it is hyperbolic to say that every day she was enduring torture. She could no longer sleep much, and neither did she want to because, whenever she did, she experienced horrific nightmares. She began to see what she thought were demons, even when she was awake, who were telling her to cut herself and kill herself. She began having seizures and horrific psychotic episodes, and she completely broke down physically, mentally, and emotionally. After one of our many emergency room visits she was admitted into a mental hospital where she was medicated with stupefying drugs. My beautiful, cheerful, delightful girl who once had faced the prospect of a glorious career as a talented cellist, and with whom I had hunted, fished, camped, and enjoyed many wonderful adventures, had lost everything except her life, and in light of the trials that were yet to come, it would have been a great mercy had she lost that too. Meanwhile, my wife was as sick as ever, and getting sicker. Kayla also began to show signs of serious Lyme disease, and at length began having violent seizures and psychotic episodes, complete with vivid hallucinations. She had to stop working and I was left with three seriously ill family members, all more or less house bound.

As bad as things were, we didn't realize that the worst was yet to come. I don't know how we would have survived the next few years had God not sent us an angel from heaven. This angel was a man named Bill Keef, who quickly became my family's dearest friend. He, like us, had suffered much in various ways, including health problems which he had learned to treat outside the mainstream medical paradigm. He helped us to see problems with allopathic medicine: that treatment is often limited to attempts at alleviating symptoms, while the cause is ignored. Sometimes the treatments actually worsen the disease, as they had for my wife and Bethany. This was particularly true in Bethany's case, where her mental illness was addressed only with drugs that gave her a chemical lobotomy and with very bad counseling, with absolutely no regard given to finding and remediating the cause of her disease. This would be like treating a man with a broken leg by giving him stupefying pain killers and by talking to him, without ever addressing the wound. As a result, Bethany worsened under the care of the "experts", and I believe would have surely died had we stayed the course.

Bill moved in with us, began working with me part-time, and became my ladies' volunteer primary care-giver. He cooked, cleaned, did chores, ran errands, made home repairs, helped my girls through seizures and psychotic episodes (which would get very ugly), and most of all, loved us like we were his own family. He did not quit when things got really tough, but happily carried our burdens on his own back, as best he could, suffering right along with us. Without his loving and compassionate care we would not have made it.

With Bill's help (and a great deal of difficulty) we got Bethany out of the mental hospital and off all of the harmful drugs she was taking. Lisa also gradually took herself off her long list of pharmaceuticals (including opiates) and lost a year of her life to withdrawal symptoms. We made the acquaintance of a doctor who was willing to order a series of extensive tests (through blood, saliva, urine and stool samples) which confirmed that we were suffering from chronic neurological Lyme disease, as well as a host of co-infections and other complications.

My symptoms were manageable, but all three of my dear girls were in very bad shape. The only prognosis that could be credibly promised was that the disease would be extremely difficult (if even possible) to beat, that any treatment would make them much worse before (or even if) they got better, and that if they were to recover it would take a long time – probably years. This doctor prescribed a six week course of doxycycline, but was prohibited by state law from treating us further.

So we began treating the disease ourselves with products we ordered online. The treatment was much too harsh, and my girls did not respond well. They began having severe seizures every day, occasionally lasting all day. These included excruciating pain, uncontrollable (and sometimes violent) convulsions and gyrations, inability to breathe for frighteningly long periods of time, hallucinations,

and severe and inexplicable anxiety and terror. We came to refer to these episodes as “the badness”; when they were particularly acute we called them “the bad badness”. In addition to everything else (constant sickness, acute headaches, mental problems, severe burning pain, joint pain, recurring bad badness) Bethany developed another symptom which is often called “sound sensitivity”. If awards were distributed for understatement then this title may well receive the top prize. Any little noise was painful, and would provoke an inexplicable response of utter terror. Even though she knew there was nothing scary about the sound of her family’s footsteps, quiet talking, or even the click of a fork contacting a dinner plate, these sounds would involuntarily terrify her. So acute was her hearing sensitivity that she would clutch her head in pain at the sound of a distant airplane, while her ears were stopped up with soft foam earplugs, with sound-canceling earphones over the plugs. Often we were not even able to whisper, but had to communicate by passing notes, taking great care that the paper didn’t make any crinkling sounds. Along with all this came an involuntary response of extreme anxiety over little things that she knew should not provoke such a response. Sometimes simple questions like “would you like eggs for breakfast?” would send her into a panic, followed by hours of badness. I can’t even imagine the horror of being involuntarily terrified of things that I know are harmless, or even beneficial, yet this was a reality for Bethany.

As a result, there were times when her suffering was endured completely alone, sometimes for days at a time. She would hide away in a sound-proof closet that was furnished with a small cot, and we would leave her meals outside the door. The only way we could communicate with her was by sending text messages on our cell phones.

Mainstream medicine was no help at all, and we finally had to give up on them altogether. Whenever we mentioned Lyme they would stop listening and refuse to take anything we said seriously. Once, during an episode of bad badness, we brought Kayla to the emergency department at the local hospital and she was rebuked and told to stop faking. The best they seemed to be offering us was either admittance into a mental hospital, or drugs that would (at best) afford my ladies a more comfortable death. Treatment of Lyme disease, or any of its co-infections, was ruled out of the question.

At a conference on chronic Lyme disease we met a homeopathic doctor and started seeing her regularly. At first we began to notice some improvements, but also learned that the disease that afflicted us was even more complicated than we had realized. In addition to the customary harm that *Borrelia spirochetes* inflict – pervasive inflammation, destruction of myelin on the nerves and collagen in the joints, back, neck, and brain (resulting in severe pain and neurological and mental problems) – Lyme disease had also destroyed my girls’ immune systems and their bodies’ natural waste-disposal functions. We discovered that this is due, in large part, to genetic disorders which the girls have but I don’t, which explains why the disease has been so easy for me to treat, but so difficult for them.

In a healthy human body every cell is taking in nutrients and disposing of toxins; for my ladies this function was all but shut down. Not only were they suffering from Lyme disease, but also from a whole host of other infections and diseases that a healthy immune system would have been able to stave off, and they were gradually being poisoned to death by the sea of toxins that the rest of us seem impervious to. Some doctors are now comparing this syndrome to AIDS.

Because of this condition my girls could no longer live in our house, which had somehow become polluted with mold toxins. So serious was their condition, and so frail their health, that the vast majority of houses in New England would be no better. They found in time that they had reactions (severe flair-ups of pain, seizures, mental problems, etc.) at relatives’ houses, Walmart, grocery stores, our church building, and almost everywhere else they went.

Not even professional cleaning could suitably remove toxins from our house, so we were forced to leave our beloved home, which we had built ourselves on one of my father’s woodlots – a property on which I had spent innumerable memorable days growing up, and where I had come to love every stream, stone, and tree. So sensitive and frail were my lovely ladies, and so acute was their reaction to our house, that we also had to leave behind all of our belongings. For a couple days prior to our

leaving, Bethany took photographs with a digital camera of anything that struck a nostalgic chord, so the memories could be kept alive even after the source of those memories was lost.

I had absolutely no idea where we would go or what we would do. We had relatives in the area who would let us lodge with them, but my girls reacted just as badly in their houses as in our own. I couldn't afford to rent a place, and besides, it would be awfully difficult to find an apartment that isn't polluted. We even considered living in a tent. And then God supplied our need by sending a wonderful family of His servants to graciously take us in: Mike and Heidi Morse, and their two children, Rachel and Ben. Mike had recently built a garage attached to the house, with an apartment above. They let us stay with them for a year and a half, rent-free, while I looked for and purchased land, cleaned out and sold our old house, and built a new one. In the process they became dear friends, and their generosity still amazes me.

Meanwhile, the rumor mill began to grind into gear. People were seeing me alone at church and elsewhere, and wondered if my wife and I were having marital trouble (which was far from true: our trials had actually drawn us much closer together). People questioned whether or not my family was really as sick as I suggested. They were especially skeptical of the more bizarre symptoms (understandably). This skepticism was fueled by a medical community that publicly denied the existence of much of what we were suffering, even though all of our symptoms were not particularly uncommon among chronic neurological Lyme syndrome sufferers. People did not understand, and we knew that we could not expect them to.

We live in a culture that doesn't have much patience with long-term suffering or chronic illness. As a result, many friendships were lost. People moved on with their lives without us, and of course we can't blame them. Others seemed to become frustrated (or even angry) with my girls for being so sick for so long. Of course, not all friendships have been lost and new ones have been gained. We are deeply thankful to God for those who have remained near and dear, and for a loving, supportive church family.

Our losses have been enormous. None of my ladies are able to be employed outside the home, and are well enough to leave home only occasionally. They can't go to church. They can't even get out to extended-family holiday celebrations. Last fall Bethany's birthday was spent writhing in agony with badness. My daughters, whose talents with violin and cello had earned them the offer of full all-tuition-paid scholarships to college, have had to give up their music. There is no possibility of attending college. We have had to leave our beloved home and all our possessions – even the clothes on our backs.

And none of the suffering that we've endured for year after long hard year has been free: it has cost tens upon tens upon tens of thousands of dollars. I have virtually no retirement savings and no realistic hope of ever having any. I can't possibly afford both treatment (which isn't covered) and medical insurance, so we don't have any of the latter. Lyme has been a hungry monster that has not only caused indescribable suffering, but is also eating up everything, and at the time of this writing shows no sign of losing its appetite.

I've had to work very hard just to stay ahead of the bills, and have barely skimmed a living off the top. I've had to work like a draft horse after nights awake beside Bethany's bed. I've had to work through miserable bouts of illness myself, when I felt like I lacked the strength to fight my way out of a wet paper bag. I've had to work hard through the cold and heat and rain, and even through raging blizzards. I've been tired constantly, right down to the very marrow of my bones – not just physically. I've been too tired and worn out to even grieve properly over our losses. Our home, which at one time had been filled with laughter and music, has for many years been filled at times with deafening silence, due to Bethany's sound sensitivity, and at other times with crying, screaming and terror, but always with pain, sorrow, weariness and loss.

One day it had occurred to me that somewhere between the happy home filled with laughter and music and the dark place filled with terror, we crossed over from one world to a different one, and I'm not even exactly sure when this happened. There was suffering in our lives before this transition, and

there have been happy and pleasant times since, but a transition has taken place none the less. The former world doesn't even seem real any more. It's like a dream, the memory of which quickly fades after the dreamer awakes. Sometimes I have to remind myself that it was ever even real.

Prior to this transition I knew that this present world is a dark place, because Gods word tells me so (Is. 8:22 – 9:1), but I only knew it theoretically. Now I know it experientially. I still see the lovely light of God's grace, both common and special, all around me (even more brilliantly in fact), but I also very clearly see the darkness. Prior to this transition I knew that "all creation groans" (Rom. 8:22), but now I can hear the constant groaning, and I can't seem to stop my own soul from groaning along with it. I can't tell you for sure when we crossed over from one to the other, but I can tell you that we now live in a different world.

Hunting Alone

It's lovely out here, my Precious One:
The autumn chill, the breeze, the warm sun;
The changing seasons their causes plead:
Summer flowers fast going to seed
(Black-eyed Susan, primrose, Queen Anne's lace);
Azure skies spread out before my face;
Bracken leaves all rusted brown and curled;
Thistle down to passing zephyrs hurled;
Bough and bush the migrant masses shake;
Forest scents fill every breath I take.
All these things bring you to mind, my dear,
And oh, how I wish that you were here.

Chapter 2. Some Hallmarks of Our World.

All of us – even the most well traveled and broad-minded – live in microcosms, and we have a tendency to be a bit myopic in our outlook. For this reason, when our world at first experiences a massive paradigm shift, it is very easy for us to think that we are completely alone. But then we begin to realize that there are other people who have had similar experiences, with whom we can relate: people who live in the same world that we do. Sometimes these are people who were there before us, and we never even realized that their world was different from ours until we joined them in theirs. (This, of course, demands that we be forbearing when people fail to understand our world: there was a time when we didn't either, and we cannot expect them to). It's somewhat like buying a bright yellow car, thinking that it is completely unique. And then something interesting happens: you begin to encounter others like it. They were there all along, you just didn't notice.

Perhaps if you are reading this as a recent immigrant to our world, then it might come as an encouragement to you to know that you are not alone. Perhaps it will help you keep on fighting to know that there are others fighting the same battles. When no one around you seems to understand your world, or even scoffs at it, remember that there are many of us who live there with you, and I have discovered that we enjoy a bond of love that the rest of the world would be jealous of, if only they knew. Welcome to our world: we love you, and (unlike Bill Clinton) we actually do feel your pain.

If you are reading this as an alien to our world, then perhaps I can help give you a greater appreciation of it. You will never have anything close to a comprehensive understanding without living in it yourself (for that we can all be thankful), but perhaps I can help you to understand us a little better.

It is my intention in this chapter to attempt to give you a somewhat loosely defined description of our world. Two things are worth pointing out at the outset. First, that our world is one of suffering, and that suffering is chronic, relentless and long-lasting. Everyone experiences suffering to one degree or another, but not everyone has entered our world.

Second, that our world is a distinctly Christian one, and the Christianity of our world is true, Biblical Christianity, not some popular cultural aberration. Chronic sufferers who are unbelievers, or nominal Christians, no doubt have their own world, but it is not the one that we dwell in, and I am hardly competent to comment on their world. If you are a true Bible-believing Christian who loves and serves the Lord Jesus, and you are also a chronic sufferer, then chances are we share the same homeland. Here are some hallmarks of our world.

Our world is a temporally hopeless one

When, years ago, we first received a positive diagnosis of chronic neurological Lyme disease, I was very optimistic. I remember thinking “at last, we finally know what is wrong. Now we can get the girls the help they need and beat this pestilence!” I knew that recovery would not be easy, but fully expected success. I was sure that in a couple of years my lovely ladies would all be up and running.

But then the years crawled by, and my girls grew sicker and sicker. We kept on finding more and more complications, and every treatment ended in disappointment. Every hard-fought battle ended in loss. Sometimes there were glimmers of hope, but these hopes were always dashed. At best, we were like the confederates at Gettysburg, who routed the union army on the first day, but on the second day were subdued, and on the third day utterly defeated. This happened over and over and over again for years; all the while my girls were suffering, sometimes horrifically.

I was the last one to lose hope, but eventually I did. When Bethany had her frequent spells of bad badness, while she twisted and writhed and cried out in agony, I found myself pleading with God to please just take her home to heaven, where before I would have been pleading with Him to heal her. I

never lost my faith; I knew that God could heal her any time He liked, but I also knew that He never promised to, and it no longer seemed plausible that He would.

Please take careful note: I did not say that our world is a hopeless one, but a temporally hopeless one. Oh what a difference a single word can make. Our world is absolutely brimming with perfect hope, just not temporal hope. We are fully convinced that God holds all of our lives securely in His sovereign and loving hands, including our suffering. We know that He is using our trials for His glory and our good. We trust Him with all that we have and all that we are; we just find it hard to believe that our suffering will ever end this side of the great divide.

While we become less and less hopeful that our suffering will ever end in this life, we become more and more certain that it will certainly end, and gloriously so, in the life to come. If you do not share this certain hope, then you may well be part of some other world of chronic suffering (one with which ours no doubt shares an acre or two of common ground), but you are not a citizen of our world. Temporal hopelessness has become quite at home in our world, but it is a world filled to overflowing with eternal, infinite hope.

Our world is a lonely one.

Everyone experiences suffering in this life to one degree or another, but not everyone enters our world. I am often acutely aware of this when I am talking with friends and acquaintances. I realize that I am an outsider to their world, and they are outsiders to mine. This becomes apparent, for example, when I'm asked things like: "how is your family doing?", to which I respond "they're very sick". What follows is often something like: "oh, do they have colds? There's a lot of that going around." Answers like these are perfectly understandable. In most peoples' world that's what they mean when they say that they're sick. However, it also exposes the disconnect between their world and ours. In our world the common cold doesn't even qualify as real illness.

I'm reminded of the Sudanese immigrants who began attending the church that we were members of some years ago (Second Parish Orthodox Presbyterian in Portland Maine). They had come from what we would consider extreme poverty. They were all war survivors who had seen friends and family killed. Some of them were scarred by old battle wounds.

One Sunday my father asked one of them if he was concerned about the economy. The Sudanese man looked quite puzzled. This was not because he didn't understand the words; he spoke English very well. Neither was he the least bit intellectually challenged by the question. I just don't think he understood how anyone could be concerned about such small things as the economy in a country where no one is shooting at us or murdering our families, and where we get to eat every day (three meals, even! Plus snacks!), and where it is reasonably safe to assume that we won't be killed by wild animals. I realize now that it wasn't just my father who was a stranger to the Sudanese war survivors' world; we all were.

In a similar fashion, the citizens of our world are strangers here in western culture. We find it very difficult to care about the things that most people care about. We struggle just to keep our heads up and drag ourselves through each day. It doesn't matter any more whether or not we have well-funded retirement accounts, or how green our lawns are, or what kinds of cars we drive, or where (or whether) we get to go on vacation. Most people in our culture seem to take survival for granted; they are much more occupied trying to fulfill all the things on their "bucket lists". We don't even have bucket lists, and we don't presume upon our own survival: death hangs continually over our heads like the sword of Damocles and often we have wished that the thread would break.

This dichotomy tends to breed a sense of loneliness in our world. The people around us don't usually treat us like enemies, to be sure, but neither do they understand us. They seem to expect us to live in the same sphere that they do: they expect us to care about the things they care about, and do the things they do, and keep up the same frenzied pace, and live the same lifestyle, and hold the same values.

We simply can't. As a result, friendships tend to be either superficial or short-lived. I have some good friendships that have survived my family's illness (I haven't been as sick as my ladies and have been able to maintain these relationships), but my wife and daughters have lost most of their friends. The majority have simply moved on with their lives, and of course we can't blame them at all.

Lisa has had some friends who ended their friendships much more overtly. One indicated that she thought Lisa was a hypochondriac, and that she didn't need friends like that. Another friend would become angry with Lisa whenever she had to cancel plans because of her illness, and would tell her that she just needed to prioritize better, and that she wasn't placing enough value on their friendship. Eventually Lisa reached a point where she didn't want friends any more, not because they disappointed her, but because she couldn't seem to stop disappointing them.

I believe I have discovered another reason why people distance themselves from our world: because they are scared of it, they see it as a threat. We live in a culture that has utterly immersed itself in the hedonistic pursuit of "the good life", and our world presents a monster that has an insatiable appetite for all the things that this culture holds dear. It takes away our ability to play and have fun; it devours the pleasures of this life; it eats up our wealth, and in return, it generously gives us an ample supply of pain, anguish, heartache, and misery.

The "health and wealth" false gospel has done much to exacerbate this problem by selling our culture's hedonism to the visible church, where it has been consumed with relish in many quarters. We are told that God wants us healthy, wealthy, and happy. (If that's the case, then why aren't we? He is uniquely qualified to do something about it.) This influence has driven a wedge between our worlds, even in the church.

Our hedonistic culture does not like to be reminded that its lifestyle is really quite fragile. If our lives could so easily become a terror to us, then so could theirs to them. We prove to them the reality that at any moment the house of mirth could be flooded with tears; without warning Xanadu could come crumbling down. This frightens them, so they shun us. And so the citizens of our world are ostracized, marginalized, and left behind, while the rest of the world races off frantically after the ever-elusive "American dream".

I'm not saying any of this to find fault with anyone, especially those who have simply drifted away. Their lives have moved on, and they now have higher priorities. My point is simply to show how our world is often a very lonely one. I'm merely pointing out, without blaming anyone, that loneliness often becomes a hallmark of our world.

It has been proven to me in the past few years that it doesn't have to be this way. The church that we are members of (Limington Orthodox Presbyterian, in Limington Maine) has made an heroic effort to narrow the divide between our world and theirs. Our pastor, a wonderful, Godly, loving man named Leonard Gulstrom, has been very instrumental toward that end. When my lovely ladies all became too ill to continue attending corporate worship services, he saw to it that a system was put into effect that made it possible for them to attend through the computer. They are specifically prayed for every Sunday. My girls have not been able to attend church in over two years, but they are not neglected and they are not forgotten. Every single week, without exception, many people ask about them, and send their love, and tell me that they are praying for them. This includes some people who barely know them, as well as some new families who have never even met them in person.

No one scoffs at or acts threatened by their disease. They take my family's illness seriously, even inconvenient aspects of it like their hyper-sensitive toxin intolerance. My girls have regularly received cards and letters of encouragement. Many people have helped us generously financially. When we had to build a new toxin-free house because of my girls' illness, we had an awful lot of help.

They still don't fully understand our world, but that's okay; there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, I'm convinced that no one can really understand it without living in it, and it would be wrong of us to expect them to. Neither do I want them to, for their sake. It is truly a beautiful thing to be surrounded by a loving christian family who values us as much as we value them, even while they do not expect us to be a part of their world, any more than we expect them to be a part of ours.

Our world is a desolate one.

One of the most insidious things about the suffering in our world is that it isn't free; we get to pay a very high price for it. In my family's case, the illness that has caused our years of suffering, and that has gained us our admittance into this other world, is not recognized or treated adequately by the mainstream medical paradigm here in the United States. We have long since exhausted every possibility that they offer, and have been forced to turn to treatments outside of the mainstream, none of which are covered by medical insurance. These treatments have wiped me out financially. We are like the woman in Mark 5:26 who "had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse".

