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the swans are not silent



BOOK TWO

the Hidden
SMILE *of*
GOD

The Fruit of Affliction
in the Lives of John Bunyan,
William Cowper, and David Brainerd

J O H N P I P E R

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*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

WILLIAM COWPER

“GOD MOVES IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY”



PREFACE



The swans sing sweetly when they suffer. The swans I have in mind are John Bunyan (1628-1688), William Cowper (1731-1800), and David Brainerd (1718-1747). I call them swans because they are great voices for Christian truth that death has not silenced.

When the unrivaled Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, retired in A.D. 430, he handed over his duties to his humble successor, Eraclius. At the ceremony, Eraclius stood to preach as the aged Augustine sat on his bishop's throne behind him. Overwhelmed by a sense of inadequacy in Augustine's presence, Eraclius said, "The cricket chirps, the swan is silent."¹ This story is the origin of the title for this series of books called *The Swans Are Not Silent*. You are now reading Book Two. The first was called *The Legacy of Sovereign Joy: God's Triumphant Grace in the Lives of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin*.

The reference to swans appeared again a thousand years later. On July 6, 1415, John Hus (whose name in Czech means "goose") was burned at the stake for criticizing the Roman Catholic sale of indulgences. Just before his death, he is said to have written, "Today, you are burning a goose; however, a hundred years from now, you will be able to hear a swan sing; you will not burn it, you will have to listen to him."² And so the line of "swans" has continued down to our own day—faithful witnesses to the gospel of the glory of Christ whose death does not silence their song.

¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, CA: University California Press, 1969), p. 408.

² Erwin Weber, "Luther with the Swan," *The Lutheran Journal*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1996, p. 10.

My aim in this series of books is to magnify the voice of the swans with the megaphone of their lives. The apostle Paul calls the church to “adorn the doctrine of God” with the fidelity of our lives (Titus 2:10). That is what the swans have done, especially in their suffering. Their steadfastness through trial sweetens and intensifies the song of their faith. It is part of our pleasant Christian duty to preserve and proclaim the faith-sustaining stories of Christ’s suffering swans. The Bible exhorts us that we “not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:12). “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7). But we can’t imitate or be inspired by what we don’t know. Hence the series, *The Swans Are Not Silent*.

The three stories that I tell in this book were originally biographical messages delivered orally at the Bethlehem Conference for Pastors. I am influenced in my selection of these three for this book by the conviction expressed by Benjamin Brook in the preface to his three-volume work, *The Lives of the Puritans*:

Of all the books which can be put into your hands, those which relate the labors and suffering of good men are the most interesting and instructive. In them you see orthodox principles, Christian tempers, and holy duties in lovely union and in vigorous operation. In them you see religion shining forth in real life, subduing the corruptions of human nature, and inspiring a zeal for every good work. In them you see the reproaches and persecutions which the servants of God have endured; those gracious principles which have supported their minds; and the course they have pursued in their progress to the kingdom of heaven. Such

books are well calculated to engage your attention, to affect your feelings, to deepen your best impressions, and to invigorate your noblest resolutions. They are well calculated to fortify you against the allurements of a vain world; to assimilate your characters to those of the excellent of the earth; to conform your lives to the standard of holiness; and to educate your souls for the mansions of glory.³

These are my aims. And I agree that “The labors and suffering of good men are the most interesting and instructive” for these great ends. It is apparent, therefore, that I do not write as a disinterested scholar, but rather as a passionately interested—and I hope honest and careful—pastor whose mission in life is to spread a passion for the supremacy of God in all things for the joy of all peoples.

John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd labored and suffered. And it was by this very affliction that they bore fruit for the nourishing of radical Christian living, God-centered worship, and Christ-exalting world missions. How they suffered, how they endured, and how it bore fruit is the story that, I pray, will inspire in you that same radical Christian life, God-centered worship, and Christ-exalting mission.

John Bunyan is best known as the simple, British, Baptist pastor who in prison wrote the book that to this day “remains the widest circulating single piece of literature in the history of the human race outside of the Bible,”⁴ *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. It is a great book about how to live the Christian life. Lesser known

³ Benjamin Brook, *The Lives of the Puritans*, vol. 1 (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1994, orig. 1813), pp. vi-vii.

