



Title: Sin and Suffering: What Will God Do with Our Sin and Suffering in Heaven?

Text: Various passages (listed below)

Date: May 22, 2022

Main Idea: In heaven, God will unpack all our sin and suffering, giving us new eyes to make sense of it all—and glorify him in the process.

Personal Study Guide

READ ENTIRE TEXTS: VARIOUS PASSAGES (LISTED BELOW)

***This sermon series will be different since it covers a topic, not one specific text. These lessons will still be text-based but we will also focus on theological themes and ideas throughout the lessons as well.**

Highlight – What stands out?

Memory of Sin

Read Psalm 103:8-12, Isaiah 43:25, Jeremiah 31:31-40, Colossians 2:13-15, 1 John 1:8-10

1. What do you notice about sin in these passages?
2. What do you notice about God?
3. What do you notice about yourself?

Read Matthew 12:36, 2 Corinthians 5:10, Romans 8:1-4

1. Write down one question, idea, or truth you learn from these passages.
2. Was anything familiar or new to you?

Memory of Suffering

Read Romans 8:18-39, Revelation 21:1-5

1. What words or phrases stand out to you in these passages?

2. Is there anything new that you learned about God, yourself, or your circumstances?

Explain – What does this mean?

We are going to focus on answering two questions

- What will God do with our memory of sin?
- What will God do with our memory of suffering?

Memory of Sin

1. There are two things God does with our sin both in this life and the one to come. Based on the first set of verses in the Highlight section above, what are those two things?

2. Based on the second set of verses. What two things do these passages say are true about us and our sin?

3. God cannot change and does not have a body like we do. So, unlike us, his capacity to forget is non-existent. Knowing all that you know about God, what do you think it means that he “forgets” our sins. What is the basis for your answer?

Memory of Suffering

1. Based on the verses you read on suffering in the Highlight section, what do you notice about what we will understand about our suffering when we get to heaven?
2. Think about the image of childbirth in Romans 8:22. What do you know about pregnancy and childbirth? How does this image help you understand what you know about suffering now and what you will know about it in heaven?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. Read Luke 7:41-42. What does knowing the magnitude of our sins do to our understanding of grace?
2. Andy Davis says “God does not want us to become corrupted by our heavenly glory or wander from the glowing center of heavenly joy, God himself. Boasting in humanity rather than God both dishonors him and robs us of heavenly joy. The eternal remedy will be our memory of the sinners we were and how he saved us in Christ.”¹ Who were you before Christ saved you? What does remembering your past sins do for our understanding of Christ and his power in your life?

¹ Davis, 159.

3. Read Romans 11:33. Is there suffering in your life that you have seen glimpses of his ways being explained? Is there a suffering you are still waiting for answers on?
4. God promises to one day explain all our suffering to us. Try to put into words what that does for your hope in him right now?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Knowing that you will give an account for your sins, means you live in such a way that you don’t want to have to give an account for what you have done. Take a survey of what you watch, listen to, or talk about. What needs to go? Ask yourself before every choice you make “do I want to relive this before the judgment seat of Christ in heaven one day”?
2. Make a list of everything you know to be true about God. Now write a prayer asking him to help you trust that he will be true to his character and will one day “make it all plain.”

Commentary: Chapter 11 and 12 from “The Glory Now Revealed”

CHAPTER 11: Our Sins Redeemed and Painlessly Remembered

Whenever I talk with other Christians about a heavenly review, they eventually get a troubled look on their faces and ask, "Do you really think we will remember everything?" Most are troubled by the idea of going back over painful memories, things they would rather never relive or recount to anyone. Of all these, our sins are foremost. It seems impossible that we could enjoy heaven if we never escape memory of our worst, most shameful acts on earth. But I believe there is a way to comprehend heavenly memories of our sins without pain. And I believe that without memory of these things, it will be impossible to glorify God fully for the grace he has shown us in Christ.

Does God Remember Our Sins after He's Forgiven Them?

It seems that the Bible says the opposite, that our sins will be completely forgotten

It is I who sweep away your transgressions for My own sake and remember your sins no more. (Isa.43:25 HCSB)

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah....For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jer.31:31,34)

As far as the east is from the west,
so far does he remove our transgressions from us.
(Ps.103:12)

You will cast all our sins
into the depths of the sea. (Mic. 7:19)

These are some of the sweetest promises in the Bible, and I do not want to undermine them. We will spend eternity in a perfect relationship with God based on the atonement of Christ. The moment we trust in Christ and are justified by faith, we have perfect and eternal peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, so God considers us as righteous as Christ. God is perfectly reconciled to us, and we to him (v. 10; 2 Cor. 5:18). That means our relationship with God could not possibly be improved. He is delighted with us and loves us as he loves his only begotten Son (John 17:23).

