

# How Can You Pray To A God Who Lets So Many People Hurt?

## By Hunter Bingham

Hunter Bingham:

How are you this afternoon? Pretty good shape. I really appreciate you staying home from the beach to come and listen to me. I have been genuinely excited about the large number of students from the University in general who've come over and been willing to listen to somebody from Talbot. There have been so many people willing to listen to a faculty member from Talbot in my conscious recollection, and that encourages me because we all need each other a lot more than we have been willing to admit on this campus. We need the enrichment that the rest of the university provides us in the graduate theological program, and we need to be able to hear what the School of Theology is saying as well.

Some of you who are at my installation service remember that I talked about establishment of moral leadership on the campus, and I very much appreciate your response to that plea by being willing to come and listen to me when there have been so many other really good people you could have listened to as an alternative. The topic for today is, how can you pray to a God who lets so many people hurt? And it's something that most thinking Christians have run into or will run into eventually in the course of their life. I begin with a series of incidents which characterize my life not so very long ago. My little girl, whose name is Hilary. You know on the phone to me, she was only five at the time, and she related that a cat had caught a bird and had killed it and left a series of bloodied feathers between her swing and her playhouse.

And she standing in the kitchen talking to daddy, could see those through the window there in the backyard. I was in my office in the seminary looking out over the trees, and I said to her in response, Well, sometimes, honey, the way the world is, one animal has to die so another could live. I felt a little guilty about even saying that because the cats in our neighborhood eat very well, actually. Lots of fabulous feline food with real chicken parts. They didn't need a bird. Why did they have to destroy a harmless bird right outside my little girl's window? But she brightened at my comment, seemed to think it was helpful to her, and I thought, it must be terrific to have a theologian for a daddy.

And she then said, Well, it's all right. It was just a daddy bird. This took place during the same month that I discovered I had a grey hair in my moustache. I discovered this by observing it in the mirror as I was shaving, and as I contemplated this advanced warning about my advancing senility as I leaned in, I caught the other side in the triple rotary heads of my electric shaver, and I looked down on the counter there, and there was my vanity laying on the vanity. That was not too long before, Jenny Tilton, one of my sharpest graduate students, said in a class one day, hey prof, is there a book which explains clearly what you've been struggling to tell us for the last half hour in this lecture? So loud and so sincere.

My friend in Seattle, he calls himself my best friend. Sent me a page from his Murphy's Law Desk calendar, and I was feeling a little beat on as a result of these experiences in my life, and I consolidated my soul with the feeling that, well, maybe I wasn't really on top of it, but I was an expert in an important area. My friend's calendar statement said that an expert is a person who knows more and more about less and less until they come to know absolutely everything about

nothing. Then I talked to the associate Dean. I said, I've been down a lot Verne, but I think I see a light at the end of the tunnel. And Verne Dirksen, who's moved on to another ministry now, said, I know, Bing, it's a train coming in the other direction. And, you know, Irma Bombax question burned as my own. If life is supposed to be a bowl of cherries, what am I doing in the pits?

In 1977, I had a course in New Testament survey. There were nine students in it. One of those students was called Ellie Edwards. Ellie was the kind of person that people who live in New York and Los Angeles make money writing pulp fiction books about dynamic, energetic, sort of person who you just couldn't hold down. And she had dedicated her life to Christ. And she had one fear in life that I knew about because we became fairly close. Ellie was special to our family. She was afraid she might die of cancer because she had spent the previous summer nursing her father through leukemia, and I watched him waste away. As a consequence of that, this was her secret fear. She continued on with her very vigorous lifestyle until the summer of 1977.

It was the year she was going to teach my son, Doug, how to swim over at the pool. And she discovered that she had melanoma in her left breast, and it was a very highly advanced form of cancer. Rapidly growing. Ellie struggled with me on the telephone over a number of items that were concerns to her. She first had small surgical probes. They finally did a radical mastectomy, and within two weeks after that, Ellie was dead. The year after that, Marty McBurnett. He was a brilliant young man. I was excited about Marty because he was willing to come to Talbot even though his fundamental theology was reformed, he would have been much more comfortable at

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Westminster. But he brought his brilliance to us. He enjoyed Exegesis courses and interpretation classes with me.