⁴ Barry Horner, *The Pilgrim’s Progress by John Bunyan, Themes and Issues: An Evangelical Apologetic* (Lindenhurst, NY: Reformation Press Publishing, 1998), p. 2.

is the fact that his twelve years in prison were “voluntary,” in the sense that a commitment not to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ would have obtained his freedom at any time. This fact intensifies the effect of knowing that when Bunyan’s oldest child Mary—blind from birth—visited him in prison, it was like “the pulling of the Flesh from my bones.”⁵ Fewer still are those who know that this imprisoned pastor, with no formal education beyond grammar school, also wrote some sixty other books, most of which are still in print 350 years later.⁶

William Cowper, for those who, along the way, happened to take a course in eighteenth-century literature, is known as “the poet of a new religious revival” led by John Wesley and George Whitefield. His poetry and letters merited fifty pages in the anthology I studied in college.⁷ Among those who know him as a Christian poet, many do not know that William Cowper lived with bleak depression as a steady companion all his life, sometimes immobilized in despair, and repeatedly attempting suicide. In spite of this darkness, Cowper today is still touching the hearts of thousands who know nothing of him at all, simply because, in worship, they sing his hymns “There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood,” “O for a Closer Walk with God,” and “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

David Brainerd would probably not be known by anyone today if it were not for Jonathan Edwards, the New England pas-

⁵ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1978), p. 123.

⁶ The “Catalogue-Table of Mr. Bunyan’s Books,” *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 3, George Offor, ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), p. 763, lists sixty works of Bunyan. See also the complete list of his writings in Christopher Hill, *A Tinker and a Poor Man: John Bunyan and His Church, 1628-1688* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), pp. xv-xvii.

⁷ Louis Bredvold, Alan McKillop, Lois Whitney, eds., *Eighteenth Century Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edition (New York: The Ronald Press Co., 1956), p. 882.

tor, in whose house this young missionary to the American Indians died of tuberculosis when he was twenty-nine. Edwards took Brainerd's diary and turned it into what is called *The Life of David Brainerd*,⁸ a biography that has inspired more missionary service, perhaps, than any other book outside the Bible.⁹ There were no specialists to tell the twenty-two-year-old Brainerd, when he began to spit blood in his sophomore year at Yale, that he was an unfit candidate for missionary stress in the wilderness. So for the next seven years, after being expelled from Yale, he laid down his life for the salvation of "the Stockbridge, Delaware and Susquehanna Tribes of Indians."¹⁰ His story has become a spiritual classic, and "it is as hard to number the great company seen by John on Patmos as to count that company—red, brown, yellow, and white—brought into the Kingdom of God directly or indirectly by the young consumptive who burned himself out in the wilderness of New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey over two centuries ago."¹¹

⁸ The full title of the 1749 edition was *An Account of the Life of the late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd, Minister of the Gospel, Missionary to the Indians, from the honourable Society in Scotland, for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, and Pastor of a Church of Christian Indians in New Jersey. Who died at Northampton in New England, October 9th, 1747, in the 30th year of his Age: Chiefly taken from his own Diary, and other private Writings, written for his own Use; and now published by Jonathan Edwards, A.M., Minister of the Gospel at Northampton.* See Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, Norman Pettit, ed., in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. vii. The reference to Brainerd being thirty years old is inaccurate. He was born April 20, 1718 and died October 9, 1747.

⁹ This claim is, of course, hard to substantiate, but others have made even greater claims: "But in truth David Brainerd's life sacrifice reached out and touched the whole world, challenging more people into Christian service than perhaps any other man that ever lived" (Ed Reese, "The Life and Ministry of David Brainerd," *Christian Biography Resources*, <http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/biobrainerd.html> [6-1-00]). A more modest claim would be, "Almost immediately upon [the *Diary's*] publication, it captured the hearts of the Protestant world. For over a century it was one of the most popular documents in evangelical circles. Its influence has been enormous" (Francis M. DuBose, ed., *Classics of Christian Missions* [Nashville: Broadman Press, 1979], pp. 173-174).

¹⁰ This summary of his Indian mission is taken from his gravestone in Northampton, MA.

¹¹ Clyde Kilby, "David Brainerd: Knight of the Grail," *Heroic Colonial Christians*, Russell T. Hitt, ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1966), p. 202.

With great spiritual privileges comes great pain. It is plain from Scripture that this is God's design: "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations," Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 12:7, "for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" Great privilege, great pain, God's design. So it was with Bunyan, Cowper, and Brainerd. But they did not all have the same pain. For Bunyan it was prison and danger, for Cowper it was lifelong depression and suicidal darkness, for Brainerd it was tuberculosis and the "howling wilderness."

What was the fruit of this affliction? And what was the rock in which it grew? Consider their stories and be encouraged that no labor and no suffering in the path of Christian obedience is ever in vain. "Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face."

