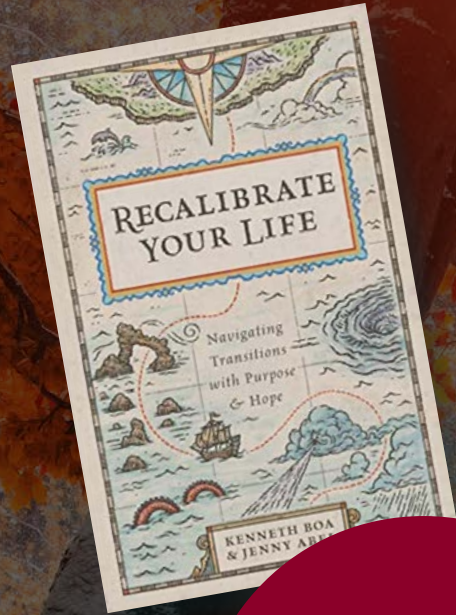


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GOD'S PROMISES

THE POWER OF PAIN

“Thank God for prison!” This puzzling sentiment of words flowed from the pen of the man many believe to be the twentieth century’s dominant literary figure, the Russian writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Growing up as a committed atheist and communist, Solzhenitsyn reached the level of captain in the Russian army. But his military career came to an abrupt end when he was shipped off to a labor camp for verbally criticizing the policies of Joseph Stalin, the brutal Russian leader.

In prison, Solzhenitsyn encountered a number of hope-filled religious believers, Russians who clung to the Orthodox Christian faith that had been so pervasive in pre-communist (i.e., pre-1917) Russia. Over time, Solzhenitsyn shifted his allegiance from Karl Marx, who had been revered by his former teachers, to the revolutionary Jesus Christ, who had been worshiped by his ancestors. “God of the Universe!” he wrote. “I believe again! Though I renounced You, You were with me!”

Why would the affliction of a prison labor camp cause an intellectual giant like Solzhenitsyn to turn to God? There can be no certain answer to that question. Every afflicted person who has discovered spiritual clarity in times of pain would have his or her own explanation for why it happened. What is most important to learn from the experience of a person like Solzhenitsyn—or the psalmist of the Old Testament—is that affliction can be a powerful force for good in our lives.

In just three verses, the psalmist says that affliction caused him to turn back from going astray, to learn the

meaning of God’s decrees, and to see God’s righteousness. Why? Only the psalmist himself could explain why. But the lesson for all is found in the power of pain to heal.

Afflictions are tailor-made for individuals: another’s pain might mean little to you. So rather than trying to ignore or prevent your own personal pain, learn the lessons it brings; let it become your teacher. In the season of sorrow, the fruit you bear may be sweeter than in any other.

God’s Promise:
God’s best for you
can appear to be the
worst for you.

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JANUARY 2025

REFLECTIONS

A teaching letter encouraging believers
to develop a clear mind and a warm heart

THE GLORIES OF CREATION

Your creation is a magnificent unity in diversity, profound in wisdom, awesome in understanding, marvelous in purpose and rich in elegance. You revel in variety, subtlety, intricacy, information, and beauty. All things work together in both the physical and spiritual realms. I thank You for creating and calling me to become conformed to the image of Your Son, and I pray for the grace of holy desire to pursue by Your power what You have called me to become in Christ. I thank You for friendships and alliances with likeminded people, and I am grateful for the manifold gifts and ministries in the Body of Christ. Give me a growing heart for Your people so that I will be embedded in others-centered community as a lover and servant of the people You love.

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“You Have Searched Me And Known Me”

There is no higher calling than to love and worship the infinite and personal God of creation and redemption. A.W. Tozer observed that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. Our image of God shapes our spiritual direction and future, and is forged in the times we spend in communion with Him. In complete contrast to the world, God's economy measures greatness not in terms of ability or accomplishments, but in the vitality and integrity of a person's walk with the Lord. King David was a gifted man who was rich in achievements, yet the key to his greatness did not lay in these, but in his choice to give his heart wholly to God. In the midst of the struggles he faced, he took time to meditate and stretch his vision of the living God, and this provided him with a renewed perspective about the things that really matter. If we unthinkingly take life for granted and lose our sense of wonder at God and His creation, our capacity to worship will atrophy. David's ongoing amazement and wonder is captured in Psalm 139, a beautiful meditation on the knowledge, presence, power, and holiness of the Ruler of all creation.

The All-Knowing God (vv. 1-6)

“O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me.” As he reflects on the omniscience of God, David is overwhelmed by the truth that God has thoroughly exposed him and intimately knows him. The same is true of us: God has “mined” us to the depths of our being, and His knowledge besieges us all around (“Thou hast enclosed me behind and before, and laid Thy hand upon me”).

He knows our actions, our words, our thoughts, and our motives. Such knowledge is overwhelming, not only because it is beyond our comprehension, but also because it exposes all our pretences. Yet it is comforting to know that there is no need of pretence before God; He knows us through and through, including our darkest thoughts and deeds, and still loves us unconditionally.

The All-Present God (vv. 7-12)

“Where can I go from Thy Spirit? Or where can I flee from Thy presence?” Not only does God know us, but He is with us all the time; He “sees the invisible and penetrates the inaccessible” (Derek Kidner). There is no escape, nowhere to hide—height or depth, day or night, past or future--nothing can conceal us from the “Hound of Heaven.” This can be a very disturbing thought, especially in times of disobedience and rebellion; the impulse to hide from God's presence dates back to the first sin (Gen.3:8). But this truth can also be a source of great comfort and assurance, because we know that as believers in Christ, we are never alone. He gave us His promise that He is with us always (Matt.28:20), and we can find our security in His enfolding presence.

The All-Powerful God (vv. 13-18)

“I will give thanks to Thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; wonderful are Thy works, and my soul knows it very well.” The third stanza of this psalm portrays the omnipotence of the Creator by a poetical description of the wonder of human birth. What artist would create his magnum opus in total darkness? Yet God wove us together with all our variegated colors in the hiddenness of the womb (“the depths of the earth”). He formed us in all our complexity to be a unity of body, soul, and spirit with all our capacities for thought, communication, morality, and aspiration. His eyes saw our embryos and He appointed all the days that were ordained for us on this planet. The all-powerful Lord of creation is worthy of all worship and trust, since nothing is too difficult for Him (Jer. 32:17; Luke 1:37).

The All-Holy God (vv. 19-24)

As David leaves his meditation, the reality of his plight with his opponents (“men of bloodshed”) confronts him once again. He responds by aligning himself with the God of holiness and justice and declares that God's enemies are his enemies, and God's cause is his cause. In the last two verses, he takes us full cycle (“O Lord, Thou hast searched me and known me”): “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” As he faces opposition, the psalmist wants to remove any doubt about his walk with God. Does He really know my situation? Does He care? Am I really committed to His purposes? The answer to the first two questions is a resounding yes—He knows us intimately and is present with us in any adversity we face. The Lord also knows what is in our hearts, and we would be wise to follow David's practice of inviting Him to illuminate areas of disobedience and rebellion in our lives so that He can lead us in the everlasting way.

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