I knew him as well because he attended a Presbyterian Church where my wife worked as the secretary to the pastor for a period of time. We moved pianos in and out of each other's houses and so forth. Biggest thing in his life was the birth of his little girl. Marty had some trouble breathing, so he went to see his physician. And there on the table in his physician's office, he died of cardiac arrest in front of his physician, and they were not able to resuscitate him. He was in class one day taking notes and he was dead the next. He left a wife and a six month old child. There was a young man in my Church. His name is Greg. He came from a very solid Christian home. He had been away from the Lord for a period of time, and then he started to come back. He married a gal who'd had a pretty rough life.

He was a sort of fellow that they used to plan films like Top Gun Around. He was a Marine Corps pilot, flew RF4Cs during the Vietnamese war, came back, went into insurance and accounting, and he was coming back to the Lord. He'd maintained his relationship with the Marine Corps reserves, and he was going off to Marine Corps training, and he got up the courage to take his Bible. Along that time he kissed his wife and his three month old daughter to goodbye, went off into the woods in Maine and flew his fighter into the forest. [snaps] Like that, and he was gone. His father is an elder at my church. Greg used to say I was his favorite preacher, so it fell to me to do his funeral.

I spent hours and hours with Ellie personally and more hours with her on the telephone from the hospital, even from the recovery room. I had a few embarrassed comments to Marty's wife when I talked to her. And as I struggled to do Greg's funeral, I was, well, the only honest thing to tell you is that I struggle with this verse, these phrases from Job. They go like this. Why do the wicked live on, growing old and increasing in power? They see their offspring established around them, their offspring before their eyes. They send forth their children as a flock. Their little ones dance about. They sing and make music with the tambourine and the harp. They make merry to the sound of the flute. They spend their years in prosperity. They go down to the grave in peace. Yet they say to God, leave us alone. We have no desire for your ways. Who is the Almighty? That we should gain anything by serving Him?

Why would we gain anything by praying to him? Job 21. I felt as I worked on that sermon that the only word that came was why? Why God does this happen? Are there not people in the mafia who deserve to die more than Ellie and Martin and Greg? Why? And God [inaudible] part said nothing. Absolutely nothing. The silence of God, as it has been described by Bible teachers and theologians, is very profound. We read you a couple of observations here by Arthur Kustanz and then later by Norman Anderson. It's this seeming indifference at times to the needs of human beings when appalling suffering overtakes them. The countless millions of people who have suffered because of famine or war or drought or disaster. We can hardly say that it's appropriate to conclude that they deserved it.

Such times, thoughtful men and women don't become atheists because they find it irrational to believe in a spiritual world which is beyond demonstration by ordinary means, but because of

emotional insult. The feeling that if God really is the sort of being that we Christians say that he is, how could he possibly remain silent? Would he not have to act? Would he not have to manifest himself mercifully, savingly, publicly? Determination of these three young lives was very jarring for me, and the tragedy of their senseless and apparently pointless deaths was a reminder to me of what Sir Robert Anderson said a century ago. He makes this comment. Quote, society, even in the great centers of modern civilization, is also like a slaveship, where with the sounds of music and revelry and laughter on the upper deck there mingled the groans of misery and untold suffering battened down below.

Who can estimate the sorrow that is suffered and the wrong endured during a single round of the clock? Western civilization has hidden us, you and me from the truth by enlarge. And that truth is that since Adam's sin, the heart of humanity has been desperately wicked. At perhaps no point in human history have so many people, especially Christians, come to think that pain and struggle and violent death were not part of normal human existence. Some of this is because of the creeping in to the way that we think about reality, of phrases like God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. The instrument has been widely used by God to bring many to Christ, and I don't speak against it.

I speak about the philosophy which is attached to it, the idea that by receiving Christ, everything gets better. That one enters into a sanctified rose garden. Brothers and sisters, how many roses do you know that have no thorns? Check it out between here and the library in the front. The American dream, which we have all bought into in a tremendously significant way, a dream founded on a Constitution which says that is an inalienable right men have before God to pursue

happiness. No society on Earth has institutionalized the pursuit of happiness as we have. And at no time in history has there been such a promulgation of the gospel packaged with the idea of happiness in the avoidance of suffering and pain and hurt.