My girls' illness has not only eaten up my worldly wealth (such as it was), but other people's as well. A number of people have given us financial aid to help with the on-going medical bills. Last spring my parents and siblings chipped in to pay for a five month treatment for Bethany at a specialty clinic in Florida, at a cost of roughly \$200,000. We are seeing positive signs already, confirmed by the results of on-going lab analysis, but there are no guarantees. Even as I write this, a request for aid is being considered by the diaconal committee of the presbytery of New York and New England of the O.P.C. to get Lisa treatment at the same clinic. A lot of money has been spent and is being spent by me and a lot of other people, and there is absolutely no guarantee that this will not be yet another in a long string of hard-fought and costly battles lost.

My family isn't alone. Plenty of others have suffered much greater losses than we have. Recently Lisa made the acquaintance of a family from Australia who were receiving treatment at the same clinic that was treating Bethany. This country's mainstream health care system's treatment of Lyme disease is pathetically inadequate; in Australia they do not even acknowledge its existence, and do not treat it at all. This family (father, mother and two children) were all seriously ill. They had lost their home, all their savings, and their employment. Extended family was paying for treatment at the clinic, but they could only afford three months. They had to leave prematurely, and we don't know what has become of them.

Desolation comes in more forms than one. The losses that the citizens of our world suffer are not just (or even primarily) financial. We suffer the loss of all sorts of things that we will never recover in this life. My girls, for example, lost their music. Even if they are restored to health in this life, the dreams and aspirations of glorious careers as musicians are gone. Since Bethany has been confined to home, and even worse, often to a dark closet for days on end, it could be argued that she has lost almost everything that this life has to offer. My cousin's daughter Victoria, a fellow sufferer of chronic illness, has been confined to a wheelchair, and her body is nourished through a feeding tube. She is denied even the simple pleasure of enjoying a meal.

It's not uncommon for a healthy person to walk away from a marriage to a chronically ill spouse, on the grounds that he "didn't sign up for this". Really? "For better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health" wasn't even in the fine print; it was overtly stated for all the witnesses, including God, to hear. What an amazing loss, for the one person who has vowed to stick it out no matter what, to run away right when he is needed most. We have a good friend (and fellow Lyme

sufferer) of whom this is true, and Lisa reads accounts of desertion quite regularly. Often a spouse who does not desert physically will do so in other ways, refusing to accept the illness in his family, and neglecting to offer the loving support that is his due.

Whatever form the losses take, our world is filled with them. We cannot do many of the things that other people do, and we cannot have many of the things they have. Much of what the other world simply takes for granted is not available to us in our desolate world.

Our world is a calloused one.

My family and I have been through so much for so long that we find it impossible to be shell-shocked any more. We watched a documentary on chronic Lyme disease called “Under Your Skin” just about the time our daughters were first starting to become seriously ill. I remember being quite shocked by this video’s presentation of what Lyme disease is capable of doing to people. But then I watched the same documentary six or seven years later, and I couldn’t understand why I had previously been so affected by it. It no longer seemed particularly shocking.

The content of the documentary hadn’t changed one bit in the years between the first viewing and the second. What had changed was me, and my whole family. We had been desensitized. We could no longer be moved by the shocking content of the video because it simply wasn’t shocking any more. We had been through much worse.

I’m reminded of what I read years ago in the novel “All Quiet on the Western Front”, by Erich Remarque, which follows the story of a handful of German recruits who went off to fight in World War I. Not long after they arrived at the front the German lines were shelled. The new recruits were absolutely terrified; some of them experienced acute shell-shock. Meanwhile, the battle-worn veterans acted like everything was perfectly normal. That’s because it was. Incoming artillery fire was nothing out of the ordinary. And yes, there were casualties, and that was perfectly normal too.

The citizens of our world are kind of like those battle-weary veterans. Things that other people are quite traumatized by barely effect us any more. A number of people who have witnessed rather mild episodes of Kayla and Bethany’s badness have been quite shocked. They seem to find equally shocking the fact that we are not. These episodes have been part of our daily life for years. Other things that shock other people no longer have that same effect upon us. For example, I’m told by a good friend who has spent over two decades working in the oncology field that when relatively healthy people receive a positive diagnosis of terminal cancer, their entire world is turned upside down. Ours would not be. We would simply put our affairs in order and prepare to go home.

I actually speak from experience. Two years ago Lisa had a large and mysterious mass in one of her breasts. I entreated her to go to a doctor to have it diagnosed, but she would not. She said that even if it were malignant she would not subject herself to the rigors of cancer treatment. She had suffered too much for too long, and she was ready to go home.

We mentioned it to the homeopathic doctor we were seeing at the time, and she treated it with supplements. Like so many other times over the years, I was quite sure that my wife would die. Much to my surprise, the lump gradually shrunk, and is now gone. To this day we have no idea what it was. Here’s the point: Lisa and I both believed she had cancer, she wouldn’t even hear of submitting to a difficult course of treatment, she wanted to go home to heaven, I expected that she would, and although this grieved me, none of it changed our world very much.

I have often heard people say that they cannot imagine losing a spouse or a child. I can. I have been imagining it for years. The loss would be devastating, to be sure. I love my darling Esposita and my precious girls more than any other created things in this world. However, as great a loss as it would be, it is one the prospect of which I have had plenty of time to get used to. There have been times of

intense suffering when I have even pleaded with God to take my girls home, because I love them so much.

Does all of this sound rather calloused? If so, there is a reason why: because it is. We have lived in our world too long to have not been desensitized by it. Our world is a calloused one.

This does not mean that we are insensitive to other people's sufferings, even the common-place ones (although there have been times when I have expressed a rather calloused outlook and have had to apologize). In fact, I believe that our trials have made us much more understanding, not less so. We don't care less about other people's trials, small or large; we care more.

Neither does it mean that our trials no longer affect us. They certainly do. We are like the battle-weary veterans in the German trenches: we've been worn down, and worn down, and worn down by the ongoing battle, and every new fight wears us down further. We are still affected by each new battle, just in a different way: we are beaten down and wearied, but we are no longer shell-shocked.

Suicidal temptations are a very common hallmark of our world.

The content of this section is so shocking to people (especially Christians), and so prone to stir up controversy, that I was tempted to exclude it, but I knew that I would be remiss (not to mention cowardly) if I did. The sober truth is that the temptation to end one's own life is very common in our world. Tragically, our world is marked not only by the temptation, but also by the very act of suicide. In addition to several people we know of but did not know personally, Lisa has had two friends whose enduring battle with chronic illness drove them to take so extreme a measure.

I know that suicidal temptations are a hallmark of our world for two reasons. First, because fellow citizens tell me so. Some of them are very open and unabashed in disclosing this information. Second, because I and my family are personally well acquainted with these temptations; we have struggled with them ourselves, and sometimes the struggle has been very difficult.

In late March of 2019 Bethany gave in to this temptation. My girls had spent months submitting to a long-term course of antibiotic treatment, which involved their injecting themselves deep in their muscles, as close as possible to the bone, with very large needles. The reason for this was to prevent the antibiotics from being released too quickly into the bloodstream. These injections were very painful.

Giving themselves the injections wasn't a problem. They had been through so much worse that it really seemed like a fairly small thing. What was not a small thing, however, was the treatment's utter failure. It looked somewhat promising at first, but after several months left them sicker than ever. The treatment actually made them considerably worse. I'm sure it killed plenty of spirochetes, but it also flooded their bodies with toxins. For those of us whose waste disposal systems are functioning properly, this would not have been a very big problem, but for my girls it was huge.

The doctor we were seeing, a Lyme literate M.D., had run out of tricks. This treatment seemed to be a last-ditch effort. She told us that she had never treated anyone as sick as my girls, and that she was out of options. We were left (yet again) in a state of utter temporal hopelessness.

Bethany had reached a place of deep despair, and she simply did not have the strength or will to keep fighting any more. She was suffering intensely at the hands of a merciless disease that didn't even have the decency to kill her. So she gave in to temptation and took a massive overdose of her pills.

When we had discovered what she had done I honestly was at a bit of a loss as to what I should do. Should we get her to the hospital as quickly as possible, or would it be better to just hold her in my arms, assuring her of my love for her, while she drifted off into the arms of one who loves her even more than I do?

We called for help, and an ambulance was sent to bring her to the hospital during a fine example of a late winter Maine snowstorm. Lisa rode with her and the paramedics, while I followed along behind in my four-wheel-drive pick-up truck, doing my best to keep up on the snow-covered roads. I spent that entire ride earnestly bringing my supplications before the Throne of Grace. The only problem was that I couldn't figure out quite what to pray for: I vacillated between entreating God to spare her life, and pleading with Him to end her suffering by taking her safely home to heaven. He chose the former, and Bethany is still with us in the land of the dying.

People are ordinarily quite horrified by suicide. Have you ever wondered why this is the case? Why does a person's killing himself elicit so visceral a response of horror? Is it because suicide is a sin against God (which it most certainly is)? I don't think so. Other sins, even very serious ones, do not evoke the same response. Is it because suicide separates us from the ones we love? I don't believe this is the correct answer either. If Bethany were to move to Iceland, leaving no hope of our ever seeing her again in this life, then we who love her would no doubt be sad and would miss her, but we would not be horrified, as we would be were she to take her own life.

The reason why suicide is so horrifying to us is because we have a deep-seated innate aversion to death, which is so viscerally felt that we, under ordinary circumstances, can't fathom having the slightest inclination to embrace it voluntarily. This aversion is encouraged in Scripture. Nowhere is death described in friendly terms, but is said to be our enemy (I Cor. 15:26). Even Phil. 1:21 ("to die is gain") does not present death itself favorably. Death is not the benefit, but the portal through which we must pass to realize the gain that is found thereafter. Death is not our friend, and we all know it intuitively.

What most people don't realize, however, (thankfully) is that life truly can become such a terror to us that the terror of death becomes insignificant in comparison. If a person suffers long and hard enough, then the fear of death can eventually be eclipsed by a fear of life; the dread terror that is provoked by the prospect of dying is eclipsed by the more terrifying prospect that this life might continue on. This is the reality for many in our world. Our suffering has been so intense for so long that we often become much less afraid that we might die, and more afraid that we might not die.

This of course does not excuse suicide, any more than a valid excuse can be offered for any other sin. Scripture does not allow for the shedding of innocent blood, whether someone else's or our own. My attempt here is not to justify the unjustifiable. Suicide must never be entertained by the child of God as a viable option, no matter what.

However, I would like to impress upon the reader how understandable such a temptation can be, given the right circumstances, even for the regenerate. While this life has become an utter terror to us, we know that at any moment we could escape into the arms of a loving Savior, and enter a world where there is no longer any sin, suffering, or valleys of the shadow of death. Many very Godly men and women have fought this temptation, myself included. Some have even given in to it. If you haven't become acquainted with this temptation, then I doubt that you have truly suffered in this life as we have. Everyone endures trials and afflictions, but very few have actually entered our world.

I would dare wager that a healthy majority of people have entertained suicidal fancies at one time or another, usually as part of a childish fantasy in which others who hurt them are hurt back: ("I'll show him! I'll kill myself, and then he'll be sorry for what he has done!"). This is not typically the motivation behind this temptation in our world. We don't want to hurt anyone. In fact, it is the strong inhibition to hurting others that has often kept us here through some very dark times.

The motivation behind this temptation is no more complicated than this: we want the pain to end. This life has become a terror to us, and an infinitely better life is only a breath away. However, faithfulness to our God requires that we resist this sinful temptation, like any other. I have found that it helps to remind myself that I am a soldier in the army of the LORD Of Hosts, and that He has told us that the battle will often be difficult. He will sustain us throughout the fight, and we must never play the coward and desert. Nevertheless, the temptation is often very real and very present in our world.

The citizens of our world no longer cling to the things of this life.

We are not ascetics; we do not believe that we can earn merit toward heaven by forswearing the pleasures of this life, or anything like that. In fact, we are delighted to temper this veil of tears with as much of God's common grace as possible, and to glorify Him by enjoying Him here, as well as hereafter, but our hearts are no longer here.

A year ago we moved into our new house. It is small and simple (mostly because of a very tight budget) and was built with toxin prevention as our highest priority. There is no basement. Downstairs there is a kitchen/living room area and one bathroom; upstairs there are two bedrooms. People have asked me how I like the new house, whether or not I am satisfied with how it turned out, whether or not it is my dream house, and questions of that sort. I answer by politely saying that I like it just fine. Or sometimes I attempt to add a touch of good humor by joking about how I wish I could have been able to afford two bathrooms, with three women at home.

These are perfectly appropriate questions, and I very much appreciate being asked them. Nothing that I'm about to say is meant to be critical. But the truth is, questions like these are almost foreign to us in our world. It's only a house. It keeps out rain and snow, and it holds in heat. Are houses things that we're supposed to like or dislike?

I have vague memories of a time when I cared about things like houses, but it seems like an awful long time ago: a different lifetime even, or perhaps a dream. Though we still enjoy much that this troubled little life offers, our hearts and affections are fixed elsewhere: our dream houses are in heaven.

Years past my lot was somewhere else, I think
(Not here on Sheol's dark and gaping brink):
A place that would command the world's esteem;
So sweet a cup as mine was mine to drink.
How far removed that other world does seem:
A different lifetime, or perhaps a dream.

Chapter 3 . How Could a Perfect God Have Created so Imperfect a World ?

I mentioned in the last chapter that our hedonistic culture distances itself from our world because it sees us as a threat. The fact that many of us are denied “the good life”, through no fault of our own, proves that the same can happen to them.

Something very similar happens within the visible church. Much of the broad evangelical church finds our world threatening because its very existence deflates their little god. Their god wants his children happy and healthy and wealthy all the time. He doesn't want us to suffer; he wants us to live the American dream.

Yet, here we are. We love the Lord, and we love His people, and we earnestly seek to know Him, and to serve Him and glorify Him, and all the while we live with constant suffering. Our world forces theological questions that they cannot give suitable answers to.

Atheist apologists love to point to all the suffering in this world as one of the main exhibits by which they seek to undermine a Christian worldview. A dozen or so years ago I listened to the broadcast of a local talk radio show in which this argument was presented. The regular host was absent that day, and a guest host filled his seat; (I can't, for the life of me, remember his name). The date was February 12, the anniversary of Charles Darwin's birth, so this atheist guest host, in commemoration, spent two hours arguing (pejoratively) against the teleological argument. What fools, argued he, Christians must be to believe that this world was intelligently designed. If it were, then it would contain no mistakes, yet (look around!) it is full of mistakes. Pain, suffering, sub-optimal design, etc., all disprove the existence of a benevolent, all-powerful God. A perfect God would never have created so imperfect a world.

The 19th century German naturalist and philosopher, Ernst Haeckel, minted a brand new name for this atheistic argument: he called it the “dysteleological argument”. Here it is presented in a quotation of Haeckel's forebear, Charles Darwin: “I cannot persuade myself that an omnipotent and benevolent God would have designedly created the ichneumonidea with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.” In more contemporary times, the dysteleological argument has been widely promoted by such antitheistic celebrities as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens.

A century before Haeckel, the Scottish philosopher, David Hume, argued the same point in his book “Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion”. This work features the mock conversation of three fictitious philosophers – Demea (a deist who believes in an unknowably transcendent god), Cleanthes (an anthropomorphic theist), and Philo (a naturalistic-leaning skeptic). The topic of conversation is natural religion, or more specifically, whether or not God can be known through an examination of natural phenomena. (If only their examination had not been so narrowly limited to what their humanist presuppositions found admissible, their conclusions could have been very different.) Here Philo is arguing the insufficiency of the teleological argument:

Did I show you a house or a palace, where there were not one apartment convenient or agreeable; where the windows, doors, fires, passages, stairs, and the whole economy of the building, were the source of noise, confusion, fatigue, darkness, and extremes of heat and cold; you would certainly blame the contrivance, without any further examination. The architect would in vain display his subtlety, and prove to you, that if this door or that window were altered, greater ills would ensue. What he said may be strictly true: the alteration of one particular, while the other parts of the building remain, may only augment the inconveniences. But still you would assert in

general, that, if the architect had had skill and good intentions, he might have formed such a plan of the whole, and might have adjusted the parts in such a manner, as would have remedied all or most of these inconveniences. His ignorance, or even your own ignorance of such a plan, will never convince you of the impossibility of it. If you find any inconveniences and deformities in the building, you will always, without entering into any detail, condemn the architect.

Here Philo is saying that all the mistakes (“inconveniences and deformities”) that we find in any building must be blamed on the architect. Likewise, the architect of this world must bear the blame for all the imperfections that we find in it. This being the case, of course, the architect could not be an all-powerful and benevolent God.

It might shock some Christian readers to hear me say this, but David Hume’s major premise is actually quite correct: a perfect God (a God who cannot make mistakes) would, in fact, create a perfect world (a world free from mistakes). If this world is full of imperfections, as David Hume suggests and many within the visible church affirm, then we have a very serious problem. A theological/philosophical question is forced that we do not have a suitable answer to: why are there imperfections in this world; where did they come from? If God is incapable of making mistakes, then how is it that He has created a world full of mistakes?

Was it because He wasn’t intelligent enough? Did He lack the wisdom to know how to create a perfect world? Maybe He didn’t mess up in the execution of His sovereign plan; maybe the problem was in the plan itself: perhaps God is a bad planner. Maybe He intended to create a perfect world, and had all the necessary power to do so, but simply lacked the wisdom and insight to know how.

If so, then He is not a perfect God, and He is not the God of the Bible. Scripture presents an all-knowing God whose wisdom knows no limitations; indeed, a God who personifies perfect wisdom (Isa. 40:14; Prov. 1:20; 3:19-20; Rom. 11:33-34).

Maybe, on the other hand, He is an all-wise God but not an all-powerful God. Maybe the problem is found, not in a deficiency in intellect, but in ability. Perhaps He knew perfectly well how to create a perfect world, and fully intended to do so, but simply wasn’t able; the task was too difficult for Him.

If this is the case, then He is not a perfect God; neither is He the God of the Bible. Scripture presents a God who is unrestrained in the execution of all His holy will. Matthew 19:26 tells us that “with God, all things are possible”. The God of the Bible is not only a God who is able to do all His holy will, but also a God who actually does do all His holy will. The Westminster Shorter Catechism gives a lovely definition of God’s works of providence in answer to question 11: “God’s works of providence are His most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.” This definition leaves no stone unturned. It tells us that God, by His most holy wise and powerful providence, actually preserves, sustains and governs all of His creatures (not just some of them) and all of their actions (not just some of their actions). God is in complete control. This doctrine is very well supported by Scripture. Psalm 115:3 tells us that God does whatever He pleases; He “does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; no one can restrain His hand, or say to Him ‘what have you done?’” (Dan. 4:35); not one single sparrow ever falls to the ground apart from His will (Matt. 10:29); even the roll of the dice falls out according to His predetermined purpose (Prov. 16:33); He works all things (that really means all things) together according to the counsel of His will, for His own glory (Eph. 1:11-12); He is the sustaining and governing power behind all of His creation (Acts 17:28); even the free and evil choices of men fall neatly into His sovereign plan, by His immutable decree (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23). If there are divine mistakes and imperfections in this world, then a God such as this does not exist. If God has messed up in His works of creation and providence, then He is not a God who cannot mess up.

Maybe God is perfectly able and wise, and so would have no difficulty in creating a perfect world, but the reason why He hasn’t is because He lacks goodness. Perhaps he is an evil god who has created this world of suffering out of spite.

This too is clearly contradicted by the very clear teaching of Scripture (Ps. 9:7-8; 97:6; 98:2; Isa. 11:4-5; 33:5; Rev. 19:16).

Popular Evangelical Christianity seldom offers anything even approaching a sound answer to the dysteleological argument. If the best answers we have to offer are those found in pop-culture Christianity, then Ernst Haeckel and David Hume win the debate. Allow me to take the time to rehearse some of these common answers, and to attempt to expose the error in them.

Sin and suffering have nothing to do with God; He desires that we be always and only healthy, wealthy and happy. Sin and suffering find their origin in the work and influence of satan.

This answer could take a variety of nuanced forms, but I believe I have caught the gist of it: don't blame God for your troubles, they come from the devil; God doesn't want you having any troubles. Here are a couple quotes from Kenneth Hagin's booklet "Don't Blame God".

Many blame God for causing accidents, the sickness and death of loved ones, and such natural catastrophes as storms, earthquakes and floods. Even insurance companies call natural disasters "acts of God", but they are not acts of God at all! God is not responsible for any of these things... their author is satan.

To make it more personal: healing belongs to you. It belongs to you because sickness is of the enemy. It belongs to you because you are a spiritual child of Abraham. It belongs to you because sickness is a curse, and Christ has redeemed you from the curse of the law.

Here is another quote from Dr. T. J. McCrossan's "Bodily Healing and the Atonement":

Not only is satan the originator of sickness, but he is the propagator of it, for the Bible informs us that he has special evil spirits whose chief business is to make people sick.

If it is never God's will that we suffer, then why does our world exist? If God doesn't want us suffering, then why do we suffer? The citizens of our world would be delighted for Him to take away our trials; He is free to do so any time He likes. If God intended one reality (one free from suffering) but has gotten another, then He is incompetent, and is certainly not the God revealed to us in the pages of Scripture.