We also, before the temptation comes, think we can walk upon the sea, but when the winds blow, we feel ourselves begin to sink. . . . And yet doth it yield no good unto us? We could not live without such turnings of the hand of God upon us. We should be overgrown with flesh, if we had not our seasonable winters.

It is said that in some countries trees will grow, but will bear no fruit, because there is no winter there.

JOHN BUNYAN

SEASONABLE COUNSEL: OR ADVICE TO SUFFERERS



I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. . . . Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons.

JOHN BUNYAN

GRACE ABOUNDING TO THE CHIEF OF SINNERS

INTRODUCTION

Where the Fruit of Affliction Grows



Three Kinds of Fruit

The afflictions of John Bunyan gave us *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The afflictions of William Cowper gave us "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" and "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." And the afflictions of David Brainerd gave us a published *Diary* that has mobilized more missionaries than any other similar work. The furnace of suffering brought forth the gold of guidance and inspiration for living the Christian life, worshiping the Christian God, and spreading the Christian Gospel.

There is a certain irony to the fruit of these afflictions. Bunyan's confinement taught him the pilgrim path of Christian freedom. Cowper's mental illness yielded sweet music of the mind for troubled souls. Brainerd's smoldering misery of isolation and disease exploded in global missions beyond all imagination. Irony and disproportion are all God's way. He keeps us off balance with his unpredictable connections. We think we know how to do something big, and God makes it small. We think that all we have is weak and small, and God makes it big. Barren Sarah gives birth to the child of promise. Gideon's 300 men defeat 100,000 Midianites. A slingshot in the hand of a shepherd boy brings the giant down. A virgin bears the Son of God. A boy's five loaves feed thousands. A breach of justice, groveling political expediency, and

criminal torture on a gruesome cross become the foundation of the salvation of the world.

This is God's way—to take all boasting off of man and put it on God. “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. . . . ‘Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord’” (1 Corinthians 1:26-29, 31, RSV).

Not surprisingly (1 Peter 4:12), therefore, suffering fits into God's design in ways that sometimes baffle us and test us to the limit. This very baffling and testing is part of the design: “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4).

Does God Design Suffering for His Children?

But many stumble at the word *design*. Would suffering be God's design? Can we speak that way? Or should we speak of God working with what he is given? In other words, does God oversee and manage the affairs of the world so that we can speak of suffering as his will and his design, or does he, rather, manage the world like a chess player who does not will the moves of his opponent, but can always check them and turn them for good? Does God plan the place of suffering in the lives of his children

for good ends, or is he always in the position of a responder to the pain that other forces give him to work with?

All the swans in this book sing in unison on this question. God governs the world and all that happens in it with purpose and design for the good of those who love him. This was the final lesson Job learned from all his suffering: “Then Job answered the LORD and said, ‘I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted’” (Job 42:1-2). Satan may play his wicked role in the drama and take Job’s children and strike him with boils from head to toe, but Job will not give Satan the eminence of ultimate causality. That belongs to God alone, even if we cannot understand it all. When Job’s ten children were crushed to death, he “fell upon the ground, and worshiped. And he said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD’” (Job 1:20-21, RSV). To this amazing confession that God had taken his children, the author of the book responds with confirmation: “In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong” (Job 1:22, RSV). Similarly, even when the text says explicitly that “*Satan* . . . afflicted Job with loathsome sores,” Job’s response was, “Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?” And again the author endorses Job’s theology with the words, “In all this Job did not sin with his lips” (Job 2:7, 10, RSV).

This is the uniform message of the Bible, whether we are talking about suffering that comes from disease¹ or from

¹ Exodus 4:11, “The LORD said to him, ‘Who has made man’s mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?’” John 9:1-3, “[Jesus’] disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it was so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’” 2 Samuel 12:15, “Then the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s widow bore to David, so that he was very sick.” Romans 8:20, “For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope.” See also Job 2:7, 10.

calamity² or from persecution³: “[God] works all things after the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:11). God has a good and wise purpose in all that happens.⁴ From morning until night, over all the goings and comings of our lives, we should say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that” (James 4:15). Why? Because God says, “My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure” (Isaiah 46:10). “Many plans are in a man’s heart, but the counsel of the LORD will stand” (Proverbs 19:21). “The mind of man plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps” (Proverbs 16:9). “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father’s will” (Matthew 10:29, RSV). “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes” (Proverbs 21:1). “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD” (Proverbs 16:33).