First century Christians could have and would have never bought this sort of gospel. They don't understand it in Eastern Europe, they don't understand it in large parts of Asia. Many in Africa are appalled by it. Those who live behind the iron and bamboo curtains are insulted by it, and those who live in Latin America are as well. I've been profoundly disturbed by a fellow who walks around this campus. His name is Daniel Wong. Some of his brothers and sisters are here as well. Daniel is perhaps the most godly young man that I've ever had occasion to come in contact with. Daniel has suffered a great deal during the time of his family's persecution during the Cultural Revolution in China, and I have come to feel a bit like a naked ape in front of him when it comes to matters of personal holiness and commitment to Christ.

When I've examined the advantages that I have been born in this country, where the pursuit of happiness and the opportunity to succeed materialistically has been part of my national heritage and the disadvantages that he had under communism, I become convinced that part of the stifling of my own spiritual growth has been my unwillingness to accept the reality of suffering and my unwillingness to stick my neck out for Christ in any way that might risk my personal happiness. But for most of you, human wickedness is not the point. You live as I do in Southern California, and like me, you probably have a lock on your car. I'm a Dean of a theological seminary, which you would think fairly innocuous location. And yet I have a ring of keys here which has 14 keys on it, and that doesn't include all of them.

I have dead bolt locks on the front and the back of my house. I understand human sinfulness. The problem is not human sinfulness. It is rather why is a wise and good God silent? As Kustanas said, or, as Anderson has pointed out. The question can't be evaded. How can you pray to a God who let so many people hurt when it is evident that the exercise of His divine power could end pain and suffering [snaps] like that? I'd like to start out first of all, as we address the question by saying, reality is this, brothers and sisters, and we need to live in reality, not in fantasy. That there are going to be some days when you and when I and when those we love are simply not able to pray. There are days when the anguish and the pain and the hurt, the grief and of suffering are so great, even vicariously, when someone else is hurting, that it isn't possible to pray.

Or when we are so alienated inside of our head from the God who has made us but rather than simply utter meaningless drivel, it would be better not to pray. I don't know that I've ever heard anyone who taught on prayer say or admit that, and some of you may be insulted by it. The fact is that there are days when it seems impossible because it hurts so much. Now, the comeback is usually, well, wait a minute. Christians are not supposed to have this kind of a feeling, they're destructive to personal faith. They hinder growth and spiritual life and crush the spirit of prayer. My comment is this on that. We need to come back to reality before we're going to make progress in spirituality. We have become a community whether we like it or not, in which we cannot afford to be honest about what we feel.

We feel alienated from brothers and sisters because we have to pretend about the quality of our spirituality. Many of us feel alienated from spiritual leaders because they seem to be a cut above

us. You could never be honest with a person like that and further, even alienated from God, who is so much more Holy than anyone we've ever seen down here. And because we cannot trust anybody any longer, Christian psychotherapy is a major growth industry among us. We can't trust anyone. And so we're willing to pay \$25 to \$100 an hour to guarantee the silence of someone who will listen to whom and with whom we can be honest. And we can get rid of our image and pretend no longer.

Our unwillingness to admit the fact that it's hard to pray when it hurts, and sometimes it's almost impossible. It's part of the reason why the whole experience is so destructive. I believe it is our unwillingness, which contributes to the impossibility for many of us to practice what's indicated in Scripture in Hebrews 12. The author says here strengthen the feeble arms and the weak knees make level paths for your feet so that the lame may not be disabled but rather healed. See to it that no one misses the grace of God, and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. I'm convinced that there are many who have missed the grace of God simply because there was nobody who was willing to walk into the shadow into that valley of darkness with them.

Nobody who would listen without being flippant. Nobody who would mourn. Nobody who would put aside being judgmental. God must be speaking to you through this disaster. Nobody to join them in weeping. Mourn with those who mourn is not just the text in the psychotherapy manual which they read at Rosemead. It isn't even a line in a pastoral counseling text that we might read at Talbot, but it's a commandment which comes from the Apostle of Christ to every

single one of us. Because we are unwilling to do this, to admit that it hurts, we find it very, very hard to intercede, to bear one another's burdens.