It won't help a bit to argue that the problem is found not in a deficiency in God, but in us (perhaps a weak faith, or some such thing). Such arguments accomplish absolutely nothing in their attempt to solve the dilemma. If God is sovereign, then He is sovereign over us and every aspect of our being. If our lack of faith renders Him powerless to help us, then He is an incompetent god. It is undoubtedly true that God requires faith and that He is honored by it (Matt. 6:30; 8:10; Rom. 3:28; 4:5-22; 9:32; Gal. 2:16; Col. 1:23), but it is equally true that the God of the Bible will certainly accomplish all His holy will, independent of our faith, or lack thereof. A strong faith does not empower Him; a weak faith is no encumbrance. If God would have this world free from suffering while suffering is ubiquitous, then He is incompetent. To say that He would help us if He could, but He can't because of our lack of faith, is only to affirm His incompetence. What a pathetic little god he would be who is unable to overrule our faltering faith, for whom our weak faith provides an insurmountable obstacle to the accomplishment of all His holy will.

It's probably also worth pointing out that a strong faith is actually a very common hallmark of our world. My own personal observations have shown that the citizens of our world typically do not have a weak and faltering faith. (Perhaps I should have included this in the previous chapter.) Some of the

greatest statements of faith in Scripture have come out of very dark places of deep suffering. Consider, for example, Psalm 88, which begins with a statement of faith in verse 1 (“oh Lord God who delivers me!”), followed by 17 verses of utter darkness. Many others of the Psalms could likewise be cited (22:1-5; 3:1-3; 5:1-3; 6; 7:1-10; 10; and this list has barely begun to scratch the surface). Consider also Lamentations 3. This is a decidedly dark chapter, composed by the prophet of God from a decidedly dark place. Yet in verses 21-24 we find an absolutely stunning statement of faith: this very text is the one that inspired the hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness”.

I have observed very strong faith in places of suffering in the world around me, as well as in God’s word. Consider the testimony of Joni Eareckson Tada, for example, who was converted after a serious accident that left her whole body paralyzed for life. What a wonderful example of solid faith she has been, and what an encouragement to many others of us. If faith effects healing, then why is Joni still in a wheel chair?

I and my family would testify that our trials have strengthened our faith. We love the Lord, and trust in Him, and lean on Him much more now than we ever did before. A strong faith does not “claim” healing, or “believe God” for a temporal health that He has never promised in this life. To the contrary, a strong faith is not shaken by trying circumstances; it trusts in the Lord even in the valley of the shadow of death; it says with Job “though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him”. I am convinced that there is proportionally much more of this sort of faith within our world than there is without.

The argument under consideration has more wrong with it than just its utter rejection of the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. It is also dualistic. It demotes God and elevates Satan to a place where they are seen as having equal ontological standing. Although proponents of this theology would likely deny this claim, nevertheless, this is the logical conclusion to which their teaching must be reduced.

There is only one being (the true, eternal, transcendent God of all creation) who occupies a place on the divine side of the creator/creature distinction. Satan is a mere created being, like us (though not in every respect). He is an evil deceiver and tempter, roaming about like a fierce lion seeking whom he may devour, but he is not an evil god. He is a fellow creature, as much under the sovereign control of God’s providence as we are (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Zech. 3:1-2; Luke 22:31-32).

The idea that God never wants us to suffer in this life is absolutely foreign to Scripture. The proponents of this false doctrine often offer in its support an argument derived from the fallacy of the false dilemma. Here’s how that works: one position (God does not want us to suffer) is juxtaposed against another (God does want us to suffer). An attempt is made to disprove the latter by appealing to texts that support the former (like Psalm 103:1-6, for example). These texts show that God’s decree includes pleasant things for us, therefore there must be no place in His sovereign plan for unpleasant things.

Here’s the problem: there are also plenty of places in Scripture where we are clearly told that God has ordained suffering for us (Acts 14:22; I Peter 4:12). If these two positions are truly in contrary juxtaposition, then they can’t both be true. Are we to assume that the Polyannic texts overrule the unpalatable ones? How do we know it isn’t actually the other way around? How can we be sure that the happy verses aren’t disqualified by the unhappy ones? Maybe God actually wants only suffering for us, all the time. The false dilemma could be used conversely to make this case, just as well as the other.

The correct answer (and this is what makes the dilemma false) is that both are true. Sometimes God has ordained pleasant things for us, and sometimes He has ordained unpleasant and difficult things. Both come to us from the hand of the same sovereign God (Lam. 3:37-38; Job 2:10).

In summary, the argument under consideration presents a god who is much less than the God of the Bible, and in no way could be said to be a perfect God.

Suffering does not find its origin in God, but in man's free will.

Probably the most common answer to the dysteleological argument is found in what we could call the "free will" response. This is the answer that Josh gave to his antagonistic atheist professor in the movie "God's Not Dead". Those people involved in the writing of the movie's script, as well as its production, apparently found this argument so persuasive that they portrayed the astute atheist philosophy professor as being left speechless. I doubt that in real life he would have been so easily dumbfounded. He would have been very familiar with all of Josh's arguments, and would have been able to answer them quite handily.

The argument looks something like this: in order for God to establish a race of creatures who possess free will, He needed to risk allowing evil. If our wills were limited in any way (for example, to the possibility of only choosing good), then they would not be truly free. Free will requires our having the ability to make wrong choices. When man fell into sin, we fouled up God's utopic intentions, but this was a risk He had to take in order to establish a race of creatures with free volition, who are capable of real and meaningful love for Him. As it relates to suffering, this argument is usually followed by the explanation that suffering is a direct necessary consequence of free human evil.

This argument fares quite well, provided it is subject to no more than a surface-level scrutiny. The very first thing, and perhaps most obvious thing, that I would like to point out in response, is that this argument offers not one shred of intellectually justifiable comfort to the sufferers in our world. It would be absolutely no affront to our free wills for God to heal us. He has healed many people throughout world history. We have numerous examples of supernatural healing recorded for us in Scripture (Matt. 14:14; 19:2; Mar. 1:34; 3:10; Luke 4:40). God could do the same for us. We freely will to be healed, and have for many years. If anything, God is overruling our free wills by not healing us.

There is a lot more wrong with the "free will" argument. There are not only philosophical/theological problems (which I will get to in a minute or two), but there are even ethical problems. I have seen this argument presented in ways that I believe are profoundly dishonoring of God. A fine example can be found on a website called "the life", in answer to the question "do evil and suffering disprove the existence of God?" Here is Michael Horner's answer:

As the atheist Evan Fales admits, "Alvin Plantinga has convinced most of us – if indeed, we were not already convinced – that the free will defense exonerates God from the imputation of a certain kind of incapacity. Not even an omnipotent being can guarantee the best of all possible worlds, for if such a world must contain created free beings, it will be partly up to them what transpires."

Consider whether God could actualize the possible world where Adolf Hitler never started the second world war. We know what Adolf Hitler's free decision was, given the exact conditions leading up to his decision. God cannot actualize the world where given those same conditions, Hitler would choose to not start the war. Even though it is a logically possible world, God's power to actualize is limited by what in fact Hitler would choose to do. Thus, God cannot actualize any other world where Hitler would not start the war unless He did not allow Hitler his free will with that decision or did not create Hitler at all.

Some might suggest those latter two possibilities would be preferred. Possibly, but that misses the point of the example. I could just as easily have used a more innocuous example, say whether God could actualize the possible world where Michael Horner eats an apple at 3pm on March 29, 2014. What Michael Horner would freely choose to do in that situation determines what is in God's power to actualize. If Michael would choose to eat the apple God cannot actualize the world where given the same situation Michael would not eat the apple. It is up to God whether to give Michael freedom or whether to create him at all, but it is not within the power of even an omnipotent God to actualize the possible world where Michael does not eat the apple.

If we remove all the unnecessary epistemic window dressing (“actualizing possible worlds”, and so forth), then what Michael Horner is saying is this: “not even God could have prevented me from eating that apple.” If this is true, then God is incapable of directing any of the affairs of men, contrary to the very clear teaching of Scripture. There is no point in praying for the salvation of lost friends, or for God to impart wisdom to civil authorities, or to intervene on behalf of the oppressed, or for the defeat of evil-doers, or for safe travels, or for almost all the other things that we customarily bring as petitions before the throne of grace. All of these things require God’s having the ability to superintend the wills of men. His response to our petitions would have to be “I’m sorry; I’m not capable of actualizing the possible world that you have requested.” Divine sovereignty would be a myth. Yikes! Please, Lord Jesus, grant repentance to your church!

It simply isn’t true that free will requires our having the ability to choose evil. God could have created us with a will that is inclined neither to good or bad, and then protected us from any possibility of temptation to sin; or He could have created us with a will that would only ever choose good. It is absurd to suggest that this would in any way compromise the freedom or honesty of our choice. (More about this in the next chapter). This is, after all, a fine description of the nature of our free will in heaven.

If the reason why there is suffering in this life is because God had so much respect for the dignity of human free will that He would not in any way impair the autonomous exercise of our wills, then what are we to make of heaven? Will the life to come be a step down for us; will He have less respect for our human dignity there than He does here? If the only way to prevent a world of suffering here would have been to do injury to human free will, then the same would hold true in the world to come. Will heaven be a less-exalted plain of existence, one where we are free from suffering, but at the expense of our precious human dignity? It won’t do to say that in heaven we will be fully sanctified, and as such will possess a free will that will only choose good, because the argument under consideration depends entirely upon the assertion that that sort of freedom is meaningless. It is argued that freedom to choose the right is only meaningful if we possess equally the ability to choose the wrong.

Hence, unless God takes away our autonomy, there is no guarantee that we won’t make wrong choices in heaven, ushering in a world of equal or greater suffering there. If all the imperfections in this life were a necessary possible consequence of the exercise of human freedom, then the only way to guarantee that this won’t happen would be to limit human freedom, which is something that this argument will not allow.

Thankfully, none of us has an autonomous will. We do have free will, to be sure. But our freedom is most certainly limited. If limited freedom is meaningless, then none of us have real meaningful freedom. This fact is abundantly proven both in natural and special revelation. None of us is the master of his own destiny. We cannot make it through a single day without our decree being overruled. There has not yet been a single day in my entire life when everything has gone exactly according to my plan.

Our freedom is completely hemmed in by limitations of every conceivable sort. It is limited preceptively (there are things we are not allowed to do), it is limited contingently (we are not infinite), it is limited with respect to our abilities (there are things we are not able to do), and it is limited by our very nature (we are born enslaved to sin).

My girls learned to shoot at a very young age. By the time they reached their early teen years they were skilled and responsible enough that I felt no compunction about letting them use any of my guns any time they liked, without even asking first. This definitely qualifies as real, meaningful freedom. However, it was also very limited freedom. They were not to use my guns to shoot at each other, the house, my logging equipment, or a lengthy list of other things: this they were not allowed to do. Neither could they use my guns to shoot down the moon: this was beyond their and my firearms’ capabilities. Neither could they be in the back yard shooting at targets while they were performing with

their violin and cello as part of an orchestra at Merrill Auditorium: they cannot be in two separate places engaged in mutually exclusive activities at the same time. Their freedom was real and meaningful, even while it was very limited. So it is with all of us all the time, respecting the exercise of our free wills. We have real, meaningful freedom, but we are not the masters of our destinies. We are not autonomous; our freedom is very limited.

The doctrine of an autonomous will in man is also at odds with what we read in Scripture, where, as stated before, we are introduced to a sovereign God. To say that man is autonomous while God is sovereign would be a bona fide contradiction. Both sovereignty and autonomy are absolute terms; there are no degrees of either. “Some sovereignty”, or “a little bit of autonomy” are both oxymoronic propositions. Freedom, on the other hand, is not necessarily absolute. There is nothing contradictory in saying that God is sovereign, while man enjoys freedom of will. In fact, it is by God’s sovereign decree that man’s free agency is established. But again, it would be a contradiction to say that God is sovereign while man is autonomous.

Scripture teaches that the free choices that we make (even the most heinously evil) come under the governance of God’s sovereign control, and fall out according to his predetermined plan (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23). God’s sovereignty is in no way bound by human free will; human free will is in every way bound by God’s sovereignty (Prov. 21:1). Though our every choice is freely made, we will never choose contrary to God’s predetermined plan.

The free will argument turns this truth on its head. It would have us believe that God would have ordained a reality free from suffering if He could, but that He had risk His plan being overruled in order to give us free will. As a result, we upset His decree by sinning, which resulted in a world of pain and sorrow. It makes God’s sovereignty subordinate to the will of man, in which case God would have no sovereignty at all; he would be an incompetent god. On the other hand, there is nothing inconsistent with either Scripture or logic in saying that man has a real free agency that is completely subordinated to the sovereign will of God.

There is yet another point that is common to the free will argument that I would like to take issue with. It has to do with the so-called “ripple effect” of sin. It is argued that the suffering here in this life is no more than a necessary and contingent consequence of human evil. God did not intend a world of suffering, but then man fell into sin and set in motion a sequence of direct consequences which resulted in all the pain and anguish that is so ubiquitous in this life.

It is certainly true that sin is the efficient cause of suffering in many cases (for example, the misery of a hangover as the direct consequence of a night of drunken carousing). However, if we elevate this principle superlatively, if we suggest that all the suffering in this world is the direct natural consequence of sin, then we have crossed the line into some very problematic doctrine.

Sin is disobedience; it is lawlessness (I John 3:4); it is “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 14). Sin is active; it is the doing or thinking or saying of something forbidden, or the neglect of those same that are required. Sin is not some mystical force; it does not have creative power. People acting in sinful ways did not cause malaria, babesia, bartonella, borrelia, anaplasmosis, etc., to come into being ex nihilo. There is only one creator of all things (God), not two creators (God and sin). Human disobedience is not the natural efficient cause behind tornadoes, hurricanes, or seismic shifts in the tectonic plates, resulting in earthquakes and volcanic activity. Sin did not efficiently cause these things while God stood helplessly by.

Sin is bound up in all of these things, of course. None of them, or any other suffering in this world, would exist were it not for sin. But sin is not their natural efficient cause, apart from the decree of God. Sin does not have creative power; it did not create destructive pathogens; it did not cause formerly benign snakes to become venomous; it was not the efficient force behind the intrusion of weeds into Adam’s garden. Please don’t misunderstand what I’m saying. I’m not suggesting that there is no ripple effect associated with sin. Neither am I saying that sin is not the reason behind this world’s cursed condition. I’m simply saying that you can’t divorce the curse from the one who did the cursing.

Borrelia spirochetes do not exist because sin somehow created them; they exist because God created them, because of sin.

The dysteleological argument claims that a perfect God who does not make mistakes would not have created a world so full of mistakes as this one is. The free will argument responds by saying that God is not at fault; we are. We used our free will in destructive ways that overturned God's intended utopia, and ushered in a world of sin and suffering. God is a God who cannot make mistakes while the world is full of mistakes, but this is not His fault, it is ours.

Here's the problem: if the exercise of man's free will fouled up an otherwise perfect world, throwing a monkey wrench into God's intended purpose, then He is not a perfect God. He is the one who created us with our free will. If the exercise of that will overturned His intended utopia and ushered in a world of suffering which He did not intend, then He is obviously not a God who cannot make mistakes, because He made a rather monumental mistake in not giving us the good sense to exercise our wills only in beneficial ways, or to see to it that we exist in an environment where there is no temptation to sin. We will exercise free will for all of eternity in heaven without sin; He could have given us the same sort of free will here in this life. To exercise our wills without sin will be no affront to our freedom in heaven, it would be no affront to our freedom here. It simply isn't true that freedom of will requires having the ability to choose evil. Friedrich Nietzsche is credited as having said "which is it, is man one of God's mistakes, or is God one of man's?"

It doesn't matter what sort of spin we put on it, the bottom line is simply this: if God intended one result from His efforts but got another, then He is incompetent; He is not the God of the Bible. If God's works of creation and providence were fouled up by any of His creatures, including man, then He is not a God who exercises sovereign authority in His works of creation and providence. To attempt to pass the buck by placing the blame on man and his free will does nothing to solve the problem. The God of the Bible actively preserves, sustains and governs all of His creatures and all their actions, including man and his free will. If He intended to create and sustain a utopia here in this life but ended up with a mess instead, then He is not a perfect God, regardless of the reason (be it man's free will, or any other). A God who made the mistake of creating a race of men with the ability to overturn His intended purpose is not a God who cannot make mistakes. If the free will argument is correct, then so is Friedrich Nietzsche, and the God of the Bible does not exist.

The "Optimal Design Engineering Trade-offs" Argument

This argument suggests that God had to allow sub-optimal "blunders" in one area, in order to achieve a greater end somewhere else. In other words, God was forced to choose the lesser of two (or more) evils. Hence, the suffering in this world would be even greater had God not allowed it, for the purpose of preventing greater ills somewhere else.

David Hume addressed this argument in the quote I included earlier. Here is an excerpt: "The architect would in vain display his subtlety, and prove to you, that if this door or that window were altered, greater ills would ensue. What he says may be strictly true: the alteration of one particular, while the other parts of the building remain, may only augment the inconveniences. But still you would assert in general, that, if the architect had had skill and good intentions, he might have formed such a plan of the whole, and might have adjusted the parts in such a manner, as would have remedied all or most of these inconveniences. His ignorance, or even your own ignorance of such a plan, will never convince you of the impossibility of it." Later in the same work Hume wrote (again, in the words of Philo):

The fourth circumstance, whence arises the misery and ill of the universe, is the inaccurate

workmanship of all the springs and principles of the great machine of nature. It must be acknowledged, that there are few parts of the universe, which seem not to serve some purpose, and whose removal would not produce a visible defect and disorder in the whole. The parts hang all together; nor can one be touched without affecting the rest, in a greater or less degree. But at the same time, it must be observed, that none of these parts or principles, however useful are so accurately adjusted, as to keep precisely within those bounds in which their utility consists; but they are, all of them, apt, on every occasion, to run into one extreme or the other. One would imagine, that this grand production had not received the last hand of the maker; so little finished is every part, and so coarse are the strokes with which it is executed. Thus, the winds are requisite to convey the vapours along the surface of the globe, and to assist men in navigation: but how oft, rising up to tempests and hurricanes, do they become pernicious? Rains are necessary to nourish all the plants and animals of the earth: but how often are they defective? How often excessive? Heat is requisite to all life and vegetation; but is not always found in due proportion. On the mixture and secretion of the humours and juices of the body depend the health and prosperity of the animal: but the parts perform not regularly their proper function. What more useful than all the passions of the mind, ambition, vanity, love, anger? But how oft do they break their bounds, and cause the greatest convulsions in society? There is nothing so advantageous in the universe, but what frequently becomes pernicious, by its excess or defect; nor has Nature guarded, with requisite accuracy, against all disorder or confusion. The irregularity is never perhaps so great as to destroy any species; but is often sufficient to involve the individuals in ruin and misery.

So, the question arises: why couldn't an omniscient and omnipotent God create a world where all the parts "hang together" without their becoming "pernicious"; without "involving individuals in ruin and misery"? David Hume was right. A God who needs to make these kinds of trade-offs is not a perfect God.

God's creation has, because of sin, fallen into an imperfect condition, but this condition can and will be reversed. One day God will gloriously restore His creation to a perfect state.

I have personally heard this answer given in response to the dysteleological argument, even in reformed circles. It certainly sounds good, and I believe it is a sound answer, but to a different question. If the question were something like this: "whatever happened to this world's Edenic paradise? Why do we find ourselves in an estate of sin and misery? Will God leave us forever in this accursed condition?" then a sound and ready answer could be found in the one given above. However, it needs to be pointed out that, in order for it to be a sound answer to any question, it must be recognized that a different definition of imperfection is being assumed than the one implied by the dysteleological argument. Because of this, it misses the point entirely, and gives a very incorrect answer.

In his house analogy David Hume presupposes that pain and suffering are mistakes. He then takes the argument a step further by pointing out that the one who bears the blame for these mistakes is the architect (God). If we respond by saying "yes, God has made mistakes in His works of creation and providence, but don't worry, one day He will set it all to right", then we have conceded the nonexistence of the Bible's God. The God of the Bible is a perfect God who executes all of His works without blunder. If He has made a single mistake – even one that He corrects five minutes later – then

He is not a God who cannot make mistakes, and He is not the God who is revealed to us in the pages of sacred Scripture.

When I have heard this answer given I am confident that the ones giving it did not mean to make this mistake. They were assuming a different definition of imperfection. It is perfectly proper to say that the world is imperfect if we simply mean that it is filled with suffering and evil, or that it is under God's curse, or that it is not yet in a glorified state.

The problem is this: that if we assume this definition then we will end up avoiding the question, and not answering it at all. We all agree that the world is filled with suffering and evil. The question is, did this condition result from incompetence on God's part? Did the master architect make mistakes in this world's design? If we are asked "did suffering and evil result from Divine blunders?" and we respond by saying "don't worry, one day God will remove all suffering and evil from the world", then we have avoided the question and failed to answer it. We have given a correct answer to a different question.

The Correct Answer

In the house analogy, David Hume's argument is presented as a *Reductio Ad Absurdum*, which takes the syllogistic form of *Modus Tollens*. Thus posited, it would look something like this:

A perfect God would necessarily create a perfect world.