² Lamentations 3:32-33, 37-38, “For if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness. For He does not afflict willingly or grieve the sons of men. . . . Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?” Amos 3:6, “If a trumpet is blown in a city will not the people tremble? If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?” Isaiah 31:2, “Yet He also is wise and will bring disaster.” 1 Samuel 2:6-7, “The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts.”

³ Acts 4:27, “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.” 2 Corinthians 1:8-9, “For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” 2 Timothy 3:12, “Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” 1 Peter 2:21, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.” 1 Peter 3:17, “For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong.” 1 Peter 4:19, “Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right.” Hebrews 12:4-8, 11, “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM; FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES.’ It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you

Opposing Voices

Yet there are those will not have it so. There are old-fashioned liberals who say, “I believe that pain and suffering are never the will of God for his children. . . . I cannot conceive that it is the will of God that anyone should be run over by a driver under the influence of drink, or that a young mother should die of leukemia, or that some one in the first flush of youth should face the increasing helplessness of arteriosclerosis.”⁵

And there are modern-day “open theists”⁶ who say, “God

are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. . . . All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

⁴ For fuller statements of the sovereignty of God in relation to our suffering and how disease and calamity and persecution are dealt with in Scripture, see John Piper, “Suffering: The Sacrifice of Christian Hedonism,” *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1996), pp. 212-238; John Piper, “The Supremacy of God in Missions Through Suffering,” *Let the Nations Be Glad* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), pp. 71-114; John Piper, “The Future Grace of Suffering,” in *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 1995), pp. 341-352.

⁵ William Barclay, *A Spiritual Autobiography* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 44. I call Barclay an “old-fashioned liberal” because his views are similar to those who summed up Christianity as the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the ethic of love. He was a universalist (pp. 58-60), and the cross of Christ was essentially a demonstration of God’s love, not a substitutionary penal atonement demanded by the righteousness of God (pp. 51-53). With regard to the specifics of doctrine, like Christology, his motto was: “Hold fast to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted” (p. 97).

⁶ *Open theism* is the term chosen by a group of theologians to describe their view that God does not plan or know all of the future but leaves much of it “open.” That is, he does not plan it or know it ahead of time. Thus, for example, one open theist says, “God is omniscient in the sense that he knows everything which can be known, just as God is omnipotent in the sense that he can do everything that can be done. But free actions are not entities which can be known ahead of time. They literally do not yet exist to be known” (Clark Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Freedom* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986], p. 157). Or again he says, “Decisions not yet made do not exist anywhere to be known even by God” (Pinnock, “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” *The Grace of God, The Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, Clark Pinnock, ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989], p. 25). Another open theist puts it like this: “Indeed, to say that God is ignorant of future creaturely decisions is like saying that God is deaf to silence. It makes no sense, because before they exist such decisions are nothing for God to be ignorant of” (Richard Rice, “Divine Foreknowledge and Free-Will Theism,” *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, p. 129). Another says, “In the Christian view God knows all of reality—everything there is to know. But to assume He knows ahead of time how every person is going to freely act assumes that each person’s free activity is already there to know—even before he freely does it! But it’s not. If we have been given freedom, we create the reality of our decisions by making them. And until we make them, they don’t exist. Thus, in my view at least, there simply isn’t anything to know until we make it there to know. So God can’t foreknow the good or bad decisions of the people He creates until He creates these people and they, in turn, create their decisions” (Gregory A. Boyd and Edward K. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic* [Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1994], p. 30). Other books representing this viewpoint include *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the*

does not have a specific divine purpose for each and every occurrence of evil. . . . When a two-month-old child contracts a painful, incurable bone cancer that means suffering and death, it is pointless evil. The Holocaust is pointless evil. The rape and dismemberment of a young girl is pointless evil. The accident that caused the death of my brother was a tragedy. God does not have a specific purpose in mind for these occurrences.”⁷ “When an individual inflicts pain on another individual, I do not think we can go looking for ‘the purpose of God’ in the event. . . . I know Christians frequently speak about ‘the purpose of God’ in the midst of a tragedy caused by someone else. . . . But this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking.”⁸ “Neither Jesus nor his disciples assumed that there had to be a divine purpose behind all events in history. . . . The Bible does not assume that every particular evil has a particular godly purpose behind it.”⁹

“But God Meant It for Good”

And then there is the Bible itself with its resounding claim over every evil perpetrated against God’s people: “You meant evil

Traditional Understanding of God, Clark Pinnock, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994) and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). This view has never been embraced as part of orthodoxy by any major Christian body in the history of the church. Thomas Oden, a Wesleyan scholar, along with others, has called it heresy: “If ‘reformists’ insist on keeping the boundaries of heresy open, however, then they must be resisted with charity. The fantasy that God is ignorant of the future is a heresy that must be rejected on scriptural grounds (‘I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come’; Isa. 46:10a; cf. Job 28; Ps. 90; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1), as it has been in the history of exegesis of relevant passages. This issue was thoroughly discussed by patristic exegetes as early as Origen’s *Against Celsus*” (“The Real Reformers and the Traditionalists,” *Christianity Today*, 42 [Feb. 9, 1998], p. 46). For a thorough and compelling critique of open theism, I highly recommend Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000).