We don't fulfill the law of Christ. But this law of love, of healing, of self-restoring love exists because hurt exists. And in the times of this numbing silence of God, we must help. We must be willing to put an arm around someone and just let them cry. We must be willing to admit that we need to be hugged on days when we can do nothing but cry. You see the route which the writer has called bitterness grows especially well in that cheerful damp that's called isolation and loneliness. I have on the wall in my office, a prayer written by St. Francis of Assisi. It reads as follows, Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace, where there is hatred, let me so love, where there is injury, pardon, where there is doubt, faith, where there is despair, hope, where there is darkness, light.

I've wondered for a long time what's the essence of Christianity? What is the religion boil down to? What is relationship with Christ mean, expressed in a few words? And I'm convinced that you must resolve a question with the four letters L-O-V-E. The concept of love is almost totally meaningless in our society. In this community that is La Mirada. The word love stands for a shop which sells Teddy bears. It stands for a barbecue restaurant. It stands for a wedding apparel shop, and it stands for a place where they sell pornography. Augustine of Hippo said, what does love look like? And I think in answering the question, you get something which is very profound. He says, Love looks like this. It has hands to help others. It has feet which hastened to the poor and the needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has ears to hear sighs and sorrow. That's what love looks like.

And that's why I have that prayer from St. Francis on the wall of my office because the prayer is what love looks like. And it's a petition that God would make me sensitive to the responsibility I have to other brothers and sisters in Christ. And all of us have to cope with that at one point or another in our spiritual lives. You must at some stage of the game, stop pretending. Let's shift gears for a minute. Let's do some honest thinking together about pain and hurt. And it's important that we do this. Have things always been bad for the human race? Does it always hurt? And the answer to that question is no. There are probably a few people who have lived in times of tremendous opposition or war for which the answer to the question is yes.

Children born in certain times and parts of the Holocaust experience, children born in certain environments of genocide, which have occurred repeatedly throughout human history would probably answer the question yes, but for most of us, the answer honestly is no. And as the New Testament and the Old Testament indicate, all of us have known something of the delight of seeing the sun after the rain. We have known how refreshed we are through the rain when it's been dry. We have indeed eaten. And God has given us our food. And sometimes it's been eaten with gladness. The seasons have encouraged us. We have known friends who have been helpful to us.

Some of us have children and the delight of having them or having younger brothers and sisters or just being around someone who's full of happiness and bubbly. Many of us have known the transforming power of love in our own lives, either through our parents, our friends or spouses, whom God has given us in a unique way. So the answer to the question is no. Things have not always been bad, and it's important to keep that in mind, especially when it hurts so much. It

seems like that's all there is or ever will be. But I know that there is cancer, there are birth defects, there is mental illness, there is natural and man-made disaster.

You have a balance. That's what I'm arguing for, and you need to remember that as I have observed, flowers do grow in very barren places. I had occasion to be in the area where Mount St. Helens erupted and was delighted to find a loop in another mountain flowers taking over that area very rapidly. It was argued by some that there would be no wildlife there for at least 20 years. I've seen Ground Zero Nagasaki, Hiroshima, where it was said no plant would ever grow for 1000 years, and it's a garden at this time. Acid rain makes beautiful rainbows. Smog and industrial dust make beautiful sunsets. You can go down to Santa Monica or Huntington Beach and observe that firsthand for yourself. Reality simply hasn't been all bad for everybody all the time.

And you must remember that when it hurts so much that it seems like it's always been bad. For a lot of us, another question which comes up is, Why can't things be good all the time? And the answer to the question from somebody like me is that Scripture indicates that things were once good all the time. God created beings in His image whom He gave the privilege of having responsible choice. This great gift is something that's responsible for the way things are in the world. He could have made us totally dominated by instinct or by electromechanical design limitations as machines are. But He chose to give us the freedom to make responsible choices. He gave us the power to love, you see. And the power to love, and the ability to make such choices is also the power to exercise animosity and anger and hate.