The world is imperfect.

Therefore, the world was not created by a perfect God.

The problem with the popular answers that I rehearsed earlier is that they all join Hume in denying the consequent, allowing for a sound deduction. They all agree that the world is imperfect. I would like to humbly suggest that this is a grave mistake; the world is not flawed in the sense necessary to David Hume's argument. The truth is, the consequent must be affirmed, and Hume's deduction is therefore invalid. Please allow me to take the time to explain.

I realize that it sounds counterintuitive to say that the world is perfect, even in its current state. Bear in mind that I chose my words carefully when I said that the world is perfect "in the sense necessary to David Hume's argument". There is a sense, of course (well supported by Scripture), in which this world could be said to be imperfect. The Bible tells us that this is a dark world (Isa. 8:22-9:2); it is a world with which God and His people strive (Mal.1:3); it is a world filled with suffering and evil (Rom. 8:22-23); it is a world where God's righteousness is affronted and His glory insulted (Rom. 1:21-32). These are realities that displease God and that He will one day gloriously reverse (Rev. 21:3-5). In this sense the world must truly be understood to be imperfect.

However, this is not the definition of imperfection necessary to David Hume's argument. His argument is entirely dependent upon the assertion that an all-powerful and all-wise God would not have created this world of suffering. In his house analogy Hume clearly described the unpleasant things of this life as being mistakes. The question isn't whether suffering and evil exist, or whether or not they are displeasing to God, or whether or not God will one day reverse this world's cursed condition; the question is whether or not suffering and evil exist because of imperfection in God; whether or not they are Divine mistakes; whether or not God intended one reality but ended up with something altogether different. Hume's syllogism restated with more precise definitions would look something like this:

A perfectly wise, perfectly powerful, and perfectly righteous God would necessarily create a world where everything behaves perfectly according to His righteous decree.

The world is filled with suffering and evil.

Therefore, the world must not have been created by such a God.

I can imagine being accused of constructing a straw man in my restatement of the major premise. After all, the dysteleological argument doesn't define a perfect world as being a place where everything behaves perfectly according to God's righteous decree. But I would argue that this is not a straw man: it is a definition that is absolutely essential to the argument if it is to be used as a proof for the nonexistence of the God of the Bible. A perfect God would certainly create a perfect world, but He would create a world that is perfect according to His own perfect definition of perfection, not according to anyone else's flawed definition. In order for the argument to work as a proof for the nonexistence of the Bible's God, the Bible's God needs to actually be present in the major premise. Any other definition of earthly perfection absents the Bible's God, and the syllogism becomes a proof for the nonexistence of a god of man's own imagination.

This being the case, the argument fails because it commits a common critical thinking faux pas called "equivocation". An equivocation has taken place when the definition of a word or clause changes from one premise to the next, forcing an invalid deduction. Here is an example that I have often used:

No man has two noses.

I have one more nose than no man.

Therefore, I have three noses.

The error is found in a change in the definition of "no man". In the first premise it means "none of the men who are"; in the second premise it means an absence of men. Rewritten with the equivocation exposed, the error becomes obvious:

Of all the men who are, none of them have two noses.

I have one more nose than an empty space.

Therefore I have three noses.

That I have one more nose than an empty space means that I have one nose, not three. That no one else has two noses is irrelevant. The equivocation cleverly disguises the fact that the first and second premises really have nothing to do with each other, making the drawing of any valid conclusion impossible.

So it is with the dysteleological argument's attempt at disproving the existence of God. The major premise necessarily defines earthly perfection the Bible's way; in the supporting premise the arguer defines it his own way. Here is the syllogism rewritten with equivocation exposed:

A sovereign God would necessarily create a world where all things fall out according to His righteous decree.

The world isn't what I would have it be.

Therefore, God doesn't exist.

Even a devoutly religious atheist would have to admit that the above deduction is invalid, provided he has even a shred of critical thinking ability (and honesty). We cannot legitimately deduce that a God who works all things according to the counsel of His own will must not exist because He has failed to work all things according to the counsel of Ernst Haeckel's will.

There are two ways that we could attempt to save Haeckel's syllogism by amending it to remove the equivocation. First, we could do so by consistently defining perfection his way in both premises. Here's what that might look like:

Ernst Haeckel's god would create a world free from evil and suffering (a "perfect" world).

Evil and suffering exist (an "imperfect" world).

Therefore Ernst Haeckel's god does not exist.

Here we have a sound syllogism, a necessary deduction, and a very correct conclusion. Imaginary gods such as this do not exist, and the modus tollens presented above proves it. If we define perfection both in God and in the world Haeckel's way throughout the syllogism, then there is no longer an equivocation, the deduction is sound, and we have a splendid proof for the nonexistence of an imaginary god.

The second way that the syllogism could be amended so as to remove the equivocation would be to define perfection the Bible's way throughout. Here is how that might look:

A perfectly wise, perfectly powerful and perfectly righteous God would necessarily create a world where everything behaves perfectly according to His righteous decree.

There is no reason to believe that anything is acting contrary to, and every reason to believe that everything is acting consistently with, God's perfectly righteous decree: God's word tells us so.

Therefore, there is every good and sound reason to believe in the Bible's God.

There is nothing in nature, pleasant or unpleasant, that gives us any reason to doubt the existence of the Bible's God. There is perfect consistency between what natural and special revelation tell us about Him and His works of creation and providence. In other words, the world is perfect even now, according to the definitions necessary to the dysteleological argument. There are absolutely no mistakes anywhere in God's works of creation and providence. If we define perfection consistently the Bible's way, then we are forced to affirm the consequent, the syllogism fails, and the proponents of the dysteleological argument are exposed as what the Bible calls "fools" (Ps. 14:1).

Imagine Adam at six hundred years of age working with some of his sons and servants in one of his crop fields. Along comes a young atheist philosopher. He pauses for a while and watches Adam and his men toiling under the oppressive mid-day sun, and then calls out: "Adam! I've heard you believe in a perfect God. But don't those weeds that you're pulling out of your garden prove that such a God could not exist?"

How might we expect Adam to respond? A perfectly appropriate response might look something like this: "you fool! These weeds do not disprove the existence of God! He's the one who put them there!" (Gen. 3:17-19).

Since I am a Christian who has a deep appreciation for nature, I have sometimes been asked why God would have created things like mosquitoes and ticks. I have gotten the impression that the ones asking the question have supposed that these creatures must exist to fill some ecological niche. I suppose that is possible. We can be sure, however, that they exist for another very important reason: to bite us, make us itch, and make us sick.

When man fell into sin God cursed His creation for our sake, and He clearly takes credit as the one who is ultimately behind the suffering here in this life (Gen. 3:14-23; Lev. 14:34; Rom. 8:19-22). All the pestilences of this life, including malicious viruses, bacteria, and spirochetes (the likes of which have done so much harm to my family) are all marvels of God's creative genius. They do exactly what He designed them to do, and they do it very well. None of them are mistakes.

Genesis 3:16: To the woman He said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children..."

Imagine Eve, having just given birth to her first child, saying: "Wow! That really hurt! Surely all that pain must prove the nonexistence of the very God who promised me pain in childbirth!"

What a fool we would think she is. Yet, that is Ernst Haeckel's dysteleological argument. Haeckel has looked around, observed exactly the sort of world that the God of the Bible has promised us, and then used those observations as the basis for his rejection of belief in this God. The fool, indeed, has said in his heart "there is no God".

The fool says in his heart "there is no God",
And takes his bow while fellow fools applaud.
He blinds his eye to what it clearly sees;
He scorns the throne of Truth on rigid knees;
Refusing e'en an epistemic nod
He says "I'll do and think just as I please."

Chapter 4 . But, What About Evil?

If suffering in this life results from God's curse, as Scripture teaches, and if the curse was a righteous and just response to man's fall into sin, then doesn't the answer given in the previous chapter simply push the problem back a bit? After all, if God is sovereign, then isn't He sovereign even over man and his fall into sin? If God cannot make mistakes, then allowing (or even ordaining) sin must not have been a mistake; it must have been part of His divine plan. But if evil is part of God's plan, then how is He not complicit in it? How is He not evil Himself? How can man be held accountable for his sin if it was foreordained by a sovereign God? It is all well and good to say that suffering is not a mistake, that it results directly from God's curse because of human rebellion. But then how can we account for God's allowing sin without being evil Himself? How can a good and all-powerful God permit evil?

Let's take a more thorough look at these questions. Did God ordain man's fall into sin? Is evil part of God's sovereign plan? Yes He did, and yes it is. I don't believe that God's word leaves any room for ambiguity on this point. This fact is clearly evidenced in the doctrine of election. Scripture teaches that God's plan of redemption involves the election of a segment of humanity out of a lost and fallen condition and into a restored and reconciled condition. This election is said to have taken place before the foundation of the earth (Matt. 25:34; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8). God purposed to redeem lost sinners long before there were any lost sinners to redeem. In other words, God's plan of redemption was not a reaction to sin; sin was part of that plan.

It is also worth noting that the God of the Bible claims to be exercising (and claims to have exercised since the beginning of time) absolute sovereign control over all of His creation at all times. Not one single sparrow ever falls to the ground apart from His will (Mat.10:29-31). That necessarily includes all those sparrows that my friends and I illegally (sinfully) killed with our BB guns when we were lads. "The King's heart is in the hands of the Lord; like rivers of water He turns it wherever He pleases" (Prov. 21:1). That necessarily includes all of those innumerable times when the hearts of the kings of this wicked world have turned away from the right, and toward evil, often heinously so (Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh, Hazael, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Pol Pot, to name just a few). Proverbs 16:33 tells us that "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord". That necessarily includes all of the times when the casting of lots has left the families of gambling addicts impoverished. Ephesians 1:11 tells us that God works all things together according to the counsel of His own will, and Romans 8:28 tells us that God works all things together for the good of His elect. "All things" necessarily includes the persecution and martyrdom of His people, as well as a fine assortment of other evils (Rom. 8:36).

How, then, is God not complicit in evil, and therefore evil Himself? How can it be that He is not the author of sin? There are neither simple nor easy answers to these questions. In fact, I believe that the correct answers expose us to doctrine that is too deep for any of us to fully comprehend. However, we can at the very least make an attempt at comprehension, and perhaps draw closer to it.

Scripture teaches unapologetically both that God is sovereign and that man is a free and responsible agent. When we sin we are not coerced to do so against our wills, and so are accountable. At the same time, God does in fact exercise sovereign control over even our free wills. Both of these truths coexist simultaneously and harmoniously without contradiction.

This concurrent relationship is presented in many places in Scripture. God's superintendence of man's free will is clearly taught in texts such as Proverbs 21:1 and Daniel 4:35, while man's free agency and moral culpability are clearly taught in texts such as Ezekiel 33:10-11. Elsewhere we see both sides of this concurrent relationship juxtaposed side by side (Prov. 16:1 and 9, for example). Consider also Jeremiah 18:1-11. In the first six verses we see God's sovereign control over the affairs on men (v. 6 "Oh house of Israel, can I not do with you as the potter has done?" declares the Lord.

“Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, oh house of Israel”.) Immediately following is a call to repentance, appealing to human responsibility (vs. 7-11).

Likewise, consider Philippians 2:12-13 (Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.) Is sanctification our work or God’s? I believe the correct answer would be that it is both. It is God’s work in us (God’s sovereignty), and through us (human freedom being its necessary second cause). Not only does God work in us the doing, but He also works in us the prior willingness to do the doing (v. 13). Nevertheless, our free and responsible wills are active in the process (v. 12).

Another fine example can be found in Genesis 50:15-20 (especially verse 20). What Joseph’s brothers did to him was truly evil, and was meant as such. But what they meant for evil, God meant for good. They acted freely and so were culpable before God, but He sovereignly superintended their actions for the accomplishment of His own good end.

Both God’s sovereignty and man’s free will live together in perfect harmony. God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, including all of our free choices. This may well blow fuses in our brains, but it is very clearly not contradictory. A true contradiction involves propositions that make truth claims that are mutually exclusive. A couple of popular examples are found in the concepts of a square circle or a married bachelor. If the shape is a square, then it cannot at the same time be a circle; if the man is married, then he cannot at the same time be a bachelor. A real contradiction is easy to spot: one truth claim refutes the other; one precludes any possibility of the other being true.

But this is not the case with God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. Both truths are philosophically compatible; I would venture that it would be impossible to show any real logical incompatibility between them. That an action is foreordained does not mean that it is not also freely chosen. That I am freely choosing to write these words in no way precludes the possibility that my doing so was also predetermined to fit into the sovereign plan of an all-powerful God. There is absolutely nothing in the doctrine of God’s foreordaining decree that requires logically that we be forced to act contrary to our wills; there is absolutely nothing in the doctrine of man’s free agency that requires logically that our free choices not be determined.

The problem that many people face in attempting to grasp this concurrency is that they confuse free will with autonomy. Too often we are not satisfied with freedom, we want to be our own ultimate masters, not God. God’s sovereignty and human autonomy would in fact be irreconcilably at odds; there we would find a real, bona fide contradiction. If God is the sovereign master, then I cannot be; if I am the sovereign master, then God cannot be. Thankfully, the former is most clearly true, not the latter. Free will we have, as clearly taught in Scripture; autonomy we do not have.

I have noticed that Christians who deny God’s sovereign superintendence of man’s free will cannot do so consistently. I have never yet met a Christian (and many a nonchristian, even) who does not claim for himself the promise in Romans 8:28. But God cannot be working all things together for our good unless He is working all things together, and all things must necessarily include the free choices that we make.

Also, they are quick to credit God for having intervened in their lives in ways that would be impossible were He not sovereign over their free wills. Here is a fine example. Someone I knew well (we’ll call him Frank) was driving a large bus a number of years ago on a busy highway when a front steering tire blew. Before he was able to subdue the runaway bus it lurched uncontrollably across two lanes of travel. Although the highway was congested with traffic, there “just happened” to be no one in those two lanes beside him at that exact moment. Frank credited God for having protected him.

But how can God be credited for having protected him unless God superintends the free wills of men? Frank was driving the speed that he freely chose, in the lane that he freely chose, and so was everyone else. Everyone in the area was where he was on the highway because of a series of free choices. So, there are only two possibilities: either God had nothing to do with protecting Frank, and

his deliverance from a nasty accident was nothing more than dumb luck, or God exercises sovereign control over the free wills of men.

We naturally chafe under this doctrine. We don't want our free wills to be subject to the sovereign decree of God. We want to be the ones in control; we want God to be our co-pilot; we want Him there so we can say "Jesus take the wheel" when things get rough, but we'll occupy the driver's seat until then. But this is not the case at all: God is in complete control of all of His creation at all times, including man and his free will.

Attempts are made to justify an autonomous exercise of free will by man, while still preserving the doctrine of God's sovereignty. The most common is the prescient explanation ("prescient" means "foreknown"). It is suggested that God "looks down the tunnel of time" into the future, simply observes what man will autonomously choose, and then predestines accordingly. The problem with this solution is that it is no solution at all. It still requires that the future be determined, which means that man's will is not autonomous. If God "looks down the tunnel of time" and sees me writing this book, then what are the chances that I won't write it? Could I thwart God's perfect foreknowledge by choosing something other than what He foreknew? If so, then how can foreknowledge be called foreknowledge? God's perfect foreknowledge would be reduced to imperfect foresuspicion, or foregueswork, forcing us into the heretical doctrine of open theism. Those who hold to this position sometimes try to hide behind a convoluted argument in which they appeal to God's being outside of time, but this argument doesn't work; it doesn't change the matter one bit: if God knew that I would do A, but instead I did B, then God's knowledge (fore or otherwise) was imperfect, and He is less than omniscient.

The prescient explanation makes an even bigger mistake. It puts the cart before the horse; it makes God's foreordaining decree a response to man's autonomy. It makes God's sovereignty the servant of man's free will, rather than the other way around; it puts man in the driver's seat and makes God his co-pilot.

The Christian philosopher, William Lane Craig, attempts to avoid this dilemma by claiming that God's foreknowledge is "logically prior, but not chronologically prior." But what does "logically prior" even mean? In order for foreknowledge to be "logically prior", it must also be chronologically prior. The very definition of foreknowledge is knowledge of an event that comes before the event in time (in other words, chronologically prior to it). When William Lane Craig says that God's foreknowledge is not chronologically prior, what he is saying is that God's chronologically prior knowledge is not chronologically prior: an obvious violation of the law of identity. There is nothing "logically prior" about chronologically prior knowledge that isn't chronologically prior.

All of this to attempt to avoid what he thinks is a contradiction, but really isn't: that is, the compatible relationship between God's sovereignty and man's free will. While God has predetermined whatsoever comes to pass, man is a morally and willfully free agent. "Predetermined" does not mean "forced". That God has predetermined that I would write this book does not mean that I am not also freely choosing to write it; no one is forcing me to do it against my will. To avoid what he thinks is a contradiction but isn't, William Lane Craig has embraced a very real contradiction: chronologically prior knowledge that isn't chronologically prior.

Lest we forget the question under consideration, allow me to restate it, by way of reminder. If God is sovereign over the sinful choices we make, then how is he not complicit in evil, and therefore evil Himself? How can we be held accountable for our sin?

Here is the answer: although human depravity was ordained by God as part of His sovereign plan, nevertheless, He is not the author of sin; we are. We are accountable because when we sin we do so freely and willfully. All the while, God is sovereign even over our sinful choices, for which we are responsible. There is great mystery here, to be sure, but not a hint of contradiction.

I will not pretend that I, or anyone else, can give an adequate solution to this paradox. It should not surprise us when our finite minds are unable to fully comprehend the workings of an infinite God. However, there are some points that I would like to make which will hopefully draw us nearer to

comprehension, near enough to perceive that this comprehension is possible, in fact certain, in the mind and actions of our perfectly wise and omnipotent God. These attempts should not be seen as each standing alone, but should be seen as standing together, complementing each other.

1. A distinction should be made between ordination and authorship. To ordain means to appoint, or to order. Author, when used as a verb, means to bring into being. It is no contradiction to say that God has ordained that which He has not authored, that He has ordained that we would sin, without being the efficient cause behind our sins. God has decreed all things, but this does not mean that He effectuates all things by His own direct action, as He did in His work of creation, for example. God often accomplishes His purposes through what the Westminster confession calls “second causes”, such as the free agency of His rational creatures.

When God ordains our free choices, He does so without compelling us to act contrary to our wills. For this reason He can hold us accountable when we sin. Yes, our sins are all foreordained by God as part of His eternal plan; nevertheless, we are not compelled to sin against our wills.

2. Freedom of will is not arbitrary but rational. Hence, our free choices are always made according to our nature, and never contrary to it. A free will that makes decisions without a rational basis simply does not exist. All of our free choices are made in accord with our own desires. For example, no one would suggest that his will isn't free because, when he's hungry, he always chooses to eat food instead of a box of sixteen penny nails. Although God's rational creatures act freely, they do not do so arbitrarily, without reasons behind their actions.

It is not inconsistent either with Scripture, or sound reason, to suggest that an omnipotent God is able to so order the world that all the free choices that all His rational creatures make, according to their natures, will not fail to accomplish His foreordained end. We have little difficulty seeing how this works on a small scale. Consider again the example of Frank and the blown bus tire. Although I don't know this to be true, suppose that just prior to the incident Frank had been listening to music on the radio, but then lost a clear signal. Suppose that as he fiddled with the radio dial he slowed down a couple of miles-per-hour, and this put him in exactly the right spot on the highway to be out of harm's way when the incident occurred. We have no difficulty seeing how an all-powerful God could orchestrate things like static on the radio as the contingent second cause behind the accomplishment of His divine purpose. But what about the contingencies behind the static on the radio? And what about the contingencies behind those contingencies, and the contingencies behind those contingencies, etc.? And what about all the second causes that put all the other motorists on the highway that day where they were? And what about the contingencies behind those second causes, and the contingencies behind those contingencies, etc.? And why did the tire blow in the first place? How does this fit into God's plan?

I think you get the idea. It is not so much the concept of God's working sovereignly through second causes that blows our minds, but the scope of it all. He doesn't just intervene here and there. God is in control of every event, every second cause, every contingency, etc. There is absolutely nothing outside of His sovereign control. All things (really, all things!) are working together for the accomplishment of His purpose, according to His own will, for His own glory, and that without violating the free wills of His rational creatures. Wow. And that even includes the sinful choices that we make.

God's decree makes Him the author of free moral beings, who are themselves the authors of sin (James 1:13-15).

3. God's decretive will, respecting sin, can be said to be permissive. God does not directly cause sin, but He does permit His moral creatures to directly cause sin. God allows in His creature that which He takes no pleasure in, or even that which is offensive to Him.

We need to be somewhat careful here. God's decree to permit sin does, in fact, render it certain. The entrance of sin into the world did not take God by surprise, neither did it throw a monkey wrench into His plans. Sin is bad, it makes God angry, and He commands that we not do it. However, when we do, we are accomplishing His purposes (Mat. 18:6-7).