⁷ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, p. 262.

⁸ Gregory Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic*, pp. 46-47. In another place he says, “Sickness, disease, war, death, sorrow and tears are not God’s will . . .” (*God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997], p. 293).

⁹ Boyd, *God at War*, pp. 53, 166.

against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Genesis 50:20). This is what Joseph said to his brothers who had sinned against him in selling him into slavery and lying to his father Jacob. What he says is not merely that God turned this evil for good after it happened, but that God “meant it” (the same verb as the one used for the brothers’ intention) for good. This is confirmed in Genesis 45:7 where Joseph says, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant.” In fact, in later centuries the people of Israel celebrated precisely this sovereign design of God in Joseph’s trouble, along with the conviction that God planned to bring the famine that made Joseph’s presence in Egypt so necessary, and the conviction that God tested Joseph with severe trials:

*And [God] called for a famine upon the land;
 He broke the whole staff of bread.
 He sent a man before them,
 Joseph, who was sold as a slave.
 They afflicted his feet with fetters,
 He himself was laid in irons;
 Until the time that his word came to pass,
 The word of the LORD tested him.*

PSALM 105:16-19

What the Suffering Swans Say

And then there are the swans who suffered. For John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd, the loving purpose of God in pain was one of the most precious truths in the Bible and one of the most powerful experiences of their lives. Cowper expressed

it in one of his most famous hymns. Notice especially the lines, “He treasures up his bright designs,” and “Behind a frowning providence,” and “His purposes will ripen fast,” and “And scan his work in vain.” Each of these lines points to the deep and hope-filled conviction that God has “designs” and “purposes” in his painful “providence” and puzzling “work.”

*Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs
And works his sovereign will.*

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.*

*His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.*

*Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain:
God is his own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.¹⁰*

David Brainerd shared Cowper’s confidence that God governed all that happened to him. This awakened in him what he called a “sweet resignation” in all his extraordinary suffering with

¹⁰ Excerpted from *The Poetical Works of William Cowper*, William Michael Rossetti, ed. (London: William Collins Sons, Ltd.) p. 292.

tuberculosis and loneliness and dangers and all kinds of privations in the wilderness. He wrote in his diary on Sunday, March 10, 1744, “My soul was sweetly resigned to God’s disposal of me, in every regard; and I saw there had nothing happened to me but what was best for me.”¹¹ Even the disappointments of ministering in a “dry and barren” spiritual condition he saw within the designs of his Father’s care:

It pleased God to leave me to be very dry and barren; so that I don’t remember to have been so straightened for a whole twelve month past. God is just, and he has made my soul acquiesce in his will in this regard. ’Tis contrary to “flesh and blood” to be cut off from all freedom in a large auditory [audience], where their expectations are much raised; but so it was with me: and God helped me to say “Amen” to it; good is the will of the Lord.¹²

If anyone should begin to wonder if such submission to the sovereign will of God over all things would produce a passive fatalism, all one has to do is look honestly at Brainerd’s life. It produced the opposite. He was empowered to press on against immense obstacles with the confidence that God was working for him in every trial. “This, through grace, I can say at present, with regard to the life or death: ‘The Lord do with me as seems good in his sight.’”¹³

The Old Testament context for that last quote confirms the empowering and freeing effect of believing in God’s triumphant

¹¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, Norman Pettit, ed., *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 242.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 316. A diary entry dated Lord’s Day, August 18, 1745.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 431. A diary entry dated Tuesday, September 30, 1746.

sovereignty over the battles of life. Joab and his brother Abishai, with the army of Israel, were arrayed against the Syrians and the Ammonites. The outcome looked precarious. So Joab said to his brother, “If the Syrians are too strong for me, then you shall help me; but if the Ammonites are too strong for you, then I will help you. Be of good courage, and let us play the man for our people, and for the cities of our God; and may the LORD do what seems good to him” (1 Chronicles 19:12-13, RSV). The Lord was in control of the outcome. But this did not paralyze Joab with fatalism; it empowered with hope. Come what may—defeat or victory—the Lord is in control and has his “bright designs.” Even if the bloody “bud” of battle turns out to have a bitter taste, “sweet” will be the “flower” of God’s design.