The opportunity to glorify God and be an expression of thanksgiving to Him carries with it the potential to equally assert sin and rebellion and tyranny and oppression. The creaturely freedom which God has given us. The great gift of bearing His image, as is expressed in Genesis, is the source of the problem. Genesis 3:17 says, Cursed is the ground because of you, and that's a comment made to Adam and to Eve and to me and to you. People hurt because I sin as is simple as that. Because of this, because of the reality of our own personal sinfulness, we must set our minds to learning to live with evil. We must at the risk of sounding on Americans say that we need to expect evil. We need to plan for it. We need to recognize that it is a natural consequence of being alive, even as redeemed people in a world that has fallen. We live in a world which is devastated by sin and by evil.

Jesus promised in John 16:33 is in the world, you will have tribulation. Nobody ever claims that promise, but it is a promise made by the Lord Jesus Christ. It was Paul who said in Acts 14 by many tribulations, we must enter the Kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul asserts that all who would live Godly in Christ Jesus will suffer opposition or persecution. We have, I'm afraid, because of the Pollyanna approach that we've taken to the gospel and the nature of American life and economic system, isolated ourselves from this. Most of us have never really hurt. And when there is any sort of intervention of the reality of sin in our life, we feel devastated and we say, Why don't you love me anymore to God? I ask you to kiss it and take it away and you wouldn't.

Come back at this point is invariably, Hunter, you are too pessimistic for a Christian, and such an attitude is nearly blasphemous given your position. Usually this is packaged with a statement that God makes evil into good, and I'd like to address that carefully and to do so carefully and

responsibly, I'm going to read a little bit from a text I have here with me. Is it too pessimistic? Is it true that God makes evil into good? I would start out like this. Yes. The death of Stephen in Acts 7 does seem to have been used by God as a factor in the conversion of the Apostle Paul. But the text is silent about the effect of this on Stephen's family. Nor does it make the death of the Apostle James something to praise the Lord about in Acts 12. There is no clue as to why God permitted John the Baptist to be beheaded in a silly display of paranoid power by Herod the Great.

As far as we know from the text of Scripture, Jesus did not tell his disciples that some great good would come from this, nor did he tell them they should praise the Lord anyway. He just went away, according to the text in Luke and mourned the death of his cousin. To assume that God lets good things happen, so that we can experience greater, lets bad things happen, so that we can experience greater good is to deny the reality of the existence of evil. It's to deny that sin is there and that it really is offensive and sinful and destructive. Christ gave His life to deliver us from sin and from the ultimate penalty of moral evil. When we say that good will always come as an ultimate consequence of some bad happening, we're really saying evil doesn't exist. It only seems that way.

Brothers and sisters, when an innocent child is murdered or John the Baptist, for that matter, that's evil. Yes, God can and often does bring good results, conversions, family reunions, reordering of priorities and so forth from this, but no parent who truly loved his or her child would let his child be murdered so that good could result. Friends who have faced tragic losses are usually not too comforted by well-meaning brothers and sisters who tell them, quote, Some

day you will understand God's reasons. Read Matthew 2 sometime and ask yourself again just how much good was actually felt by the shattered mothers in Bethlehem whose slaughtered infants served no more good than to demonstrate Herod's paranoia. The comment in Scripture is this. A voice heard in Rama weeping and in great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more.

The facts are that God does not make evil into good. Evil remains evil no matter how much good God may be pleased to bring about or to reveal as a consequence of it. My objective here is to assert strongly that Romans 8:28 does not say that God makes all things into good, but rather that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him. Confidence in God's love and His power and His presence and His confidence does not require that we deny the objective reality of evil or say that pain doesn't really hurt. Now, if at this point you're thinking Jesus was joyful about going to the cross, or since the Savior delighted in doing to God's will He decided to go to the cross, my response is you're terribly wrong. The text says, quote, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross in Hebrews 12.