4. It should be noted that when we refer to God's decretive will and His preceptive will, that we are actually using the word "will" in two different ways. In the former it is determinative, describing that which is according to God's eternal purpose, which will certainly come to pass. In the latter the word "will" is moral, denoting that which God commands us to do. God takes no pleasure in our violations of His preceptive will. When we sin we offend Him, and He rightly becomes angry. But this does not mean that our sovereign God cannot use these violations for the furtherance of His eternal purposes. Indeed, He does. Neither does it mean that these violations of His preceptive will were not ordained by Him in His decretive will. They were. Neither does it mean that we are not responsible for these violations. We are. Although our sinful choices are rendered certain by God's foreordaining decree, they are, at the same time, freely made. No one is compelled by God's decree to sin against His will.

I hope that these resolutions, considered together, help to show that the doctrine of God's sovereignty, in relation to man's responsibility, is not contradictory, but is rationally coherent and Biblical. I realize that a completely satisfactory case has probably not been made. This is not because a satisfactory resolution does not exist, but either because our finite minds would not be able to understand it, or because God has seen fit to keep it hidden from us, or both.

So, God is sovereign over the affairs of men. He has permitted sin without authoring it; He has ordained evil without being its direct efficient cause. How does this solve the problem? God could just as easily have not ordained evil. Can't He at least be blamed for forming a sovereign plan that includes evil, when He could just as easily have formed a plan that didn't? Even if we grant that God is not the author of evil, at the very least He failed to prevent it. Wouldn't a good and all-powerful God have at least prevented evil?

The "problem of evil" has been widely used by atheists for many years as a proof for the nonexistence of God. Here is what that proof looks like:

An all-good and all-powerful God would not permit evil to exist.

Evil exists.

Therefore there is no all-good and all-powerful God.

In response I would like to pose a question of my own: what sufficient reason are you competent to supply that would support the assumption that God should have prevented evil? The problem with the atheists' syllogism is that it depends upon a major premise that cannot be credibly defended. An all-good and all-powerful God is free and able to permit evil, provided He has a good and morally sufficient reason for doing so, and we have no good reason to believe that He doesn't.

I would like to take that answer a step further by pointing out a more foundational problem endemic to the atheists' argument: that it rests entirely on a philosophical foundation of human autonomy, and so is epistemologically unstable. The atheist does not have the epistemic authority or competency to make the assumptions that he has made.

There are two hidden and unstated presuppositions that are made by any atheist who uses this argument. The first is the assumption that he is competent to make any sort of judgment on the matter, but he is not. When he says that an all-good and all-powerful God would not permit evil, he is making an assertion that he cannot support; he has absolutely no way of knowing how evil fits into God's

perfectly righteous and sovereign plan, and so is in no position to judge why God would or would not allow it.

The second presupposition is this: that there is such a thing as a transcendent ethical standard by which evil can be defined. This presupposition is even more damaging than the first; it actually backfires and destroys the atheist's own argument. If the materialists are right and the heavens are empty, as Christopher Hitchens used to say, then there is no one to whom we are accountable, and we are forced into a trap of subjectivity that necessarily leads to nihilism. In the atheists' world I have no right to tell you what to do, and you have no right to tell me what to do. I might not like it if you rape and murder my wife, and you might not like it if I burn down your house with your family locked inside, but neither one of us has any right to condemn the other's actions as objectively evil. Neither one of us has any right to force the standards of his morality on the other. If the materialists are right, then neither one of those actions is any more evil than a rock rolling off a mountain and breaking a stick.

The more respectable atheists (in my opinion), like Friedrich Nietzsche, openly admitted that their worldview reduced to nihilism, but there has arisen a new crop of "soft" atheists who seem bent on finding some rational justification for absolute norms of ethics without a transcendent law-giver. All of their attempts fail. Age-old attempts have included appeals to majority rule, or social compacts. But these are, by definition, subjective. What right does a majority have to impose its will on a minority? In fact, that very act would be seen by our secular culture today as an act of immorality.

It seems to have become popular in atheist circles to claim that absolute ethical norms "just are", like laws of physics, or absolute norms of rationality (even more hopelessly problematic in an atheistic worldview). This is impossible; absolute normativity requires an absolute law-giver. But it also fails to escape nihilism. If such absolutes did exist (again, impossible), then how could we ever know them? An atheist whose work I have read recently (Andrew Sneddon, professor of philosophy at the University of Ottawa), claims that we discover absolute ethical norms through the hard work of careful investigation (from his book "A Is For Atheist", under "Morality, or Loving the Good with and without God"). But what do we conclude when his investigation leads him in one direction and mine leads me in another? Who is right? How can we possibly know? His investigation leads him to his own subjective morality, and my investigation leads me to my own subjective morality, and never the twain shall meet, and so we find ourselves still hopelessly mired in nihilism. Another atheist I encountered recently on You Tube (Tom Jump) sought to justify objective ethics from a foundation of subjective intuition. Hmmm....

There is only one way that this (otherwise) hopeless trap of subjectivity can be escaped, and that is by submitting to the rule of the transcendent law-giver (God), who has clearly revealed Himself to us. It has been argued by some atheists (like Andrew Sneddon, mentioned above) that even theism cannot supply a suitable foundation for ethics, because of the arbitrary and transient nature of this foundation. If the only reason that an action is objectively wrong is because some god says so ("divine command theory"), then how can we know that he won't change his mind, and that what was wrong today won't be right tomorrow? The only way for there to be any such thing as a transcendent ethic, according to this argument, would be for it to transcend the whim of any god.

When offered in an attempt to undermine a truly Christian foundation for ethics, this argument does a pathetically poor job: it mercilessly beats away at a straw man, while missing the real target by a mile. Absolute ethical norms (just like absolute rational norms) are found, not in the whim of god, but in the very nature of an eternal and immutable God. Objective right and wrong are what they are because of who and what God is. Ethics is rooted in Divine Ontology, not divine command. Here we find a solid foundation for ethics, and there can be no other. Without a transcendent law-giver, there can be no transcendent law. Without God there is no such thing as evil.

So, by pointing to evil as proof for the nonexistence of God, the atheist is actually making a self-destructive argument. He is saying that God is guilty of allowing breaches of absolute ethical norms

that cannot exist without God. His argument against the existence of God in fact (though unwittingly) presupposes the existence of God.

I would love to spend more time developing this argument, especially as it relates to rationality, but I will resist the temptation, since the focus of this book is more an apologetic for God's role in human suffering, and less an apologetic for the existence of God (although the former would be entirely irrelevant without the latter). Here's the point: without God there cannot be any such thing as even a concept of objective evil. The atheist is seeking to disprove the existence of God by pointing to something that cannot exist without Him.

If we abandon the unstable epistemology of human autonomy (we get to decide what is true), and replace it instead with the solid epistemology of God's self-revelation (God reveals truth to us), then we find ourselves in need of a whole new syllogism:

God is both good and all-powerful, and as such works all things together for the accomplishment of His own good purposes (Eph. 1:11; Rom. 8:28).

Evil exists.

Therefore, God must have a morally sufficient reason for ordaining evil, a reason that is unknown (perhaps even unknowable) to us.

None of us are competent to judge otherwise.

In closing, I would like to add what might look like an appendix to this chapter, but a very important (even necessary) one. In this chapter and the previous one I have spent some time defending a Biblical understanding of God's sovereignty. Many professing Christians attempt to help God save face by compromising this doctrine. I do not believe that they have thought through the implications of their misguided theology very carefully. I would like to suggest that if we lose the doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty, then we suffer a loss along with it that every professing Christian should be quite uncomfortable with: along with the doctrine of God's sovereignty we lose practically everything else that we as Christians hold dear.

What do we have that the world doesn't? We have the hope of heaven. No matter how much we suffer here, our sufferings are momentary and light, and unworthy of even being compared with the weight of glory that awaits us in the life to come (II Cor. 4:17; Rom. 8:18). But if God is not sovereign, we lose this hope. No matter how good His intentions, if God is incompetent, we cannot trust Him to not make a mess out of the next life.

We have the blessed invitation to boldly approach the throne of grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16), with the assurance that God hears us, and will answer our petitions according to His will (I John 5:14-15). We are invited to "cast all of our cares upon Him, for He cares for us" (I Peter 5:7). But what good is any of this if He is less than an all-powerful God? Why would we bother to bring our petitions to a god who maybe can hear us, but maybe not, and who is unlikely to be able to help us even if he desires to?

We have the assurance that our lives here have purpose; even our trials and afflictions, endured for the glory of God, are storing up for us an incomparable weight of glory for all eternity (II Cor. 4:17). That is, provided God is powerful enough to accomplish this for us. If He is not sovereign, then there are no guarantees.

We have the promise from God that if we seek first His kingdom then He will take care of everything else, according to His will. Therefore, we need not worry: for the Christian, this life can be stress free (Matt. 6:25-34). But if God is not sovereign, then this is an empty promise. We have the promise in

Romans 8:28 that He is working all things together for our good. But this would be impossible, were He not working all things together.

Brothers and sisters, we serve a sovereign God. He is working all things together (even evil and suffering) for our eternal good. He holds all of His creation safely and securely in the palms of His loving and sovereign hands. This is a God in whom our trust is very well placed.

Oh Lord our God, how oft and long have we,
Your people who would rest in thee,
Been driven far away from Zion's hill
By forces bent upon our ill
(The fire, the pestilence, the chain, the sword)
Into the dark and weary night
Where all the blessings of our loving Lord
Seem turned to fright.

Chapter 5. To the Praise of His Glorious Justice, Mercy and Grace.

We serve a God who is both loving and sovereign. He is a God who cannot make mistakes, and who has not made mistakes. This is a God who is worthy of our love, our worship, and our praise, a God in whom we can certainly put our trust. But this doesn't answer all our questions, does it? A sovereign God could have ordained a different reality. Why didn't He? Why did God ordain a reality in which there was a fall into sin? Why not one without sin, and therefore without suffering? Does God's word give us any insight into the matter, or are we left entirely in the dark?

The most popular answer to these questions is the free will argument that I spent some time examining two chapters back. I do not believe it is a sound answer, but since it has become so widely accepted within the Christian sub-culture, I think it deserves a second glance. Here it is in an excerpt from David Limbaugh's book "Jesus on Trial".

"Why, then, does God allow evil to exist? I've read and thought a great deal about this question, and I think the best answer is a rather simple one. God permits evil to exist for the same reason He allowed it to arise in the first place: because He can't destroy evil without eradicating free will, which is necessary for a moral universe....Ravi Zacharias says that scholars through the years have posited four possible alternatives.

1. He could have not created at all.
2. He could have created human beings but given them no free will.
3. He could have created an amoral world where there was no such thing as good or evil.
4. He could have created the world we live in, where good and evil exist and we have the possibility of choosing either.

The first option doesn't require much discussion, except to repeat that He could have chosen not to create us, being in a perfect Triune relationship without us, but He chose to anyway, despite all the anguish it would entail. As to the second option, what would be the point of creating a world full of androids? They certainly couldn't have given and received love in any genuine sense. And what would be the point of the third option, creating an amoral world? If you remove morals altogether, then you remove goodness. Only option four permitted God to make us in His image – beings with free will who are capable of love and spirituality. As Ravi says, of the four choices, our world is the only one where love is genuinely possible."

There are two problems with Ravi Zacharias's argument. The first is hardly relevant to the content of this chapter, but I can't help myself. The third possibility above is quite seriously incorrect. Since objective ethics find their origin in the very nature of an immutable God, it is impossible for Him to create a world in which there is no concept of good or evil. For example, God could not create a reality in which it would be acceptable for His creatures to worship other gods. God could not have created an amoral world; to do so would be contrary to His nature.

The second problem is that the argument limits the possible solutions to four (one of which is simply incorrect), when in reality there are other very obvious possibilities. God could have created a world in which good and evil exist, and given us a free will that would only choose good. He could have created us with the desire and ability to always and only choose the right, without the slightest inclination to ever choose the wrong. This would be no affront to our freedom of will; free will does not require that we have the ability to choose evil.

Or, God could have created us with a free will that is inclined neither to good nor to evil (as Adam had in his pre-fall condition), and then placed us in a world where we are never exposed to the slightest temptation to sin. This would not be difficult for an all-powerful God, and it would be no affront to human free will.

In fact, we possess a free will here in this reality that is no less limited. Without His gracious regeneration of our spiritually dead hearts, none of us would ever have any desire or ability to love God at all, or to obey Him (in other words, to choose good). We love God only because He has first loved us (I John 4:10, 19). Our repentance unto life, by which we are enabled to love God, does not originate in an autonomous human choice; it is granted to us by God (Acts 11:18). Our vivifying faith (without which we cannot love God) is not ultimately our work, but God's work in us; it is a gift from God (Phil. 1:29; Eph. 2:8-9). We are by nature slaves of sin (Rom. 6:16-22); we are dead in sin (Eph. 2:1). Without the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, no one has the ability to choose to love the true God, or to come to Him in faith and repentance (John 3:7-8; 6:44). No spiritually dead sinner has the autonomous will that this argument is dependent upon. Without regeneration our wills are enslaved to sin, yet still free within these limitations.

It is a bad argument to say that our love for God is meaningless unless it is autonomously chosen. If that were the case, then no one would have meaningful love for God, because none of us have ever loved Him at all without His sovereignly granting us the ability to do so in the regeneration of our spiritually dead hearts. Therefore, it won't do to say that God had to risk permitting evil in order to secure for Himself the love of His creatures. To the contrary, the entrance of sin into this world (effecting, by God's decree, a change in our very nature) made it impossible for us to love Him at all, without His first lovingly removing our hearts of stone, and giving us new hearts of flesh (Ezek. 36:26; I John 4:19).

It would be no affront to human free will (which cannot possibly be autonomous) to create us with the ability and desire to love God fully without our having the slightest inclination to sin. This is, after all, an apt description of the type of free will that we will have for all of eternity in heaven. This will not be a lesser, but a greater freedom, since we will no longer be enslaved to sin. To possess free wills that will only choose good will not make us androids in heaven; neither would it do so here in this life. God could have given us the same free will here that we will have in heaven. It is absurd to suggest that it would cast aspersions upon the honesty of our love for God were He to remove our desire or ability to hate Him.

The free will answer is a non-answer. It fails to offer any real solution to the problem. It depends upon a type of free will (autonomous) that we clearly do not have. If free will must be autonomous in order to be meaningful, then either we will no longer possess free will in heaven, or a death blow is delivered to the blessed hope of a better life to come; either we will be transformed into androids, or the possibility (probability) exists that we will make wrong choices and paradise will be lost. The free will argument offers absolutely no solution to the problem of evil and suffering.

So, why did God ordain man's fall into sin? Why did he decree that, as a result, we would henceforth be born with a totally depraved nature? If there had been no fall into sin, then there would be no divine curse; if there had been no divine curse, then our world of relentless suffering would not exist. To say that suffering results from God's curse because of human rebellion only pushes the question back a little farther and deeper. Why is there human rebellion? Why did our sovereign God ordain man's fall into sin? If not to preserve human free will, then why?

I realize that these are emotionally charged questions. I am not ashamed to admit that they have been for me too. Before you read further, please remember that the answers I am about to give are given with credibility; I have the necessary "street cred". If you doubt this, please go back and read the first two chapters of this book again.

Also realize that as I answer this difficult question, I am doing so with God's clear revelation as my philosophical final authority. As Martin Luther said when ordered to recant at the Diet of Worms, "my conscience is captive to the word of God...here I stand; I can do no other."

Soli Deo Gloria

The very first thing that we humans need to realize as we consider a Biblical answer to the above question, is that we are not the center of the universe. God does not exist to serve our purposes; we exist to serve His.

Far too much man-centeredness has managed to slither its way into popular Christianity in our day. Yes, God does care deeply for His people; He loves His elect with a fatherly love that is beyond our comprehension (Rom. 8:28-39). There are no benefits in this life that can measure up to those found in serving our Lord. When we seek first the kingdom of God there is a lot in it for us, both in this life and, most ultimately, in the life to come (Mark 10:30). However, none of this means that it is God's chief end to glorify man. To the contrary, it is man's chief end to glorify God (Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 1). In fact, I believe it could be correctly said that it is also God's chief end to glorify God.

Often where Scripture presents to us promises of blessing, we also find an appeal to this higher end. Consider, for example, the twenty-third psalm – a very familiar text. This beautiful psalm expresses how the Lord, our Good Shepherd, cares for His sheep. He provides for our physical needs (v. 2); He nourishes our souls (v. 3); He protects us from real danger, and sustains us in times of trial (v. 4); He vindicates us before our enemies (v.5); He treats us with goodness and mercy (v.6); He gives us a place in His own home (v.6). These beautiful promises of blessing show the loving care that our Heavenly Father has for us. But verse three reminds us that none of this blessing is an ultimate end in itself; it all points beyond itself to a higher goal: the glorifying of God (“for His name’s sake”).

The main theme of all of Scripture is found in God's plan of redemption. This is, after all, why He took on human flesh in the form of our Lord Jesus Christ, and came to live among us. He came to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11-16), and thereby to pay the just penalty for the sins of all of God's elect (Rom. 3:21-26). Jesus made this payment so we would be redeemed and enjoy all the benefits of redemption, including eternal life in God's heavenly kingdom. Even this wondrous redemption, however, is not all about us: it serves a higher purpose. Christ humbled Himself and died for our sins (Phil. 2:5-8), that He might receive our worship, that God would be glorified (Phil. 2:9-11).

So, I believe it would be more appropriate to say that the theme of all of Scripture is God's redemption of His people, for His glory. We miss the point entirely when we leave off that last clause. It is for God's glory, ultimately, that we are saved (Phil. 2:5-11); it is for God's glory, ultimately, that we are adopted into His family (Eph. 1:5-6), and lovingly predestined to a glorious inheritance (Eph. 1:11-12); it is for God's glory, ultimately, that we are sanctified (Phil. 1:9-11).

God's word even goes so far as to reveal to us that God has ordained suffering in the lives of His beloved people, that He might be glorified. Consider the account of the healing of a man who was born blind, in John 9:1-12. Verse three makes what might be considered by some people to be a rather startling statement: that the man was born blind, and that he suffer for years without sight, so that God would be glorified when he was healed. Consider also John 21:18-19. In these verses Jesus was predicting Peter's cruel and painful death as a martyr, and we see that even so gruesome an event as this is used by God for His own glory.

While God has assigned His glory as our chief and highest end, He is also a God who lavishes great loving-kindness upon His children. For example, while God's primary concern in John 9:1-12 was His own glory, He was also deeply concerned about the blind man himself. In fact, verses 35-39 of John chapter 9 show that our Lord's compassion for the previously blind man was far deeper than mere concern for his physical eyesight.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism tells us not only that man's chief end is to glorify God, but also that we are to enjoy Him forever. We serve a God who sees fit to glorify Himself in ways that also benefit us. Here we see God's great love for His children. Consider Matthew 19:27-30. when Peter

asked “what’s in it for us?”, Jesus could have said “My kingdom is not about you, it’s about me.” This would have been very right and very true. But He didn’t; instead, He gave them a promise, the generosity of which was completely out of proportion to the price they had payed. They had given up little compared to what they had received.

So it is with the God who has adopted us as His children. Our chief end, and His own chief end, and everything else’s chief end is to glorify Him. This theme runs throughout Scripture from beginning to end. He has every right to glorify Himself by whatever means He sees fit, but because of His great love for us, He has condescended to glorify Himself by means that also enrich us, beyond what we could ever imagine. This is most notable in the doctrine of redemption.

Look, ye saints, the sight is glorious;
See the man of sorrows now;
From the fight returned victorious,
Ev’ry knee to Him shall bow.
Crown Him! Crown Him! Crowns become the victor’s brow.

Crown the Savior, angels, crown Him;
Rich the trophies Jesus brings;
In the seat of pow’r enthrone Him,
While the vault of heaven rings.
Crown Him! Crown Him! Crown the savior king of kings.

Sinners in derision crowned Him,
Mocking thus the Savior’s claim;
Saints and angels crowd around Him,
Own His title, praise His name.
Crown Him! Crown Him! Spread abroad the Victor’s fame!

Hark! Those bursts of acclamation!
Hark! Those loud triumphant chords!
Jesus takes the highest station;
O what joy the sight affords!
Crown Him! Crown Him! King of kings and Lord of lords.

Thomas Kelly

To The Praise of His Glorious Justice

So, why would God ordain a reality in which there is a fall into sin? As harsh as this no doubt sounds, He did so, at least in part, so that He would be glorified in the display of His punitive wrath poured out against “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Rom. 9:17, 22). He ordained a fall into sin to the praise of His glorious justice.

That God is glorified in the outpouring of His just wrath against the wicked is shown clearly in many places in Scripture. Over and over again in the books of the prophets we find proclamations from the LORD of Hosts against the wicked, in which His punitive judgment is expressed in terms that are stark in their lack of ambiguity.

Ezekiel seven provides a fine example. Here we find an outpouring of God's retributive justice promised to His rebellious Old Testament visible church. Because of the abominations that they had committed against Him, He was preparing to rain down His judgment upon them. Hear a sample of the words He spoke to them through His prophet: "My eye will not spare you, nor will I have pity, but I will punish you for your ways (v.4)... An end has come; the end has come; it has awakened against you (v.6)... Now I will soon pour out My wrath upon you, and spend My anger against you, and judge you according to your ways, and I will punish you for all your abominations. And My eye will not spare, nor will I have pity (v. 8-9)". In verses 4, 9, and 27 God reveals this motivation for the outpouring of His just wrath: "then you will know that I am the Lord". The wickedness of the rebellious Israelites gave God the occasion to glorify Himself in the just display of His punitive judgment.