But God has not forgotten our sins in an absolute sense. If God truly does not remember the facts, dates, and circumstances of our sins, he would no longer be omniscient. Since God is eternal, that means the past is as vivid to him as the present and the future. Though we may forget the wicked things we did as time passes, God experiences each one as though it is occurring right now!

How, then, should we understand these statements about God forgetting and removing our sins?

In order to understand the mystery of the infinite mind of God "remembering" and "forgetting," we must remind ourselves that God often uses anthropomorphisms when communicating with us. This is language that likens God to certain aspects of human experience. We read of various body parts of God, like the hand of the Lord, his eyes, his mouth, his breath, and so on. God walks in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:8), sits on a throne (Ps. 29:10), and rises to shake the earth (Isa. 2:19). This language helps us understand God's actions in history.

In the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's safety was in part ascribed to Abraham's intercession for him: "So ...when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham and brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived" (Gen. 19:29 NIV). We should not think that God ever for-got Abraham and then suddenly remembered him, saying, "Oh, yes-Abraham asked me to rescue Lot! I'd better do something about that!" Rather, whenever the Bible says God "remembers" something (like his covenant or his promises), it means he is acting on the basis of that knowledge.

Therefore, when God says, "I will remember your sins no more," he is saying the opposite: "I will not act in accordance with what those sins truly deserve; I will not treat you accordingly!" Relationally, it will be as if those sins had never happened, as though God had no record, no memory of them at all. God's love and lavish affection toward us are as great as they would have been if we had never sinned at all. But that doesn't mean our sins never happened, for that would be a lie. In the parable of the ten thousand talents, the king (representing God) cancels his servant's massive debt because the servant begged him to be patient with him. But when that servant found one of his fellow servants who owed him one hundred denarii, he choked him and demanded, "Pay me what you owe me!" When the king heard about it, he called the man back. "'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt" (Matt. 18:32-34). The forgiveness of debt does not mean the king has no memory of the ten thousand talents. He remembers the precise amount. And so does God. God's gracious forgiveness means a perfect reconciliation, not divine amnesia.

Paul remembered what his life was like before his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus: "Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. ... Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of

whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:13, 15). Paul wrote 1 Timothy under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit did not forget what Paul had done before he was converted, and Paul never forgot either. But still the grace and mercy of God flowed richly into Paul's heart through the blood of Christ.

A Painful Judgment Day

This fuller sense of the quantity and gravity of our sins will begin on judgment day: The Bible reveals very clearly that all Christians will give an account of our lives to Christ: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10). Jesus said we will have to give an account on the day of judgment for “every careless word” we have spoken (Matt.12:36). Paul fully believed that the doctrine of the resurrection from the dead meant that he should “take pains to have a clear con-science before God and man” (Acts 24:16 NIV). It did not seem that Paul expected to have an easy time on judgment day but rather that he should live every moment of every day in light of that meticulous accounting.

This inventory of all we have ever done while in the body—“whether good or evil”—is shocking to some Christians when they face the truth of it. We may squirm and try to evade it, saying “There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus.” However, it is essential for us to realize there is an infinite difference between giving an account to Christ and being condemned to an eternity in hell for our sins. We will give an account; we will not be condemned for our sins.

Our testimony before the Lord on judgment day will be a mixture of pleasure and pain. The pleasure will come when we hear Christ's commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matt. 25:21). The pain will come in having to explain to him our evil deeds-sins of commission and omission-especially considering his perfect love toward us. Remember when Peter denied the Lord, and Jesus turned and looked at Peter (Luke 22:60-61)? This face-to-face encounter with Christ and his sin was so painful that Peter wept bitterly. So will we weep on judgment day for our many failures. But then the Lord will wipe every tear from our eyes, and we will never weep again, nor will we feel any pain, shame, or regret (Rev. 21:4). We will have a perfect memory but no pain. First Corinthians 3 points to a difficult judgment day for us:

If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—each one's work will be-come manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is

burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. (vv.12-15)

All of our works will be tested by the fire of God's perfect standards. As we talked about earlier, the gold, silver, and costly stones are various good works that please Christ and will be rewarded. The wood, hay, and straw represent works without eternal merit—sins and worldly actions that did not build the kingdom of Christ. If what we have built burns up, we will suffer “loss.” This loss is the missed opportunity to serve God and others, opportunities and resources squandered in things that proved to be worthless. Feeling this loss will be exquisitely painful, as will the process of looking Jesus in the eye and giving an account of everything we've ever said or done on earth. There will be tears of regret on that great judgment day, which the Lord will also wipe away, as we've seen (Rev.21:4). Then we will spend eternity enjoying the rewards represented by the gold, silver, and costly stones.

Without Heavenly Memory of Sins, How Can We Celebrate Grace?