Bunyan’s Counsel for Those Who Suffer

John Bunyan wrote more on suffering and the fruitfulness of affliction than Cowper or Brainerd. He was even more explicit that there is divine purpose and design in suffering for the good of God’s children and for the glory of his name. The great *Pilgrim’s Progress*, as George Whitefield said, “smells of the prison.” It was born in suffering, and it portrays the Christian life as a life of affliction. But Bunyan saw his imprisonment as no more than what God had designed for him: “So being delivered up to the jailer’s hand, I was had home to prison, and there have lain now complete for twelve years, waiting to see what God would suffer those men to do with me.”¹⁴

¹⁴ John Bunyan, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1978), p. 20.

The richest source of teaching on suffering in the writings of Bunyan is a book that he wrote for his own congregation titled *Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers*.¹⁵ It appeared in 1684 just before the “Bloody Assizes.”¹⁶ The need for this “seasonable counsel” was not theoretical. Some of his parishioners had already been imprisoned with him. The threat was so real again that Bunyan deeded over all his possessions to his wife Elizabeth in the expectation that he might be imprisoned and made to pay fines that would take all his possessions.¹⁷ It was no exaggeration when Bunyan wrote, “Our days indeed have been days of trouble, especially since the discovery of the Popish plot, for then we began to fear cutting of throats, of being burned in our beds, and of seeing our children dashed in pieces before our faces.”¹⁸

What, then, would he say to his people to prepare them for the probability of their suffering for Christ? Would he say, with the old-fashioned liberal, “I believe that pain and suffering are never the will of God for his children”? Would he say with the modern-day open theist, “Christians frequently speak about ‘the purpose of God’ in the midst of a tragedy caused by someone else. . . . But this I regard to simply be a piously confused way of thinking”? No, this would have been biblically and pastorally unthinkable for John Bunyan, whose blood was “bibline.”¹⁹

He takes his text from 1 Peter 4:19, “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their

¹⁵ John Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 2, George Offor, ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), pp. 691-741.

¹⁶ See Chapter One, note 12.

¹⁷ John Brown, *John Bunyan: His Life, Times and Work* (London: The Hulbert Publishing Company, 1928), p. 338.

¹⁸ John Bunyan, *Israel's Hope Encouraged*, in *The Works of John Bunyan*, vol. 1, p. 585.

¹⁹ Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), p. 159.

soul to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (KJV). Then he explains the text with these observations:

It is not what enemies will, nor what they are resolved upon, but what God will, and what God appoints, that shall be done. . . . And as no enemy can bring suffering upon a man when the will of God is otherwise, so no man can save himself out of their hands when God will deliver him up for his glory. . . . We shall or shall not suffer, even as it pleaseth him. . . . God has appointed who shall suffer. Suffering comes not by chance or by the will of man, but by the will and appointment of God.²⁰

He goes on to say that God has appointed not only who shall suffer but also when, where, in what way, for how long, and for what truth they shall suffer.²¹

“God’s Hook Is in Their Nose”

Whether there have been serious and loving pastors in the history of the church who during times of great persecution have pointed their people to a God who has no control over and no purpose in their suffering, I do not know. But such counsel would have been viewed as untrue and unloving by Bunyan, Cowper, and Brainerd. They knew another God, and they lived with a different confidence. Bunyan summed up the involvement of God in the persecutions of his people like this:

All the ways of the persecutors are God’s. Daniel 5:23.

²⁰ Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers*, pp. 722-723.

²¹ See Chapter One for the details of his argument and the texts he gives to support them.

Wherefore, as we should, so again we should not, be afraid of men: we should be afraid of them, because they will hurt us; but we should not be afraid of them, as if they were let loose to do to us, and with us, what they will. God's bridle is upon them, God's hook is in their nose: yea, and God has determined the bounds of their rage, and if he lets them drive his church into the sea of troubles, it shall be but up to the neck, and so far it may go, and not be drowned. 2 Kings 19:28; Isaiah 37:29; 8:7-8. I say the Lord has hold of them, and orders them; nor do they at any time come out against his people but by his license and compassion how far to go, and where to stop.²²

This robust view of God's rule over his enemies is the foundation of Bunyan's consolation as he ministers to his people:

I have, in a few words, handled this . . . to show you that our sufferings are ordered and disposed by him, that you might always, when you come into trouble for this name, not stagger nor be at loss, but be stayed, composed, and settled in your minds, and say, 'The will of the Lord be done.' Acts 21:14 . . . How kindly, therefore, doth God deal with us, when he chooses to afflict us but for a little, that with everlasting kindness he may have mercy upon us. Isaiah 54:7-8.²³