Another beautiful example can be found in Habakkuk 2:6-14. Here we find a proclamation against the proud Babylonians; God was promising to judge them by bringing the abuses that they inflicted upon other nations back on their own heads (v.8 "Because you have plundered many nations, all the remnant of the peoples shall plunder you"). In verse 13 God clearly takes credit as the one who frustrates and destroys the works of men ("Behold, is it not from the LORD of Hosts that people labor merely for fire, and nations weary themselves for nothing?"). Verse 14 reveals to us God's ultimate motivation behind His punitive actions: "for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea". What beautiful imagery this is: that the recognition of the glory of God in this world would be to such an extent as to be compared to the waters covering the sea. But don't miss the efficient occasion for this display of glory: the outpouring of God's punitive judgment against sinners.

Romans 9:17 tells us very plainly that God raised up Pharaoh for this very purpose: that He would be glorified in all the earth through the outpouring of judgment against him.

In revelation 5:11-14 we find a breathtaking picture of the Lord Jesus receiving glorious worship from an innumerable multitude of men and angels. The efficient reason behind this magnificent display of worship is the outpouring of the Lord's punitive judgment upon the earth (Rev. 6, 8 and 9). Likewise, in introduction to the outpouring of the bowls of God's wrath in Revelation 16, we find these words: "who will not fear, oh Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed" (Rev. 15:4). See also Revelation 19:1-2. It is made abundantly clear in these texts, and many others, that God is glorified in the outpouring of His retributive justice against the wicked.

Were there no fall into sin, then God would not have the occasion to glorify Himself in the display of His perfect justice – for which we will not fully glorify Him until we see it in action. In other words, we will not fully glorify God for His divine justice until we see His just wrath poured out against rebellious sinners. If there had been no fall into sin, then there would be no rebellious sinners against whom to pour out His just wrath. God ordained a fall into sin, in part, to the praise of His glorious justice.

When this passing world is done,
When has sunk yon glaring sun,
When we stand with Christ in glory,
Looking o'er life's finished story,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

When I hear the wicked call
On the rocks and hills to fall,
When I see them start and shrink

On the fiery deluge brink,
Then, Lord, shall I fully know,
Not till then, how much I owe.

Robert Murray McCheyne

To the praise of His glorious mercy and grace

God ordained a fall into sin not only to the praise of His glorious justice, but also to the praise of His glorious mercy and grace. If there had been no fall into sin, then there would be no place for redemption; if there were no need for redemption, then God would not have the occasion to glorify Himself in the active demonstration of His abundant mercy and grace.

It is easy for us to have an anthropocentric focus respecting our salvation: that the redemption purchased by Christ is only for our sake – that it is an end in itself. But this is not what God’s word clearly teaches. In Scripture we find that man’s salvation is a glorious means to a higher, more ultimate end: the glorifying of God.

Consider Psalm 25:6-11. In these beautiful verses David pleads with God to remember His mercy and steadfast love (v.6). He beseeches the Lord to forgive his sins (v.7). He acknowledges God’s work of sanctification (“He instructs sinners in the way [v.8]...He leads the humble in what is right” [v.9]), so that we will “keep His covenant and His testimonies” (v.10). But if we read carefully we will see that all of this is done for a higher purpose: that our redeeming Lord would be glorified (...“for the sake of Your goodness, oh Lord [v.7]...for Your name’s sake, oh Lord” [v.11]).

This same truth is expressed repeatedly throughout the Psalms. Psalm 130:4, for example, tells us “but with You there is forgiveness, that you may be feared”. God’s forgiveness of sinners is the means by which He is glorified (“feared”). Hear this proclamation of Soli Deo Gloria from Psalm 145:21:...“my mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless His holy name forever and ever”. The first seven verses, and verses 10-13, present an outpouring of worship in which the majestic glory of God is extolled. Verses 8-9 and 14-20 reveal the occasion for God’s display of His own glory – that is, His merciful and gracious care for His people.

Consider also Ezekiel 39:25-29; (many other texts in the books of the prophets could likewise be cited). In verses 25-27 God promises a gracious and merciful redemption of His people from exile, pointing typologically to a far greater redemption from God’s wrath and curse because of sin, which redemption is found in Christ. Verse 28 shows us that this redemption is not its own ultimate end, but points beyond itself to a higher purpose: the glorifying of God (...“then they shall know that I am the LORD their God”).

We find the same truth expressed in Romans 1:5 (...“through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of His name among the nations”). And also in Romans 5:2 (“Through Him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”). And also in Second Corinthians 4:15 (“For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.”). It is certainly true that God has saved us from the damnation that our sins have earned us, and that He has done so for our sake because He loves us deeply. I truly hope that nothing I have written could be taken to indicate otherwise. But this is not the only reason for our redemption, or even the ultimate reason. We have been redeemed to the praise of His glorious mercy and grace.

None of this would be possible if there had been no fall into sin, and therefore no need for redemption. We will not fully glorify God for His divine retributive justice until we actually see His

just wrath poured out in full measure on the great and terrible day of the Lord. Neither will we fully glorify God for His great mercy and amazing grace until we see how much we have been forgiven, and how much we have been given that we do not deserve. We, as finite beings, do not have the capacity to fully glorify God for these divine attributes without experiencing them firsthand.

God did not ordain a world filled with suffering and evil so we could have a free will that we could just as easily have had in a different world where suffering and evil were impossible. He ordained this particular reality because it gave Him the occasion to glorify Himself in the grand display of His justice, mercy and grace. It won't be until the great and terrible day of the Lord that we discover these divine attributes in full measure, and glorify God for them as we ought.

This doctrine is not popular in our culture's evangelicalism. Pop-culture christianity is loyal to a much nicer god. Their god would not ordain a reality filled with suffering for any reason, especially the reasons explicated above. I have heard professing Christians ask this question (rhetorically) about the God I have presented in this book: "Why would you want to believe in a God like that?", as if not wanting to believe in Him supplies sufficient grounds for rejecting belief in Him.

This rhetorical question actually exposes a rather profound epistemological problem. How do we justify our beliefs? How can we know what is or isn't true? Are we on solid epistemological ground when we reject a truth claim simply because we don't like it? Not wanting to believe a proposition doesn't make it untrue; neither does wanting to believe it make it true. Truth is what truth is, and in order to know truth at all, we need a transcendent source of information. We have that in God's revelation of Himself to us.

So, why would I want to believe in the God I have described in this book? Because that is the God who actually exists, who has revealed Himself to us in His word, and in His creation. We don't get to choose who or what God is. I would much rather believe in a God who actually exists, than in a nice little imaginary god.

The God who is and has revealed Himself to us, is a sovereign God. He is a God who cannot make mistakes, and who has not made mistakes. This world is as it is by His sovereign decree, complete with its assortment of evils and sufferings. It all serves His eternal purpose, for His glory. This world is filled with evil and suffering to the praise of His glorious justice, mercy and grace.

The Day of The LORD

Oh Lord, before our very eyes
The wicked at thy word will fall
With trembling limbs and anguished cries,
All 'round and 'round and 'round this ball,
Beneath a crimson vault:
Millions at thy behest will rise
And billions at thy bidding fall.

Oh, let us hear thy loving call,
Oh Lord, and lift our humble eyes
To see thy face above the pall,
Our conquering king, our only prize,
Returning in the skies:
Billions at thy behest will fall,
And millions at thy bidding rise.

Chapter 6. God's Love is Perfectly Present in Our World

There is another very good answer to the question “why would God ordain a reality in which redemption is necessary?”. Because it gave Him the occasion to glorify Himself in the demonstration of His great love for His people. It is undoubtedly true that God has ordained a reality filled with suffering, but then He entered that reality, and has suffered along with us. In the incarnation the Most High Lord of Hosts took on a human nature, voluntarily emptied Himself of the privileges of Deity, and walked through this valley of the shadow of death along with us (Phil. 2:6-8). We have in our Lord Jesus not an unsympathetic mediator, but a sympathetic one (Heb. 4:15).

Not only has He suffered with us, but He has also (more ultimately) suffered for us. On the cross He suffered in ways that we cannot comprehend, as the punitive wrath of God was poured out against Him for our sin. All this – His life and death – was for our sake, out of love for us. “For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (II Cor. 5:21). This is a profound and amazing demonstration of love. In John 15:13 we find these words: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down His life for His friends”. This was spoken by our Lord Jesus just prior to His doing that very thing for us. But if there had been no fall into sin, then He would not have had the occasion to glorify Himself by demonstrating His love for His elect in this way (Rom. 5:6-8; I John 4:9-10).

Have you ever wondered what sort of relationship we would have with God, had there been no fall into sin? I expect that it would be a very good relationship – probably better than the one that we have now. We would no doubt relate to God as Adam did prior to the fall. If there were no possibility of a fall into sin, then this relationship would go on uninterrupted for eternity, free from God's curse, and therefore free from all suffering.

However, the eternal paradise enjoyed would be an eternal paradise earned under a covenant of works. This, I believe, makes all the difference. Our utopic existence would have been owed to us, and although we would certainly have enjoyed it, we would not have appreciated it and glorified God for it to the same extent as the redeemed saints in heaven. If there had been no fall into sin, then we would relate to God as an obedient slave relates to his loving master. This would be a good relationship, to be sure, but it would lack the worshipful gratitude that is our due, having been saved from a hopelessly lost and damned condition. We are able to worship and glorify God in ways that we would not be able to, had there been no glorious and undeserved redemption.

I believe that, in the Edenic paradise, Adam had a closer relationship with God than any of us have now, and we would enjoy the same type of relationship, had there been no fall into sin. However, the relationship that redeemed saints have with God in this life is only a very incomplete picture of the relationship that we will have with Him for all of eternity in the life to come. When we are finally and fully glorified, and every vestige of the fall is forever removed, our relationship with God will be better in every respect than it would have been had we not fallen into sin and been redeemed. The eternal glories of heaven will be far more than a return to Eden. A return to Eden would be a return to an obedient slave/loving master relationship; in heaven we will have a perfect marriage (Eph. 5:25-32). We will have a much more blessed existence as redeemed beloved sons and daughters of the Most High (Rom. 8:15-17), than we would have had as obedient servants. We will have much more of God having been restored under a covenant of grace than we ever would have had if we had been perfectly obedient under a covenant of works.

So we suffer here for a short time, that we might have a deeper relationship with God in a more glorious existence for all of eternity. Our path mirrors that of our Lord Jesus, who suffered with us for a time, that He would be eternally glorified thereafter. God has lovingly ordained a similar experience for us: suffering comes before glory.

This being the case, it follows necessarily that God's love was perfectly present even in His superintendence of man's fall into sin, as well as in His subsequent redemption of His elect. He has allowed (even ordained) a fall into sin that we might be the recipients of an even greater display of His love, for His glory.

I have discovered that, even in our different world of chronic suffering, we need not wait for our glorified existence in heaven to experience rich tastes of the great love of God. Such are available even here. In fact, if we know how to discern properly, we can see God's love for us even in His curse, and even in our suffering.

God's curse is most definitely a curse, and nothing I am about to say should be taken to indicate otherwise. But God's curse is also a blessing for His people. It gives His unregenerate elect a small taste of His judgment now, so they would be driven to seek the only means of escaping its full measure in the life to come. God often uses the trials and tribulations of this life as the efficient second cause by which His lost sheep are brought home safely into His fold. It is not at all uncommon for people's conversion stories to include times of great suffering as the means by which God brought them to repentance.

The unpleasant effects of God's curse are also a blessing for His regenerate elect, who are already secure citizens of His kingdom. Trials and afflictions in this life are often the efficient means by which God sanctifies us. God's word compares our sufferings here to a refiner's fire, or a launderer's soap (Mal. 3:2-4). James 1:2-4 goes so far as to instruct us to "count it all joy" when we find ourselves experiencing "various trials", because of the sanctifying value of those trials. If we could only grasp the inestimable worth of our sanctification, and the comparative uselessness of all the best things that this present world has to offer, then we could easily see the loving hand of God even in our suffering.

Far better to have much sanctification along with much suffering in this little life, than to have little sanctification with little suffering. Second Corinthians 4:16-5:4 puts all of this into perspective for us. In this text we learn several things that are most relevant to the matter at hand.

First, we learn that this present life is very short. Scripture likens it to a flower that is here today and gone tomorrow (Jas. 1:10-11), and to a vapor (Jas. 4:14). What a beautifully accurate picture: our sojourn here from birth to death is like a puff of smoke that lingers in the air for a moment, only to dissipate and be gone and forgotten. In our youth we tend to think that this life will just go on and on and on, but then one day very soon we look in the mirror to see an aged face gazing back at us, and we wonder where all the years have gone. I've heard it said that inside every old man there is a young man wondering what happened. This life truly is a vapor.

In comparison, eternity is an unthinkable long time. I learned recently in a David Attenborough nature documentary that the Sahara Desert is roughly the same size in land mass as the United States of America. Try to imagine, if you can, so amazingly vast an ocean of sand as this! Now imagine a bird swooping down once every thousand years to pluck away a single grain. The bird came and went just recently. Prior to that, its last visit was around the time of the European Crusades against the Muslims; prior to that, roughly the time when Jesus of Nazareth was walking the earth; prior to that, during the reign of King David; prior to that, probably around the time just before the great flood in Noah's day. In all of recorded world history the bird would have removed less than a very small pinch of sand. At this rate, the eons of time necessary to see the removal of a single shot-glass full would boggle the human mind.

To imagine this bird in this manner removing all the sands of the mighty Sahara provides a beautiful picture of eternity, does it not? No, it does not! Not even close! At the rate of one grain per millennium, the bird would eventually deplete even so vast a desert as the grand Sahara. Even then, eternity would still be, as it always is, in its infancy.

For these two reasons – the brevity of this present little life, and the unimaginable vastness of eternity – we are right in joining the apostle Paul in reckoning our trials here to the momentary. They will soon be gone and forgotten, never to be revisited. To say that the bitterest sorrows of this troubled

little life will be swallowed up by the immeasurable joys of heaven like a single tear lost in the magnificent Pacific Ocean, would be a pathetically inadequate analogy.

Not only does the Holy Spirit tell us through the pen of Paul that our afflictions here are momentary, but also that they are light. And remember, the human agent who wrote these words was very well acquainted with bitter trials as a regular pattern for life (II Cor. 11:23-28). The reason why Paul could call the harsh sufferings that marked his life “light” is because he had an eternal perspective; he had his eyes fixed on the end goal. Compared to the eternal joys of heaven, the most difficult trials and afflictions in this little life are hardly worth mentioning. Likewise, compared to the glories of the life to come, the most opulent pleasures of this life are dung (Phil. 3:8).

Second Corinthians 4:16-5:4 helps put our world of suffering in its proper perspective in another way. These verses show us that our trials and afflictions actually matter a great deal, that they are not pointless. These verses give us a perspective that saves us from teleological nihilism.

Teleology is the study of purpose; nihilism is nothingism (“nihil” is Latin for “nothing”). So, teleological nihilism is the belief that there are no absolute norms of purpose, that life is ultimately meaningless. William Shakespeare gave us a beautiful expression of teleological nihilism in the words of MacBeth. When he saw his little coup failing, and his short-lived kingdom crumbling and falling apart, he said: “Out, out brief candle. Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. MacBeth is telling us not only that our lives are short, but also that they are meaningless: they are walking shadows, strutting and fretting players (and poor ones, at that), tales told by idiots.

If there is no sovereign God, and this life is all that we get, then our world of chronic suffering proves that MacBeth was right. Our existence is no more than a cruel lottery. One person gets a life of wealth, happiness and pleasure, while another ends up with a life of poverty, sorrow, terror and pain – and all by pitiless chance. If this life is all that we get, then our world of chronic suffering is filled with tales told by idiots. As first Corinthians 15:19 tells us: “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied”.

But an eternal heavenly perspective saves us from this nihilism. We have the absolutely certain testimony of God’s word assuring us that this life is not meaningless; indeed, even our sufferings are filled with purpose. Scripture assures us that there is an eternal weight of glory awaiting us that is entirely disproportionate (in our favor), and that our sufferings here are bound up in it and contributing to it (II Cor. 4:17).

This means that our afflictions are not meaningless accidents, but that they are infinitely meaningful. They are all according to the flawless plan of a sovereign God who is working all things together for our ultimate good (Rom. 8:28). Whether we have wealth or poverty, happiness or sorrow, comfort or pain, we can rest assured that our lives, here and now, are serving a higher purpose. Our trials and afflictions are not just fruitless burdens to be endured, but are actually storing up for us an eternal and incomparable weight of glory in the life to come. Our trials and afflictions are used by God to accomplish this glorious end; they are a means by which our eternal good is being secured. Or, if I could put it in so crass a fashion, our light momentary afflictions here are paid back with an incomparable weight of glory in heaven.

What exactly am I saying? Am I suggesting that our sufferings here are somehow equivalent to purgatory in Roman Catholic soteriology? Am I saying that our trials pay, in some measure, for our sins, propitiate God’s just wrath, and earn us a place in heaven? Certainly not! That would be heresy. Our afflictions, no matter how severe, are not costly enough to make any payment of that sort. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism teaches in its answer to question 84, “every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, both in this life, and that which is to come”. No matter how bad our sufferings, they are only a small taste of what our rebellion against an infinitely and incomprehensibly holy God deserves.

There is only one payment possible that could have sufficient value to atone for our sins, and that payment was made for us by our Lord Jesus. However, even though the things done “in the body” cannot earn us a place in heaven, this does not mean that they have no bearing on heaven (II Cor. 5:9-10; Matt. 6:20). I believe that what we do in this life has an eternal impact. When we suffer and remain faithful to our Lord, when we say with Job “though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him”, then we are storing up treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:20). When we glorify God by remaining faithful to Him through our momentary light afflictions, we are storing up an eternal and incomparable weight of glory in the life to come.

Our trials and afflictions here in this little life have eternal impact by working in us the fruit of sanctification. While the outward man is gradually wasting away, the inward man is being continually renewed. The very same afflictions that tear us down physically, renew us and vivify us spiritually; they draw us closer to God and cause us to rely upon Him and trust in Him more deeply; they deepen our relationship with Him.

In this way we are sanctified by our trials. We are purified like gold in a hot furnace, and we come to realize that this sanctification is of infinitely more value than all the ease, comfort and opulence that this little life has to offer. When we get to heaven I believe we will find that this sanctification, forged in the fires of affliction, was the very thing that God used to work for us an incomparable weight of glory.

It might seem like I have strayed a bit from the topic of this chapter, but I haven't. An eternal perspective allows us to recognize the love of God even in our world of suffering. All of these things that our suffering has accomplished for us – our sanctification, our closer relationship with God, our treasure in heaven – are expressions of that love. Our trials and afflictions have not been granted to us by a God who is indifferent to us, but by a God who loves us deeply, and man's fall into sin has given Him the occasion to display that love in profound and amazing ways. That's the point, and that is the answer to the question that opened this chapter. Without a fall into sin God would not have had the occasion for the amazing display of love that I have described. God's love is perfectly present in our world of chronic suffering.

How the trophies of this world take hold
Of human hearts, and hold them fast.
Those ravaged by the moth, rust and mold
Will never satisfy, or last.

What love, that God would oft take away
Our cherished idols, loose their bands,
And make Himself our only hope and stay;
Who tears these trophies from our hands.

Chapter 7 You Are a Clam

In the year leading up to our leaving our toxic house, my wife, my daughter Bethany and I were enduring such dark times that I truly don't know how we were able to survive. We longed for death, but it refused to take us. We were all dangerously suicidal, our lives hanging by a thread.

Lisa and Bethany were constantly sick and in severe pain, and were experiencing seizures and other related badness every day. Mainstream medicine had long-since completely given up on us, and alternative remedies that we were pursuing were only marginally helpful, usually leading to disappointment. Lisa (desperately ill herself) would cope with the situation to the best of her ability during the day while I was working, and then I would take the night shift when I got home. It became part of my routine to spend most of the night beside Bethany's bed as she writhed in agony – both physical and mental – into the wee hours of the morning. I would spend the long hours silently pleading with God to have mercy on us, and please just take my precious daughter safely home to heaven. Often she would plead with me to send her there.

No one outside our home had any idea how bad things had gotten. Even our older daughter Kayla didn't really know. She was also very ill, but has always been an amazing fighter. Despite her illness, she was volunteering her time helping to start a reformed Christian farm-based ministry a couple hours from home up in central Maine.

One night (early in the morning, to be precise) I found myself beside Bethany's bed after a particularly acute episode of bad badness had finally run its course. Still in pain, and lying on her bed nearly paralyzed, Bethany lashed out against God, accusing Him of having subjected her to “pointless suffering”.

My girls were raised having been fed a regular diet of careful systematic theology. Bethany was very familiar with Romans 8, and Second Corinthians 4 and 5. She was used to hearing James 1:2-4 quoted frequently. She knew better than to lash out against God as she did. The problem wasn't that she was a bad theologian. She was a good theologian, but she was also a good philosopher, and a good philosopher knows how to push back against answers until they are driven right down to their very foundation. Bethany was well acquainted with the answers that I have given in the previous two chapters, she knew that they were good answers, and she even believed them. But she also knew that they were answers that can be pushed back against.