Central to our heavenly celebration will be the deep awareness of God's grace to us in Christ. In the coming ages, God will display the riches of this grace. At present, we lack an accurate estimation of how much grace God has lavished on us. We readily forget our sins, while we minimize God's perfect holiness. We do not know even a fraction of the times we sin in our thoughts, or when we commit sins of omission—walking right by needy people whom the Lord wanted us to help. When we get to heaven, our knowledge of our history of sin will be complete and perfect, so that we can fully glorify God for his grace.

The greater the knowledge we have of the magnitude of our sins—both their quantity and their seriousness—the greater value we will place on the atoning blood of Christ in heaven. Amos 5:12 says “I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins.” For each of us individually, our sins are as many as they are mighty. There are a multitude of the redeemed, more than can be counted, from every nation on earth. How great must be the value of the blood of Christ to atone for such a volume of transgressions against a holy God! In order that Christ might have his due worship and thanks for such a great atonement, there must be a memory in heaven of the number and magnitude of the sins of the redeemed.

The Retelling of History Is Impossible If Sins Are Omitted

The tapestry of God's history is woven with the mixed deeds of all people, including the sins and good works of the elect. How can even a single day of history be accurately recounted without an honest inclusion of our sins? The greatest sin in human history—the killing of the perfectly righteous Son of God—was carried out by men who may well be in heaven right now. A

Roman centurion physically nailed Jesus to the cross, then watched in awe as the sky turned dark and the very ground shook beneath his feet. He heard Jesus's words of intercession, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34 NIV). The Great High Priest was praying for these Romans who were killing him in ignorance. The fruit of this prayer came immediately upon Jesus's death when the centurion said, "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mark 15:39). If this centurion is indeed in heaven, when the death of our Savior is displayed for our worship, the centurion's actions will be shown as well. Imagine sitting at the feast in the New Jerusalem and talking with the man who drove the nails into the body of the Son of God!

So it is with all history, both sacred and secular. Human sinfulness is inextricable from its telling, and many of the key sins that have shaped history have been made by God's people, either before or after their conversions. To tell the history of the church without the sins of Christians would be like trying to read a letter from a soldier that was censored in World War II, with most of the words cut out or blackened by dark ink... not a single sentence intelligible. So would history be with all mention of our sins excised.

"It Is No Longer I Who Do It"

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). This "new creation" language is used by the Bible to speak of the new heaven and new earth, where righteousness will dwell forever (2 Pet. 3:13). The sinner is "born again" (John 3:3, 6). The Holy Spirit removes the heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36:26). The "old man" (Rom. 6:6 KJV) in Adam forever dies. Because of this decisive break, Paul can mysteriously say, "I no longer sin." So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (7:17-20)

The decisive break God makes between us and our sins at conversion is consummated in our actual lives at glorification. In heaven, we will be able to say with absolute truthfulness: "I no longer sin at all." Paul cried out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (v.24). But then Paul thanked God ahead of time for this deliverance through Jesus Christ in verse 25. And now it has happened; Paul is in heaven and will never sin again! And he is able to say now in heaven that it is not he who sinned but effectively another man, a man he will never be again. So it will be for all the redeemed. When our sins are revealed and reviewed as a necessary

part of God's narration of history we will have a glorious detachment from the people we were in our sins. Effectively the stinger of sin will have been totally and finally removed by our resurrection from the dead: "O death, where is your sting?" (1 Cor. 15:55). There will be not the slightest pang of shame when we watch our past actions in heaven.

No Scarlet Letters on Our White Robes

God will not shame his glorified people. There will be no "scarlet letters" embroidered on our radiant white robes. Public shame for sin is one of the most painful experiences that any human being could ever endure. Thomas Watson, in his treatise *The Doctrine of Repentance*, argues that shame is essential to true repentance. God desires that sinners on earth would remember their sins, be ashamed, and never again open their mouths in arrogance against him (Ezek. 16:63). The prodigal son said that he was no longer worthy to be called his father's son. The tax collector in Jesus's parable beat his breast and would not even lift his eyes to heaven but said "Be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

However, while shame is a necessary and beneficial part of the ongoing work of our sanctification, it has absolutely no place in heaven. Watson said, "If the sins of the godly are mentioned on Judgment Day, it will not be to shame them, but to magnify the riches of God's grace in pardoning them....The saints will be without spot then and without shame." Just as physical pain is necessary and helpful now on earth but will not be needed in heaven, so also the psychological pain of shame will become obsolete in heaven. As we discussed earlier, there will be no more death, mourning, crying, or pain in heaven. This includes the pain of shame for our sins.