My five year old knows that you endure spinach, Rutabaga, liver. Strawberry shortcake, chocolate ice cream, and other good things are not endured. They're enjoyed. Given our Savior's omniscient knowledge of the plan of Salvation, such things as your Salvation and my conversion, the Son of God saw joy, but as a man, He did not enjoy the prospect or the eventual reality of the cross. There's too much agony in Gethsemane to believe that the Savior was just praising the Lord on the Mount of olives. Luke 22 says he was in anguish and sweat profusely. Luke

compares it to blood. Hebrews 5 says he cried. He asked the help of his friends. Sit here while I pray in Mark 14, but they failed him. Luke tells us he needed the help of angels to continue.

Now, if our Lord and our master, if our sovereign Savior could be so deeply distressed and troubled as He says in the face of sin and evil, if He could say, My soul is overwhelmed to the point of death as He truly does, if He could cry, why is it that we Christians continue to pretend in the name of some kind of abundant or victorious living, but somehow it's good for bad things to happen, or that black is really white from God's point of view. If Jesus recoiled in personal abhorrence from the consequences and implications of evil and sin in terms of personal suffering, by what slide of hand do we conclude it is spiritual to put a happy face on it and to lie to one another by saying things like someday we'll understand these things always work out for good.

Their promises such as the one in 1 Corinthians 13 quote, I shall know fully, even as I've known fully, as I've known. Unquote. Mean that Christians are going to become omniscient when they're glorified. The answer is now. The Book of Revelation 6:9, you will find there the souls of them who have been slain in the presence of God. Mind you in the presence of God, next to the altar, and their question to Christ is not oh, now we understand. Their question is, how long sovereign Lord, before you judge and avenge our blood? In the very presence of God, according to the image we have in the Book of Revelation, questions remain as His creatures. We will never understand all that our mighty God understands and purposes because He was divine as well as human.

Jesus understood the purpose for His suffering, but those of us who are only human are required to experience hurt and pain and suffering, sometimes victorious or vicariously when others, those we love are in anguish, without any certain knowledge of why or to what purpose. If you read the end of the Book of Job sometime, you'll discover much to your surprise that despite the suffering and the agony that the man went through, he never knew why. It's reasonable. Nevertheless, given what is revealed about God in Scripture and in Christian experience to assume that God does not permit suffering in the believer's life because it's some sort of end in itself.

Despite our inner feelings that we or they or he or she doesn't deserve to suffer, we must be more open than we are to the possibility that we are supposed to respond to questions that relate to our own personal holiness, our own sense of justice, our own integrity, rather than shake our hand at heaven and say why? In a book entitled Encourage Me Charles Swindoll says Crisis crushes and in its crushing, it often refines, and it purifies. You may be discouraged today because the crushing has not led to surrender. I've stood beside too many of the dying. I've ministered to too many of the broken and the bruised to believe that crushing is somehow an end in itself. Unfortunately, it usually takes the brutal blows of affliction to soften and to penetrate our hearts, even though such blows seem unfair.

Let me read to you Alexander Schultzenitzen's observations on one of his prison experiences. He says, quote, it was only when I lay in the rotting prison that I was within myself sensing the stirrings of good. Gradually, it was disclosed to me that the line which separates good and evil passes not through classes or political parties, but right straight through the middle of human

hearts. So I bless you prison for having been in my life. The words are strong illustration of what you find in Psalm 119. Here, the author says, Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I obey your word. It was good for me to be afflicted, he says in verse 71 so that I might learn your decrees.

Some of you are thinking, what's all this got to do with prayer? This. I don't think we Christians can begin to pray effectively for ourselves or others who are in pain unless we're honest because of our creatureliness, much of human suffering seems meaningless. Our conjectures about why people hurt obscure the fact that we simply don't know why most pain and suffering take place. It probably is helpful to assume that God will do this or that and that from particular circumstance there may be good, which comes. For the Christian, the issue is not, is it helpful? We must deal more in terms of am I acting and believing in categories which are truthful. The truth is that we, like the mothers of Bethlehem and like Job, usually don't know what's going on. What we know is that it hurts.