"My Father's Wise Bestowment"

This is the vision of God's sovereign and mysterious kindness that has sustained Christians in every century and from all parts of the world. It is the vision that underlies scores of hymns that the

²² Bunyan, *Seasonable Counsel, or Advice to Sufferers*, pp. 725-726.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 724, 737.

people of God have sung through many storms. Indeed, the great hymns usually come from the experience of suffering and prove by their existence the truth of their message—that afflictions bear fruit for the people of God. Examples come not only from William Cowper, but from others as well.

Karolina Wilhelmina Sandell-Berg (Lina Sandell) “was the daughter of Jonas Sandell, pastor of the Lutheran church in Fröderyd, Sweden. At age twenty-six, she accompanied her father on a boat trip to Gothenberg, during which he fell overboard and drowned before her eyes. The tragedy profoundly affected Lina and inspired her to write hymns,”²⁴ one of the best known of which is “Day by Day.”

*Day by day, and with each passing moment,
Strength I find, to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father’s wise bestowment,
I’ve no cause for worry or for fear.
He Whose heart is kind beyond all measure
Gives unto each day what He deems best—
Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.*

This is the same vision of God’s sovereign kindness that we saw in Bunyan’s *Seasonable Counsel*. Our God is “kind beyond all measure.” What he gives is a “Father’s wise bestowment,” which means he gives to each day “what He deems best—lovingly, its part of *pain* and pleasure.” This wisely and lovingly apportioned pain gives us “strength to meet [our] trials here.” The truth and beauty

²⁴ “Karolina Wilhelmina Sandell-Berg,” *The Cyber Hymnal*, http://tch.simplenet.com/bio/s/a/sandell-berg_kw.htm (6-2-00).

of this hymn was the fruit of affliction and goes on helping us “consider it all joy” (James 1:2) so that the affliction of our own lives may yield “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).

*Baptist, Anglican, Congregationalist:
All Justified Through Faith*

The suffering of persecution was not bestowed equally to John Bunyan, William Cowper, and David Brainerd. But there was another form of affliction that brings these three together, and the remedy for it was cherished by them all, even though it bore fruit very differently in their lives. The affliction was the terrifying mental turmoil and darkness of guilt before God, and the remedy for it was the great biblical truth of justification by grace through faith alone. Bunyan was a Baptist, Cowper an Anglican, and Brainerd a Congregationalist. One of the great mercies of God is that, in their times, the doctrine of justification was clear and common to all of them.

“Now Did My Chains Fall off My Legs Indeed”

The *Second London Confession* was forged by Baptists in Bunyan’s lifetime and published in its final form in 1689, the year after he died. Built on the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, it was crystal-clear on justification.

Those whom God effectually calleth He also freely justifieth; not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their

persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone, not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing Christ's active obedience unto the whole law, and passive obedience in his death for their whole and sole righteousness, receiving and resting on Him, and His righteousness, by faith; which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.

Faith, thus receiving and resting on Christ and His righteousness, is the alone instrument of justification; yet is it not alone in the person justified, but is ever accompanied with all other saving graces, and is no dead faith, but worketh by love.²⁵

This was the truth that rescued Bunyan from the terrors of feeling hopelessly damned. "Oh, no one knows the terrors of those days but myself."²⁶ Then comes what seemed to be the decisive moment.

One day as I was passing into the field . . . this sentence fell upon my soul. Thy righteousness is in heaven. And methought, withal, I saw with the eyes of my soul Jesus Christ at God's right hand; there, I say, was my righteousness; so that wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say of me, he wants [lacks] my righteousness, for that was just before him. I also saw, moreover, that it was not my good frame of heart that made my righteousness better, nor yet my bad frame that made my righteousness worse, for my righteousness was Jesus Christ himself,

²⁵ *The Second London Confession*, 1677 and 1689, Chapter 11:1-2, quoted in *John A. Broadus: Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, Timothy and Denise George, eds. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), pp. 69-70.

²⁶ *Grace Abounding*, p. 59.