I agree. The answers that I offered in the previous two chapters are good answers, and they are Biblically sound. If they weren't, then I would not have given them. However, they are not end-of-the-line answers.

Here is a probing question that pushes back against these answers: did God ordain a fall into sin out of necessity? Again, if there were no sin, then there would be no Divine curse, and therefore no suffering. Scripture shows us that our fall into sin has given God the occasion to glorify Himself in the display of His glorious justice, mercy and grace, and in a demonstration of His love that is deeper and more profound because of the fall. But, couldn't God have glorified Himself just as well by some other means?

In answer to this question I think we should first take a few minutes to consider the concept of limitations in God: is there any sense at all in which God could be said to be limited? This might look like a bit of a digression, but it really isn't, and I believe this will become apparent in due time. The correct answer to the question “is God limited?” would be “of course not!”, provided that what we mean is this: that He is unrestrained in the execution of all His holy will. There is absolutely nothing that God desires to do that He is not also able to do without the slightest difficulty. His purposes are never thwarted, or even hindered, in any way.

However, this does not mean that there is nothing that God cannot do in another sense: He cannot act contrary to His nature. He cannot be what He is not. God is perfectly holy and just, therefore He cannot pardon sinners without an adequate atonement being made on their behalf (Rom. 3:9-26). He is infinite life, therefore He cannot die (1 John 5:20). He is essential ontology, therefore He cannot cease to exist (Rev. 1:8). He is truth, therefore He cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). He is omniscient, therefore He cannot be ignorant of any detail (Is. 40:14). He is omnipotent, therefore He cannot make a rock so big that He can't move it; He is unrestrained in His rock moving ability (Luke 1:37; 3:8). It is not incorrect, then, to say that God is bound by necessity, just not necessity external to His own nature.

That God cannot act contrary to His nature does not limit Him in any real sense; it in no way puts the execution of His decretive will in jeopardy. We are not able to accomplish all our wills, so we are limited; God is never hindered in the accomplishment of all His holy will, so He is not limited. The inability to act contrary to His nature is not in any real sense a limitation: it does not stand between Him and the accomplishment of every one of His divine purposes.

So the question relevant to this chapter is this: was God bound by His own essential necessity in ordaining man's fall into sin? It would be so very tidy if we could just discover some way that God was legitimately bound to ordain reality as it is. This is what is so appealing about the free will argument; it supposedly absolves God of responsibility for evil and suffering by imposing necessity upon Him. But this is a bad argument; it simply doesn't work. Maybe, however, there is another way that necessity can be imposed upon God: maybe He was somehow bound by His own nature.

In a sense, I believe that this is the case. Scripture perspicuously teaches that God's redemption of His elect was purposed by Him from before the foundation of the earth, so He was bound by His own decree. If He fails to bring to pass what He has decreed from eternity past, then either He is an incompetent or a dishonest God, and certainly this is contrary to His nature. His decree, therefore, must come to pass; God is, in a sense, bound by His decree.

But this hardly absolves God of responsibility for having ordained a reality filled with evil and suffering. Wasn't God's decree free and volitional? If not, then wouldn't there have to be some other authority that transcends His? To say that God is bound by His decree does not let Him off the hook; why didn't He decree something else?

I truly believe that God has established a reality in which there is much suffering because He is glorified in it and by it. But does this mean that He could not have done otherwise without contradicting His essentially glorious nature? Perhaps I'm showing my own ignorance, or maybe even stretching out my neck somewhat invitingly over the theological chopping block, but I am inclined to say no. God was not bound by necessity. He could have glorified Himself just as well in other ways than in His creating a world filled with suffering. I have heard it said that God had to create the world as it is, that He could not have glorified Himself by revealing His justice, mercy and grace without a fall into sin, but I don't believe this to be the case. I can think of ways in which God could have made us equally acquainted with the glories of these divine attributes without having to establish a fallen and cursed reality.

God could have created us with a complete and comprehensive innate knowledge of His justice, mercy and grace. If He had done so, then we could glorify Him just as well for these divine attributes without having to experience them. We could know them purely theoretically, but no less completely. I do not believe that it would be in any way contrary to the nature of God to do this.

Or, that same knowledge would not even need to be innate. God could have created us as we are, except without sin, and then impressed upon us a complete and comprehensive extent of necessary knowledge. He could have given us a vision showing us exactly what an outpouring of retributive justice would look like, had there been such a thing as a sinner upon whom to pour out His just wrath. He could have explained to us exactly how costly an atonement He was willing to make on our behalf, how perfectly holy He is, and therefore how detestable sin would be in His sight, and how immeasurably grand would be His mercy and grace, were there any such things as sin and redemption.

God could have also given us perfect memory, so we never forget His divine attributes, and never stop glorifying Him for them. Or He could have reminded us at regular intervals throughout eternity. In other words, He could have given us the epistemic ability that we will have forever in heaven. We could have lived forever in an Edenic paradise, fully glorifying God for His justice, mercy and grace without ever having to see them in action, had He given us this thoroughly comprehensive but theoretical knowledge. I cannot see how any of this would be inconsistent with the nature of God.

Quite to the contrary, I think we are on dangerous theological ground if we say that God could not have done this. This, in fact, would be to place bona fide limitations on an unlimited God. Specifically, it would compromise His omniscience and omnipotence. Why would He have any difficulty creating us with this comprehensive knowledge? Because He lacked the knowledge to know how? Because He lacked the ability? It is sometimes suggested that God was incapable of giving us any other reality without having to compromise the glorious display of His infinite justice, mercy and grace, but I do not agree. I believe that such an assertion truly places limitations upon an unlimited God. An unlimited God could have displayed these glorious attributes in some other way.

I can easily anticipate this rejoinder: the problem is not found in any limitation in God, but in us. We simply lack the capacity to fully glorify God for His justice, mercy and grace unless we see them in action; we lack the capacity to appreciate these divine attributes as well theoretically as we will experientially. Therefore, there had to be a fall into sin and subsequent redemption in order for us to fully glorify God for these divine attributes.

Granted, I agree; we do lack such a capacity. We cannot fully know God's justice, mercy and grace purely theoretically; we need to experience them in order to get a full grasp of them. But why is this? Who gave us the capacity that we have? Couldn't God have created us with a different capacity; couldn't He have given us the capacity to know these attributes just as well theoretically as we will experientially?

It is true that without a fall into sin there would be no need for mercy, grace and punitive justice, but that does not mean that these attributes could not have been made perfectly clear to an unfallen race of men. Couldn't man have been created in a fully glorified state, and then given a clear vision of all of God's attributes? Again, God is the one who created us with the capacities that we have. I am a bit uncomfortable with the suggestion that God could not have created us with a different capacity, one that would praise Him for these glorious attributes as fully without a fall into sin and subsequent redemption, as with them. He is an unlimited God; I believe He could have given us this capacity.

If only God had given us the ability to know His divine perfections as fully theoretically as we do experientially, then we would not need to experience God's forgiveness in order to fully glorify Him for His grace and mercy; we would not need to see His just wrath meted out against lost sinners in order to fully glorify Him for His justice. He is God. He is not limited. I believe He could have granted us this ability. It is true that we are limited, and so are unable to fully appreciate these attributes without there having been an occasion for their display, but it is He who gave us our limitations. To say that God could not have created us without these limitations is to place undo limitations upon God.

I am not suggesting that God could have created us with any sort of Divine nature. This would be contrary to His monotheistic nature, and therefore impossible. However, I do believe that the creator/creature distinction could be maintained while still allowing us the capacity to glorify God as fully without sin, suffering and redemption, as with them.

The same is true respecting God's demonstration of His love for His people. The previous chapter argued that man's fall into sin afforded God the occasion to demonstrate His love for us in profound and amazing ways in the atonement. A very high price was paid for our redemption: the punitive wrath of God was poured out against our Lord Jesus for all the sins of all of His people. I doubt that the human mind will ever be able to comprehend how staggering a cost this was. Without a fall into sin, there would have been no need for this particular demonstration of divine love.

But the question remains: was a fall into sin necessary? Would it have been possible for God to have acquainted us with so great a love as this by some other means? Again, I believe that to say that He couldn't would be to place illegitimate limitations upon an unlimited God. Couldn't He have created us with the capacity to know His love just as well, and to love Him in return just as well, without so costly an atonement? If so, then there would be no reason for a fall into sin, no occasion for human suffering, and no need for an infinitely expensive redemption.

I also pointed out in the previous chapter that God uses trials and afflictions to sanctify us. Considering the overwhelming value of our sanctification, these temporal sufferings are actually an active demonstration of His love to us. But couldn't He have sanctified us in some other, more pleasant, way? Or couldn't He have created us without any possibility of choosing to sin? Couldn't He have created us pre-sanctified?

There is another way that the answer in the previous chapter can be pushed back against. I argued that we are better off because of the fall and because of God's subsequent redemption of His people, and I believe that this is a very good and sound argument. Our glorified state in heaven will be a far more exalted one than we would have had, had there been no sin; our relationship with God as the redeemed bride of Christ will be much better than the relationship that Adam had prior to the fall. We have more under a covenant of grace than Adam had in his state of obedience under a covenant of works.

However, this is true only for God's elect. The overwhelming majority of humanity is certainly not better off! Broad and easy is the way that leads to destruction, and narrow and difficult is the way that leads to eternal life. Matthew 7:13-14 tells us that there are many traveling the former and few traveling the latter. What about the multitudes who will spend eternity in torment in hell? In the long run, a small minority of humanity will be better off for having fallen into sin and having been redeemed, but the majority certainly will not be.

I dare say that all of us have friends and family who are part of that damned multitude. I would gladly give up heaven in exchange for a return to Eden, provided that they could all be there with me. Paul was willing to go so far as to wish that he were accursed for the sake of his lost countrymen (Rom. 9:3); shouldn't we be willing to endure a pre-fall paradise for the sake of our lost loved ones? If there had been no fall into sin, then the unimaginable multitude in hell would be enjoying an eternal Edenic paradise instead.

I do sincerely believe that the answers given thus far in this book are sound. This world is as it is by the sovereign decree of a transcendent God. It is filled with suffering because He has cursed it for our sake, because of our sinful rebellion against Him, but even that rebellion falls neatly into the sphere of His sovereign providence. He has ordained our fall into sin because He is glorified in it, by its having given Him the occasion to glorify Himself in the display of His glorious justice, mercy and grace. Our fall into sin, and therefore our need for redemption, has also given God the occasion to glorify Himself in a truly magnificent outpouring of love upon us, His elect.

These are very good answers, but they are not end-of-the-line answers; they do not take away all the "why" questions. Why did God ordain this reality? Why not a different one – one without sin and suffering? Couldn't God have found a way to glorify Himself as fully without so much pain and sorrow? Couldn't an all-powerful and all-wise God have found a way to communicate to us all the aspects of His glorious nature (including His retributive justice) without our having to experience them? Why didn't He create us with the capacity to know His divine attributes purely theoretically, but no less completely? Why didn't He create us pre-glorified and pre-sanctified as the spotless bride of Christ, and simply give us a perfect vision of what divine justice, mercy and grace would look like, had there been any such thing as sin? I can hear the rejoinder: there's just something very different about experience that can't be replicated with theoretical knowledge. I agree, but that's only because of our God-given limitations. Why didn't God create us without these limitations, and with a different capacity for knowledge?

I believe that we are on dangerous ground theologically if we say that God acted out of necessity, that His hands were tied, that He was a slave of circumstances beyond His control (like our limited capacities, for example). I believe that such a suggestion runs contrary to the nature of an all-powerful God. So, why did God give us this reality, complete with all its valleys of the shadow of death?

Thankfully, God's word does supply an answer that fully lays the matter to rest, and puts a stop to all further inquiry. It is found in Romans 9:20, and in the last several chapters of the book of Job, and elsewhere. Here is a bit of a paraphrase, but I believe an accurate one: He is God, and I am not. He is the potter, and I am the clay. It is okay to search out His revelation for answers to our questions (respectfully), but where He has closed His holy mouth, we must desist all further inquiry. The secret things belong to Him (Deut. 29:29).

Throughout his time of intense suffering Job demanded answers from God. He wanted to know why. The friends who came to comfort him insisted that he must be guilty of some serious unrepentant sin, and this was why he was suffering. Job consistently insisted that this was not the case. He knew that he was a sinner (why else would he be in the habit of offering sacrifices?), but he also knew that he dealt with his sin. He was a repentant sinner, not an unrepentant one.

Eventually God surprised Job and his three friends by actually answering them. He spoke briefly to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar in verses 7 & 8 of chapter 42. He said "my anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of Me what is right, as My servant Job has. Now therefore take seven bulls and seven rams and go to My servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And My servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of Me what is right, as my servant Job has."

God spent four chapters answering Job. He beautifully and poetically challenged Job's competence to challenge Him. He started out by asking "who is this who darkens (not enlightens) counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2). He challenged Job's understanding of geology, and zoology, and biology, and astrology, and meteorology, and much more. And the questions that God was asking were, from His perspective, at a kindergarten level, yet Job could not answer (40:3-5).

The Lord went on to challenge Job's right to challenge Him. He said "shall the one who contends with the Almighty correct Him? He who rebukes God, let him answer it. (40:2) Would you indeed annul my judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?" (40:8). In other words, the LORD of hosts spent four chapters telling Job "I am God, and you are not".

God spent four chapters challenging Job's right and competence to challenge Him, but one thing He never did get around to was telling Job why he had suffered. I have heard it said that God does not give us answers to our "why" questions because we are incapable of understanding the answers. This might be true some of the time, but certainly not all of the time. Job could have understood. I have read the first two chapters of the book, and I understand why he suffered; my girls understood even when they were little tykes, and I believe that Job was a good deal smarter than us. He could have understood, and he wanted answers, but God simply told him "I am God, and you are not".

This is the answer that I gave Bethany on that very dark night several years ago. I told her that I can imagine a million ways that this reality could be improved upon, but the problem is, I'm not God; I would be wrong in a million ways. He is God, and I am not; He knows exactly how this world should be governed; I do not. I told her that, respecting our insight into the secret counsel of God, and respecting our right to pass judgment on His decree, we are clams. I made it clear that we are not clams in every respect. We are human beings, made in the image of God and deeply loved by Him, but respecting our right and competence to act as His judge, we are clams. We have absolutely no reason to believe that He has not given us the best of all possible realities, even though we cannot understand how this can be, and we have absolutely no right to demand that He explain Himself. We are clams.

When I got home from work the next evening I found Bethany on the couch, where she often spent her days. Beside her on the coffee table was a little round cork coaster that was used to prevent the

condensation from drinking glasses from spoiling the table's varnished surface. On this coaster she had written in large artistic letters "you are a clam".

Rebellious sinners probably have a difficult time understanding this, but for submissive children of God, that is actually a very comforting thought. We don't need all the answers. The answers to our "why" questions are held safely in the hands of a sovereign God who loves us dearly.

At some point we need to content ourselves with an apprehension of what is, even without a comprehension of why it is. This world is the one that God has given us, complete with its eclectic blend of sufferings – of this we can be sure. Why? I don't know. God has not answered all the "why" questions to my satisfaction, but that's okay, He doesn't need to; He doesn't owe me an answer. Respecting my right and competence to challenge Him, I am a clam. He is God and I am not, and I trust Him, and I love Him.

"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to Him that He might be repaid? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33-36)

For Bethany

All those desperate battles waged and lost
That came at so extravagant a cost
Were for the glory of our LORD well fought,
Nor were they, in His providence, for naught.

All the pain and anguish and bitter tears,
And all the damage done and worlds undone,
And all the ruined dreams and wasted years,
And all the vigils kept and gauntlets run

Were only for your good, my precious one.
Have patience dear, have patience and you'll see
That, in the arms of love and sovereignty,
Those battles lost, in truth, were victories won.

Chapter 8 It Is A Privilege To Enter This World

It has occurred to me that there is a difference between my citizenship in this different world of chronic suffering and the citizenship of those who are actually seriously ill, as my wife and daughters have been. They are here because they have to be. They are not physically able to walk away; everywhere they go, their illness goes with them. I do not have to be here. I'm healthy; I could walk away at any time. Many men (and women) have done exactly that.

When Bethany was in the clinic in Florida last summer she and my wife met a young woman whose husband deserted her. She was desperately ill, and the clinic was a last-ditch effort toward healing. Her next planned stop if she failed to recover her health, was in Switzerland for a physician-assisted suicide. Arrangements had already been made. To help pay for the clinic, her family and her husband held a fundraiser of some sort. When it was over, he stole all the money and hit the road.

Of course, although I am physically able to walk away, I am not able in a different sense. I am completely honor bound to this different world. In the first place, I made vows; I promised before God and men to be faithful to my wife for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. In the second place, I am bound by my love for my family. The thought of deserting them in their time of need and leaving them unhelped absolutely breaks my heart.

Incidentally, I am unquestioningly certain that if the tables were turned – if Lisa had her health and I were chronically ill – she would be just as faithful to me. I have no doubt about this. In fact, she probably would do a much better job of it than I have.

Nevertheless, there is a difference between my citizenship and theirs. You might say that they inherited theirs, while mine was acquired by immigration. Of course, none of us, myself included, ever really had any choice in one sense. Leaving this world of suffering is not an option, because I will never leave nor forsake the ones I love, to whom I made vows. But in another sense I do have a choice: I'm not physically bound to this world in the same way that they are; I'm here because I choose to be, in the same way that my Precious One would be here for me, were the tables turned.

There are a couple of reasons why I'm pointing this out. First, because I don't want you to read what follows and think that what you're reading is just a recitation of empty words. I don't want you to think that I don't truly believe what I'm writing. It would be very easy to make the claims that I'm making in this chapter without ever having lived in this world, but that is not the case. What you're reading was written by someone who has proven his profession. I can tell you with credibility that it is a privilege to enter this world, because I have willingly done so and it has been.

In the second place, there are spiritual lessons that I have learned, and can hopefully relate to the reader, that would hardly be relevant if I were bound to this world by my own illness. Without a doubt, those who are seriously ill have a more difficult citizenship than I do; my lot is easier than theirs. We have both suffered losses, but they have suffered more than me: they have lost everything that I have lost, and on top of that, they have also lost their health. But here's the point: it was impossible for them to have the things that they've lost; they were taken from them. I could have, had I chosen to sin against God and against the ones I love by walking away. I have willingly given up much to live in this world, and I have come to realize that it was a very good trade, that it truly is a privilege to have been given the occasion to do so. Of course, I must not neglect to mention the fact that I have come to realize this only by the sanctifying grace of God, and can take no credit for it myself.

When I was a much younger man I resented my wife's illness. I never once resented her for being ill; that was not her fault. But I resented the illness itself. It got in the way; it slowed us down; it drained our finances; we couldn't do or have many of the things that other people enjoyed because we couldn't afford them. If, when I was twenty four, I had any inkling of how much suffering was in store for me, I

might have chosen a different life. But that is only because I was young and foolish back then; since then God has graciously sanctified me, and I now see things very differently.

Somewhere along the way in my own spiritual journey I had an epiphany. It shouldn't have been an epiphany, because it didn't involve the acquisition of any new truth that I hadn't been acquainted with since I was a child. But sometimes truths that we know theoretically fail to take root in our hearts, and this was the case. The epiphany was this: that, at least within the body of Christ, I am the least important person I know (Phil. 2:3).

When I was a young child I learned how to prioritize the value of relationships with a little acronym that spelled the word JOY. The first letter (and highest priority) stood for Jesus; the second letter (and secondary priority) stood for others; the third letter (and lowest priority) stood for yourself. The acronym sought to teach in a memorable fashion the fact that true joy is found in prioritizing correctly: that we are to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33), and then to esteem others more highly than ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

In fact, there is a connection between service of our Lord and service of others. Our Lord Jesus taught that He so identifies with His people that He reckons service rendered unto them as service rendered unto Him (Matt. 25:34-40). So, one of the ways that we seek first our Lord and His kingdom is by esteeming others more highly than ourselves. To serve others is to serve our Lord. It is impossible, therefore, to give Christ the highest place of priority without giving our brothers and sisters the second place. It is impossible to put ourselves before them and still put Christ first.

It is easy to affirm these precepts so long as we aren't really put to the test. It's easy to serve others when it's easy. There is nothing particularly difficult about giving up the best seats or parking spaces or letting someone else go first in line, or giving up the larger slice of cake, or letting another motorist out in traffic ahead of us. These are all fine, selfless gestures, but they are superficial. They really don't cost us much at all.

But it is an entirely different matter if we are called upon to give up our dreams and aspirations, our retirement savings, our vacations, our comfort, our homes, our sleep, our strength and often much more. When we receive the God-given assignment to enter a world of suffering for the sake of others (a world that we are physically able to avoid by simply walking away) then we are given the occasion to prove that we are putting Christ first by esteeming His people more highly than ourselves. This is an opportunity that the truly wise dare not squander.

Much more important than me are the ones I love, who are dependent upon me. They are children of the Most High God; they are priceless treasures whose value no man can accurately assess. They are infinitely more valuable than any of the trifling riches or pleasures that this little life has to offer.