What we must stop doing brothers and sisters before we will begin to pray effectively is to stop trying to be God. Stop trying to figure things out, always see some good and evil or pain, and admit that we are creatures. Creatures who don't understand and we must be willing to cry. There is no victory despite what we're told repeatedly in that sort of pagan stoicism which says Smile even though it hurts. Remember your testimony. Such attitudes are a victory for deception and spiritual schizophrenia. Wonder Woman and Superman exist only in comic books. They're fantasy people. Reality hurts, and the Christian whose become convinced that they must pray to

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God and say thank you for hurting me or them or us is a masochist and he turns and she turns God into a sadist.

Does God enjoy suffering and evil? Read some time what he says about it in Ezekiel 18, verses 22 and 32. Did Jesus lack victorious faith when he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears? Read the Psalms again. Notice how incredibly honest David is when he admits his anguish, his sorrow, his grief, his affliction. It's not necessary to pretend to enjoy pain and hurt and suffering in order to be found faithful and to pray effectively. Part of the reason why it's so hard to be honest about this, why it's so hard to be helpful to someone who's in agony is the realization that it could happen to us and our desire to be independent, to always be happy, to always pull our own strings, to be victorious, really, to be omnipotent and need nobody else is threatened when you are around people who hurt.

Hurt and pain bring us back to the reality of our own creatureliness and our utter and total dependence upon God, the contingency of our existence, the fact that we don't control even whether we take another breath or not. And should God withdraw a sustaining hand, we'd all fall over dead in an instant. Truly victorious Christians, brothers and sisters are those who admit their humanness, who admit the emotional insult of God's apparent silence when we want to know why and to what purpose, and who submit themselves to others and to the Creator with tears on their faces. In a book entitled *The Psalms of My Life*, Joe Bailey, who has just passed away, says, I cry tears before you, Lord tears, because I cannot speak. Words are lost among my fears and my pain and my sorrow. It hurts. But tears you understand my wordless prayer you hear. Lord wipe away my tears, all tears. Not now, not in some distant day, but now, right here.

I think when we stop pretending with our God, when we stop pretending and playing games with one another, this is the sort of prayer which comes forth. It's the sort of prayer which the Bible tells us is heard. A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. You see, God uses pain. He uses suffering. C. S. Lewis rightly said it's God's megaphone, and the fact is that many of us will not look up unless we're flat on the back. I know a businessman in the city of Seattle who lived an incredible life of hedonism until he developed brain cancer. The cancer was operated on, but it proved to be inoperable as far as permanently stemming the course of the disease, and he knew that he only had six months to live and this man's life was radically transformed.

His business did as well as it ever did, but he led dozens of people to Christ because he thought, I don't have too much time left. And the priorities in the short period of time that I have left are all different now on the other side of my illness. While I was in Cambridge during my sabbatical in 1984, a bomber who is now thought to be from the Irish Republican Army went into the hotel in Brighton, where the Conservative Party was holding its national meeting and placed what is now thought to be 12 pounds of gelignite plastic explosive behind a panel in a bathroom next to where Margaret Thatcher was staying in the hotel. Most of you read about it in the newspapers. Mrs. Thatcher escaped very narrowly. Others who were present were maimed.

She was asking an interview with the Times of London whether this incident had changed her perspective on life. Mrs. Thatcher to the best of my knowledge, is not a Christian, but she made this sort of statement. All my values are different now. I've looked death right in the face. My priorities have shifted. I am much more concerned with people and the quality of my

relationships with them. Many of the little things, the trivia in my life, which was so consuming now seemed to be absolutely unimportant. I don't know what sort of thing it's going to take in my personal life for God to give me a total reorientation like that. I pray that it's not the destruction of some part of someone that I love. But I recognize that I need it more often than I'm willing to admit.

Then in the back of my mind comes a thought which says, It's not fair. It isn't right. Why should I have to live down here in a world which is so much like hell too much of the time while God gets to live in heaven where it's all peace and bliss? It introduces another thought before we leave today, where is God when it hurts? The answer to the question is that He's on the cross and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, taking to himself all the pain and all the suffering and all the hurt of the world. That's what's meant by 2 Corinthians 5, where Paul tells us God in Christ was reconciling the world unto himself. That's what's meant by 1 John 2, verse one and two of chapter two, that Christ is the sacrifice not only for our sins but the sins of the whole world. You see theologically and morally as our Creator, God is responsible ultimately for the existence of evil and of pain and of hurt.