“The same yesterday, today, and forever.” Hebrews 13:8. Now did my chains fall off my legs indeed. I was loosed from my afflictions and irons. . . . Now went I also home rejoicing for the grace and love of God.²⁷

“I Think I Should Have Died with Gratitude and Joy”

The solid foundation of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England* (framed in 1571) had been around for almost 150 years when William Cowper, the Anglican, experienced the power of its truth on justification. Article 11, “Of the Justification of Man,” says,

We are accounted righteous before God, only for the merit of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ by Faith, and not of our own works or deservings. Wherefore, that we are justified by Faith only, is a most wholesome Doctrine, and very full of comfort. . . .²⁸

Comfort indeed to the young Cowper who had been committed to an insane asylum for his suicidal depression. There a man of God applied to him the truths of the Gospel again and again. Slowly Cowper began to feel some hope. One day he opened the Bible at random, and the first verse he saw was Romans 3:25, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God” (KJV). He marks his conversion from this moment, because, as he says,

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 90-91.

²⁸ Quoted from *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 494, citing the American Revision of 1801.

Immediately I received the strength to believe it, and the full beams of the Sun of Righteousness shone upon me. I saw the sufficiency of the atonement He had made, my pardon sealed in His blood, and all the fullness and completeness of His justification. In a moment I believed, and received the gospel. . . . Unless the Almighty arm had been under me, I think I should have died with gratitude and joy. My eyes filled with tears, and my voice choked with transport; I could only look up to heaven in silent fear, overwhelmed with love and wonder.²⁹

Again it is “the completeness of [Christ’s] justification” that the Holy Spirit used to awaken and rescue Cowper from the darkness of damnation that had settled over him. The war for Cowper’s soul was not ended, but the decisive battle had been fought and won by the Gospel of justification by grace through faith.

“This Way of Salvation, Entirely by the Righteousness of Christ”

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* formed the doctrinal foundation of life and ministry for David Brainerd, the Congregationalist (with Presbyterian leanings³⁰). He used it among his Indian converts,³¹ as he had grown up on it himself. Question 33 asks, “What is Justification?” and answers, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as

²⁹ Gilbert Thomas, *William Cowper and the Eighteenth Century* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, Ltd., 1935), p. 132.

³⁰ Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, p. 58.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone.”³²

On the Lord’s Day, July 12, 1739, at the age of twenty-one, Brainerd experienced a conversion that marked the rest of his life.

At this time, the way of salvation opened to me with such infinite wisdom, suitableness, and excellency, that I wondered I should ever think of any other way of salvation; was amazed I had not dropped my own contrivances, and complied with this lovely, blessed, and excellent way before. If I could have been saved by my own duties, or any other way that I had formerly contrived, my whole soul would [now] have refused it. I wondered [that] all the world did not see and comply with this way of salvation, entirely by the righteousness of Christ.³³

As with Bunyan and Cowper, it is the “way of salvation, entirely by the righteousness of Christ,” that breaks through the darkness of doubt and unbelief and wakens new life.

And not just at the beginning of his walk with God, but also at the end of his life, this is the truth that sustained him. On Saturday, September 19, 1747, less than three weeks before he died, he wrote about how God sustained him in a moment of self-recrimination:

Near night, while I attempted to walk a little, my thoughts turned thus, “How infinitely sweet it is to love God and be all for Him!” Upon which it was suggested to me, “You are not an angel, not lively and active.” To which my whole soul immediately replied, “I as sincerely desire to love and

³² Quoted from *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 683.

³³ Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, p. 140.

glorify God, as any angel in heaven.” Upon which it was suggested again, “But you are filthy, not fit for heaven.” Hereupon instantly appeared the blessed robes of Christ’s righteousness which I could not but exult and triumph in.³⁴

Where the Fruit of Affliction Grows

Is it not remarkable that the song of these three suffering swans should be so similar at the crucial moments of their conversions? The righteousness of Christ, outside themselves, imputed to them through faith alone, did not make wastrels of them but worshipers. It did not lead them into profligate living but impelled them into the pursuit of holiness. It did not leave them self-satisfied but set them to preaching and writing and evangelizing. It sustained them through all suffering (for Cowper, barely—1 Peter 4:18) and formed the solid ground where the fruit of affliction could grow and the tree not be broken.

Under God’s sovereign grace, then, what we have to thank for the great allegory of Bunyan and the hymns of Cowper and the life of Brainerd is, first, the glorious biblical truth of Christ’s righteousness imputed by grace through faith alone, and second, the merciful gift of affliction. We are the beneficiaries today of the fruit of their affliction. And God’s design in it is that we not lose heart, but trust him that someone also will be strengthened by the fruit of ours. Behind a frowning providence he hides a smiling face. We may see it in our lifetime, or we may not. But the whole Bible is written, and all the swans are singing, to convince us it is there, and that we can and should “exult in our tribulations” (Romans 5:3).

³⁴ Ibid., p. 465.