When I came to realize all of this, then it became rather easy to see how great a privilege it is to have been granted an invitation into this world of suffering. God could have entrusted the care of these priceless treasures into the hands of someone much wiser, more virtuous, wealthier and stronger than me, but He didn't. Instead, He condescended to place their charge into the rough hands of a simple logger. What a marvel! What a privilege!

During those times when I have had to visit my wife every evening in the hospital, or have stayed up night after night beside Bethany's bed enduring the terrors of bad badness, or have had to restrain Kayla during violent psychotic episodes, or have had to work hard all day and then truck pulp wood late into the night in an attempt to keep up with all the medical bills, I have been able to do these things with joy, knowing that my efforts are being spent for a worthy cause. Most men my age are spending the fruits of their labors on silly trifles like fancy new pickup trucks, vacations, hunting trips, boats, retirement accounts, etc. I have had the great privilege of spending mine on something truly worthwhile. The treasures that most men have invested in will not survive this troubled little life; mine will.

Please don't misunderstand. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with enjoying the things of this world. To the contrary, I believe we glorify God by taking joy in even the temporal blessings that He

grants us. There are plenty of things exclusive to this life that I and my family have enjoyed, and I look forward to enjoying many more. Neither am I saying that there is necessarily any virtue in suffering; nor am I wishing for suffering for me, or my family, or anyone else; nor am I saying that it is a privilege to suffer. There is absolutely no virtue in suffering for suffering's sake. The virtue is found in being willing to endure suffering for a higher cause.

If God has granted you a life without much suffering, then thank Him for it and glorify Him in it. You have been blessed. Enjoy His blessing. Don't wish for suffering. Let me be very clear: If you think that this chapter is saying that you should wish for suffering, or that you are necessarily more spiritual because you suffer, or that suffering is intrinsically a privilege, then you are wrong. Here is what this chapter is saying: that suffering gives us opportunities that we would otherwise not have, and to avail ourselves of these opportunities is a privilege. If God in His infinite wisdom has ordained suffering for you, consider it a privilege to persevere through it, faithful to Him, for His glory. You have been given an opportunity to glorify Him in ways that would not have been available to you had He withheld suffering from you. Your trials and tribulations have come to you by divine appointment, and if you are among His elect, they were appointed by a God who loves you dearly. Remember this as you persevere through your various trials, for the glory of God.

If suffering has not marked your life (yet), then there is still a wonderful opportunity available to you. Certainly there are people around you who are suffering, and God's word extends to you the privileged invitation to enter into their sufferings with them. This doesn't mean that you need to take up a full-time residency in their world; I don't believe that you can. However, you can visit; you can help "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal. 6:2). Remember, the Lord Jesus so identifies with the sufferings of His people that when you visit them, you visit Him (Matt. 25:34-40).

Finally, if anyone to whom you have made vows of commitment before God, or any of those precious gems He has placed under your charge, are called into this other dark world of suffering, and you refuse to go there with them but abandon them instead, then damn you. God will take care of them without you, but He will also take care of you (in a very different way), if not in this life, then in the next. You are on very dangerous ground before a very angry God, and you need to repent. If you are not inclined to listen to my warning, then listen to the Lord Jesus: "Then He will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then He will answer them, saying 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life." (Matt. 25:41-46)

If God calls the precious ones under your charge into this other dark world and you abandon them to save your own temporal skin, then not only have you extended the one-finger-salute to the just and holy LORD of Hosts, but you have also missed out on a very important opportunity. As is the case with every duty that God imposes upon us, the duty to care for them and suffer along with them is also a very great privilege.

After some years of experiencing my family's illness, I finally came to realize this truth. From my perspective, they are more important than me. They are priceless treasures; they are children of the Most High LORD of Hosts. They are precious and beloved possessions of the all-powerful God who created the universe ex nihilo, the Sovereign Lord Almighty who governs and sustains all things by the word of His power. He loves them; He died for them; they are the apple of His eye, and He has condescended to entrust them into my care. God help me! What a responsibility! What a privilege!

To A Much-Loved But Desperately Ill Esposita

What a privilege that God would assign
My lot to such a hard but lovely place,
Where all your burdens, dear, are also mine,
And mine is every tear that stains your face.
If in this troubled world you tarry more,
And life goes on at this same weary pace,
Then by your side I'll gratefully endure
Whate'er our lot, for sake of your embrace,
Though each new day new trials sure will greet.
But if to better worlds you turn your face
(And not just your face, but also your feet)
And I am left to carry on the race
Alone, without my cherished one, then know
That all God's love, my dear, and that same grace
That takes you there, sustains me here below.

Chapter 9. Our World is a Gloriously Teleological One.

Among the professing people of God, trials and afflictions tend to have a winnowing effect; they sift wheat from chaff. Hypocrites and pretenders often become angry with God and fall away, while the truly faithful are drawn closer to Him. Why is this? Ultimately, it is not because of any intrinsic virtue in us, but because of the work of God's free grace in our hearts. Prior to being born again our stony hearts are at enmity with the true God; we hate Him. In His work of regeneration the Holy Spirit performs a heart transplant, removing our hearts of stone and, in exchange, giving us new hearts of flesh (Ezek. 11:19). Along with our new hearts comes a new inclination: we are no longer repelled by God, but drawn to Him. We come to love the sound of the Good Shepherd's voice, even when we hear that voice calling to us through trials and afflictions.

It helps encourage us to know that God's word promises both that we will experience tribulation in this life, and also that this tribulation is not without purpose. No matter how difficult our trials, we can be sure that they are appointed for us by a sovereign God who loves us more than we can imagine. Every detail of our trials is superintended by Him for our good. We can rest in these truths, trusting in Him, even when we do not know all the reasons why. Our world of suffering is a divinely purposeful one.

We might never understand the full purpose behind our sufferings. God certainly hasn't supplied tidy little answers to all of our "why" questions here in this life, and perhaps He never will. God does not owe us answers. He has ordained a reality through which it is necessary to walk by faith. However, this does not mean that He has not given us any answers at all. God's revelation tells us much about the divine teleology behind our suffering; God has not left all of our questions unanswered.

Here is one way that God has revealed divine purpose behind our suffering. He uses trials and afflictions to wean us off from our innate addiction to this little life, and to turn our eyes toward heaven, and our affections toward our Lord.

All Christians know that we are supposed to be heavenly-minded. This is absolutely basic to our entire world view. But not all professing Christians behave in a fashion that is consistent with this elementary belief. Recently I was talking with a fellow professing Christian, and I expressed my longing for our glorified heavenly existence. He seemed to scoff at my sentiments, and replied "everyone wants to go to heaven, just not today". On another occasion recently I was talking with an elderly woman who professed to be a follower of Christ. She commented about how quickly the years fly by, and I replied by reminding her that each passing day is one day closer to glory. I was surprised by her reaction. She looked offended, gasped, and said "you won't be thinking that way when you are my age!"

Even among professing Christians there is far too much addiction to this present little life; we are too much in love with the land of the dying. Sometimes God is kind and gracious enough to send us bitter trials to break that addiction.

In the parable of the sower we are told that some of the seed falls among thorns, which choke it and kill it (Mark 4:7). In His commentary on the parable, the Lord explained that this represents the Word of God sown among those who are hedonistically committed to the things of this life (Mark 4:18-19). After hearing the gospel message "the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful".

In our world, our soteriological gardens have been quite thoroughly weeded. Many of the things that might be inclined to turn our hearts away from our Lord have been forcibly taken away from us. There is very little left for us here in this little life, but to serve our Lord and to run the race with endurance. Our health, our retirement savings, our lavish vacations, our dream homes, our hopes and aspirations, our bucket lists, are all in heaven. God has given us no choice in the matter; He has lovingly pulled out

the thorns, roots and all; He has graciously removed “the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things”.

What a very good trade this is! God obviously loves us very much, and has proven so by sending trials and afflictions as His instruments by which that love is manifested to us. How enamored might we otherwise have been with useless weeds and thorns, had He not been so kind as to graciously remove them. Here is one way that we can clearly see divine purpose behind God’s sovereign ordination of trials and afflictions in our lives: they draw us away from the things of this present world, and redirect our attention and affection toward our Lord and His kingdom. In Matthew 6:19-20 the Lord instructs us to store up treasure in heaven, rather than in this brief and transient life. But then in verse 21 He tells us why: “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”.

Our trials here in this little life work in us a genuine and solid faith. Our suffering often puts us into a place where we are left with nowhere else to turn for strength and perseverance than to our Lord. As a result, we learn to trust in Him in ways that we might not have otherwise.

A strong faith does not “believe God” for things that He has never promised us. Nowhere has God promised us a life free from suffering; in many places He has told us to expect the opposite (I Pet. 4:12). It is true that He has promised that in due time all our trials and afflictions will be removed, and we long for that day, but that day has not yet come (Ps. 103; Rev. 21:4). A strong faith does not claim promises that do not exist; a strong faith says with Job “though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him” (Job 13:15).

This sort of faith is not something we are born with, or that we can muster up. It is something that God grants to us through the learning process of experience. Like our muscles, our faith is strengthened through exercise. The more we use it, the stronger it gets. Here is another way that we can see purpose behind our trials and afflictions: they provide the proving-grounds upon which a strong faith, through exercise, is forged.

Our sufferings here in this life are used by God to sanctify us. They purify us like silver in a refiner’s furnace (Ps. 66:10); they scrub off the pollution of sin like a fuller’s soap (Ps. 51:7). This process is unpleasant for a very short time, but the rewards are absolutely incomparable; the pain will last for only a moment; the glorious fruits of that pain will last for all eternity.

The smallest measurement of sanctification, then, is of infinitely more value than all of the health, wealth and pleasure that this little life has to offer. No one looking back from heaven will ever wish that he had had his “best life now”. Far better to be conformed into the image of Christ, than to enjoy all the best of this very temporary world. There is nothing wrong with suffering; there is a lot wrong with sinning. What a wonderful thing it is to have as much as possible of our sinful practice purged away in this life, even if it means we suffer for a little while in the process.

When Bethany first became seriously ill she was on the fast track to a glorious career as a classical cellist. She has since told me that if the trajectory of her life had not been redirected by suffering, she would probably not be walking with the Lord. Thank God for His sanctifying trials and afflictions! (Ps. 119:75). Here is another way that we can clearly see purpose behind our sufferings: they purge away the sinful dross with which our entire being is polluted, and mold us into the image of our Lord Jesus.

Our momentary light afflictions here in this life make for us a heavenly contribution that is incomparably out of proportion, in our favor (II Cor. 4:16-5:4). I spent some time in exposition of these verses back in chapter 6, but the point is just as appropriate here as it was there. Remember, the afflictions that Paul was calling “momentary” and “light” were anything but, from a temporal perspective. A heavenly perspective, however, changes everything. Compared to eternity our bitterest trials here are no more than brief irritations. Soon they will be forever gone and forgotten.

The entertainment industry loves to produce inspiring stories of stoic perseverance through suffering, in which the victims and their families will not accept defeat, and they always win in the end (“My Left Foot”, “A Beautiful Mind”, “Lorenzo’s Oil”, “Brain on Fire”, etc.). These stories are inspiring and heart-warming, but unfortunately, they are also misleading. They give the impression that as long as we

are determined and persistent enough we will always win. But that is simply not the truth. Millions upon millions have fought just as hard, only to lose their battles, but their stories are never told. In fact, from a temporal perspective, everyone loses in the end, even the winners. Nobody makes it out of this life alive. If this life is all we get, then MacBeth was right – it really is a tale told by an idiot; it was all for nothing. In the end we lose everything, and the end is coming very quickly. As the book of Ecclesiastes teaches, life “under the sun” is “vanity of vanities, a striving after the wind” (1:2, 14).

But Scripture teaches without ambiguity that this life is not all that we get. An eternal perspective, then, is the most realistic of all perspectives; it is the only correct perspective. This changes everything. We can run the race with endurance, knowing that there is a finish line just around the corner – and it is an unimaginably glorious finish line. And here’s the best part: as we run with endurance here in the land of the dying, our bitter struggles actually make a contribution to the overwhelming weight of glory that awaits us in the land of the living. I believe that this is what II Cor. 4:17 is teaching. It would be enough to know that our trials will soon end gloriously, but to know that they are actually contributing to that weight of glory sweetens the deal immeasurably. With this perspective, our efforts, expended for the glory of God, are not purposeless; they are not “a tale told by an idiot”; they are not “a striving after the wind”.

I won’t pretend to know what form heavenly treasure will take, but I do know that Scripture talks about it, and tells us to invest in it (Matt. 6:19-21; I Cor. 3:14). I believe that one of the ways we do so is by trusting in the Lord even through times of great suffering. When life delivers circumstances that the world would see as sufficient grounds to curse God and reject Him, but instead we remain faithful to Him, or even love Him all the more because of our circumstances, then we are contributing to that eternal weight of glory to which our present sufferings cannot be compared.

Here is divine teleology! II Cor. 4:17 tells us plainly that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory that cannot be compared”. Our afflictions are actually preparing for us this incomparable weight of glory! What a good deal this is: a little bit of light suffering now in exchange for an eternal weight of glory!

Sometimes our afflictions don’t seem very momentary. Once after a particularly severe and lengthy spell of acute suffering had finally eased, I reminded Bethany of these truths. I told her “it’s only for a moment”. She replied by saying “yes, but it’s a very long moment”. How true. Sometimes it seems as though our trials will go on and on and on, and will never end. But they will end. Bethany has often said that one great comfort that has kept her going through very dark times is this: that every second that passes is one more that will never have to pass again. Eventually those seconds will all run out, and the heavenly payoff will be both indescribably glorious and eternal. There can be no substantive comparison between the two, either quantitatively or qualitatively.

There is another way that divine purpose can be observed in and through our sufferings. They give us the opportunity to glorify God in ways that would otherwise be unavailable to us. We claim to believe that the chief end of man is, not to glorify ourselves and enjoy as many of the pleasures of this little life as possible for as long as we can, but to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. When God takes away the pleasures of this life and gives us suffering instead, then we are given the opportunity to prove that we really believe this. Talk is cheap. Will we really love God and remain faithful to Him even if He takes away every temporal reason for doing so? When we do, we prove that our chief end is what it should be.

That statement almost sounds self-glorifying. But a proper understanding of the root efficient cause of our sanctification kills any attempt to glorify ourselves. Philippians 1:6 tells us that God is the one who not only has initiated the work of sanctification in us, but also that He is the one who will bring this work to completion. Although we are active in the process, Philippians 2:13 tells us that it is God who has worked in us not only the doing, but also the prior willingness to do the doing. A proper understanding of theology, in every aspect, demands humility. Any good work performed by us is ultimately the fruit of a work of God’s free grace in us, removing any legitimacy from our boasting.

We need to be quick to truly hear the words of Paul: “what do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (I Cor. 4:7). Nevertheless, to remain faithful to God through times of intense suffering proves that He has done this work in us, for His glory. If not for the suffering, this would remain unproven.

These are some ways that we can see the purposeful hand of God behind our trials and afflictions. He uses them to set our minds and our faces in a heavenward direction; He uses them to strengthen our faith in Him; He uses them to sanctify us; He rewards faithful perseverance through suffering with an eternal weight of glory in the life to come; He is glorified in the faithful perseverance of His saints through trials and afflictions. These are all beautiful glimpses into the divine teleology behind our world of suffering, but they are only glimpses.

Beyond the material world to which we are bound there exists a spiritual realm that we know little about. This realm is not less real, but if anything, perhaps more ultimately so. How else can we make sense of Ephesians 6:12? Here we are told that, as we wrestle against flesh and blood, we “wrestle not (ultimately) against flesh and blood”. The physical enemies that we engage in the world are less ultimate than the principalities, powers, and spiritual forces behind them.

Consider also the very interesting account found in II Kings 6. In this narrative the king of Syria sought the life of Elisha, the prophet of God. He dispatched an army and surrounded Dothan, the city in which Elisha was residing, by night. In the morning the prophet’s servant was greatly alarmed when he made discovery of their plight, but Elisha was not at all concerned. He said (enigmatically, I expect, from the servant’s perspective) that “those who are with us are more than those who are with them”. He prayed that the Lord would “open his eyes that he may see”. When this request was granted, the servant could see that the Syrian army was, in fact, greatly outnumbered by a host of angelic beings (“horses and chariots of fire”), which were nonmaterial, but no less real.

We find another glimpse into this spiritual realm in Daniel chapter 10. In chapter 9 we find that the prophet had discovered in the book of Jeremiah that the time of exile (seventy years) should have been drawing to an end (9:2). Daniel humbled himself, and poured out his heart to God in repentance on his people’s behalf (9:3-8), recognizing God’s covenant faithfulness in having poured out His judgment against Israel (9:11-14), and earnestly sought the Lord’s grace, mercy, forgiveness and blessing, for His glory (9:15-19). A speedy response was sent to Daniel through a vision of the angel Gabriel, in which the prophet was given a message from God concerning the future restoration of Jerusalem, typifying the people of God (9:21-27).

In chapter 10 we again find Daniel earnestly seeking clarification from God, with mourning and fasting (10:2-3). This time, a speedy response was not forthcoming. An answer finally came in the form of another angelic vision some three weeks later. The heavenly messenger explained that he had been detained for twenty one days by conflict with the “prince of the kingdom of Persia”, and it wasn’t until “Michael, one of the chief princes” came to help him, that he was able to deliver his message.

There is a reason why I’m pointing the reader to texts such as these. I want you to understand that there is much more to reality than meets the eye. As we walk through this life, bound as we are to the material realm, we miss much of the divine purpose behind what we experience here.

Please don’t misunderstand what I am saying. I’m not suggesting that the spiritual is a more exalted plane of existence than the physical; I’m not flirting with gnosticism, or anything of that sort; I’m not making a false dichotomy between the body and the soul. We are both physical and spiritual beings, and will remain so for all of eternity. My point is only this: that, for now at least, we are able to see only a small corner of reality, and so are hardly competent to make an exhaustive judgment regarding the purpose behind our suffering. The first two chapters of the book of Job make this very clear: there was divine purpose behind Job’s suffering that he knew nothing about. God’s revelation has given us lovely tastes of the purpose behind our suffering, but only tastes. We don’t know but a small portion of the full extent of it.

God has not revealed everything to us, but He has revealed enough. We can be sure that God is sovereign, that He has ordained whatsoever comes to pass for His glory and our good (including our suffering), that He loves His elect, that our trials and tribulations will come to an end and be replaced by an eternal weight of glory in heaven, and that God is glorified here and now in our faithfulness to Him through bitter trials. This is all we need to know for now.

If there were no sovereign God, then there would be no such thing as transcendent purpose; MacBeth would be a sound philosopher. But there is a sovereign God, and this means that MacBeth was actually a fool. Because this world is created, governed and sustained by the all-conditioning God of Scripture, therefore there is no such thing as non-purpose. There is no possibility that this is a nihilistic world. All the pieces (all of them!) fit together perfectly according to the eternal plan of our magnificent God. This includes all the grand and accoladed pieces, as well as all the trivial, base and seemingly irrelevant pieces. This includes all the pleasant pieces, as well as all the unpleasant ones. Every detail of God's creation is governed and sustained by Him according to His good providence, and all for the good of His elect, and for His own glory.

These truths were impressed upon me rather powerfully a year or so ago during an evening worship service at church. I was all alone in my pew, as I had been for over two years, because the ones I love most were too ill to join me. Other people sat together, worshiped together, and enjoyed the kind of life that I longed for, but had been taken away from me, and I was struggling with jealousy and discontentment. I rested my arm on the windowsill beside me, and when I did I noticed the dead, dried-out and dusty remains of a mud-dauber wasp. My thoughts immediately took on a philosophical/theological bent. I began to muse about how even the life and death of this insignificant little insect was entirely superintended by the sovereign hand of God's providence. Even this – the life and death of a simple wasp – fell safely within the bounds of divine teleology; how much more is this true regarding my dear family, loved and cherished by this same sovereign God.

All of creation, all of history, all of reality is headed for a grand doxological culmination, and is all guided by the sovereign hand of God toward that end. Our pastor has been preaching a series in the book of Revelation, and I was struck by these truths as he went through several sermons on chapters five and six. These truths relate even to the storied “four horsemen of the apocolypse” (6:1-8), who have been active since the fall in Genesis three, are active now, and will be active until this glorious culmination on the great and terrible “day of the Lord”. Even wars, and pestilences, and trials, and famines, and hardships, and death are all serving God's divine purpose in bringing in His kingdom.

In chapter five we see a glorious vision of the courts of heaven. In verse thirteen we are told that “Every creature which is in heaven and on earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: ‘blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!’” All creation joins in doxological worship of our sovereign Lord, for His glory. That necessarily includes botfly larvae, venomous snakes, mosquitoes, ropeworms, leeches, ticks, and even *Borellia Burgdorferi* spirochetes.

Our world is, in fact, a gloriously teleological one.

Teleology

I happened on your carcass in a window nook
Where other eyes than mine were scarce inclined to look:
Grotesquely twisted, frozen in the throes of death,
Brittled by the sun, fragile as a dying breath,
(Except an obscure poet) unnoticed by all,
Either in life or death, your rising or your fall.
Never again will you rise up and take to wing,
Your lifeless stinging part long-since has lost its sting,
And soon to dust your dusty casement will return.
Pause and marvel with me; let wisdom now discern:
All this – your life, your death – was purposed from above
and safely borne within the pale of Sovereign Love.