And he has accepted that responsibility as our Redeemer. He is a man of sorrows. He is acquainted with grief. There is agony in the cross. Physical agony I could describe at some length. I'm the author of an article on crucifixion in a major Bible encyclopedia. Agony emotionally and psychologically. One who had never been out of intense, totally consuming personal union with God, ripped apart from Him and put in total isolation. The cry from the cross, brothers and sisters isn't that it hurts it as my God, my God, where are you? Eloi Eloi lama

sabachthani. That's the emotional spiritual terror of the Cross, an experience which no one in the universe has ever been called upon to accept. God directly identifies with your suffering if you're a Christian. In Acts 9 tells Paul, you are persecuting me. And Paul has been persecuting other believers.

In Matthew 25 talking about his identification with his brothers and sisters, he says, what you did to my brothers, you did also to me. We're told in 1 Corinthians 12, we constitute the body of Christ. And the implication of that is that if you suffer, Christ Himself suffers. Christ suffered utterly, totally and completely alone, so that you and I would never have to endure suffering alone. The promise of Hebrews 13 is that I will never leave you. I will never forsake you. The question which is posed in the Torrey Week schedule. How can you pray to a God who let so many people hurt must be changed in light of this. The question is, can you pray to a God who died for people who hurt?

Hope and hope does not disappoint because God has poured out His love in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. You see, at the right time, while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, although somebody might try it. God demonstrated His own love to us. And yet while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him? I also read in the Book of Revelation that the day is coming when God will wipe away all tears. When it will be true that the dwelling place of God will be with men and women. He Himself will be with us. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, and the old order of things will have all passed away.

John, who heard this, said, He was seated on the throne, said, I am making all things new. And then he said, Write this down for these words are trustworthy and they're true in my case. And I cannot speak for you. You must all make up your own mind on this kind of an issue. It is the reality of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus. The complete and total victory which Christ has obtained over sin and over evil, over the forces of darkness and hell, over death and suffering. The fact that God personally took the moral responsibility for what He created in Christ. It is that which makes me want to pray to a God who allows so many people to hurt. But when it hurts too much, I need you to pray for me.

Let's pray. Father, this is heavy stuff today. There are lots and lots of us who are struggling with depression because of opposition in our life. Some of us have fiddled around a demonic. Some of us are living with sin. Some of us are just scared of exams, afraid of being away from home, worried about relationships. But generally speaking, most of us have had it pretty easy.

[inaudible] I really ask most of us to suffer very much and we're pretty much into pursuing happiness. Father, please make us willing to be your children, to accept the responsibility of living as children of light in a world which is saturated with evil and darkness. Help us not to shake our hands at you and to cry and to say if you loved me you would take it away. Help us to see you on the cross where we know your love is there. Help us to be people who are not trite about the suffering of others. Help us to accept the fact that so often we don't know.

Give us the courage to admit that we're children that we're just creatures. Thank you that you're not some divine despot, but that you have come down personally and entered into our sufferings in the person of the Lord Jesus, that you are a man of sorrows and that we can come to you and

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bear our souls and weep and cry and struggle and be honest when we don't understand. Help us to reach out to our brothers and sisters, even to those who don't know the Lord Jesus Christ and to cry with them and to encourage and to support. Save us from triteness.

Thank you, Father, that the day is coming when there will be an end to pain, to evil, and to suffering. When some, if not all of our questions will be answered about these things. Thank you that you've shown us in Christ, that if we can't understand, you're worthy of our trust. Father, we need your help. A lot of us need to grow up. Most of us are afraid that some great suffering or pain would come into our family, into my life, into her life, into his life. Father, give us the courage to accept and to believe. Help us to pray even when it hurts. We ask this in Jesus name. Amen.

Message on Friday will deal with faith. Questions will be addressed that relate to naming it and claiming it the nature of faith. Faith will get things from God that he doesn't want to give you. How to understand, fasting how to think about persistence, how to think about importunity. If you have the time, it would be well to try to attend that session because it will tie up some of the loose ends that have been left in the little time that I have here. Thanks for your attention.