According to the book of Revelation, the heavenly saints will be lavishly attired in white robes. The color white represents perfection and purity from all sin (3:4-5). Christ offers white robes to the lukewarm sinners of Laodicea "so that you may be dressed and your shameful nakedness exposed" (v.18 CSB). The redeemed from every tribe, language, people, and nation will all be wearing white robes, with no shame whatsoever (7:9). The apostle John was told that this multitude were those who "washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v.14). The armies of heaven that go with Jesus into the final battle are arrayed in fine linen, white and pure" (19:14). Not one of those robes will bear an emblem of shame.

Yet robes will be needed in heaven. While the covering of our sins is perfect, the backstory is still there. Sin can never be spoken out of existence, not even by God, for God cannot lie. His answer was the atonement—the covering. The Hebrew word for "atonement" is also translated as "covering" Psalm 32:1 (quoted in Rom. 4:7) says that God covers our sins. God's holy eyes look

continually on Christ's atoning blood and imputed righteousness when he sees the redeemed in heaven. But he knows our earthly careers in sin with perfect accuracy. He chooses to see Christ's imputed righteousness, the royal robe.

Walking around heaven, interacting with other redeemed sinners, we will see their glory, radiance, and honor—all gifts of God's grace. When we meet Paul, we will not meet him as a "blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor" (1 Tim. 1:13 NASB). He will shine as the trailblazing apostle to the gentiles who wrote the book of Romans. When we see King David, he will not be stamped "adulterer, murderer, Deceiver." He will shine as a trophy of God's grace, a man after God's own heart, who courageously slew Goliath, reigned in righteousness, and walked in God's laws day after day.

Let the One Who Boasts Boast in the Lord

Throughout the Bible, God teaches a central lesson: it is not our abilities—our power, wisdom, goodness, military prowess, perseverance, loveliness, inventiveness, or any other attributes—that accomplish our salvation. God has worked in history to crush human boasting. For example, he commanded Gideon to dramatically reduce the size of the Israelite army that was going into battle against the Midianites, "lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'" (Judg.7:2).

God desires that sinners saved by grace would never forget their origins and would never boast except in the Lord: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Eph. 2:8-9).

It is for these paired reasons—that we will never boast in ourselves again and that we will forever boast in God for our salvation—that God will cause us to remember our sins in heaven. The negative part of this—that we will not boast in ourselves ever again—is pictured as a silencing in response to shame over sin:

Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are subject to the law, so that every mouth may be shut and the whole world may become subject to God's judgment. (Rom. 3:19 CSB)

Behold, I am of small account what shall answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. (Job 40:4)

God does not want us to become corrupted by our heavenly glory or wander from the glowing center of heavenly joy in God himself. Boasting in humanity rather than God both dishonors him and robs us of heavenly joy. The eternal remedy will be our memory of the sinners we were and how he saved us in Christ.

CHAPTER 12

Our Earthly Sufferings Fully Explained

The heavenly review of history will include God's explanation of the darkest threads in the tapestry of grace, the suffering of God's children. In 1828, missionary Adoniram Judson sat beside a grave he had dug in the jungle of Burma, staring into it for hours—for days. The grave contained no body; it was only symbolic. Two years before that, his beloved wife and partner in mission, Nancy, had died of a fever after a brief illness while Judson was away. That had been shockingly unexpected, for she had been in good health when he departed to translate for the British Army in their negotiations with the Burmese government. However, the health of their baby daughter, Maria, had been extremely fragile, like a flickering flame. While Judson was away, he received an envelope with an ominous black seal on it. Fearing the worst concerning his little girl, he tore it open and could barely believe the words as he read them: "Mrs. Judson is no more." Four months later, little Maria died as well.

Over the next two years, Judson went into an emotional and spiritual tailspin. His glorious vision of leading the Burmese to faith in Christ and planting a church network was not even off the ground. Few had come to Christ, and those were persecuted by the increasingly hostile Buddhist government. A staggering investment had been repaid by a pitiful return. So, he went into the jungle and dug that symbolic grave. Deeply depressed, he felt at a great distance from God and his unfathomable purposes: "God is to me the Great Unknown. I believe in him, but I find him not."

Why, O Lord?

God's servants like Judson have responded to the bitter twists and turns of providence with the anguished cry, "Why, O Lord?" David cried out,

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. (Ps.22:1-2)

Job complained bitterly,
God has cast me into the mire,
and I have become like dust and ashes.
I cry to you for help and you do not answer me;
I stand, and you only look at me
You have turned cruel to me;
with the might of your hand you persecute me.
(Job 30:19-21)

Like all suffering saints, Job cried out to God for relief and rescue from his circumstances and intense anguish. We want to be delivered from oppression, healed from sickness, and witness the unconverted saved. But if those things do not happen and our circumstances only get worse, we would like some explanation from God. "Why, O Lord? Why is this happening to me? What possible good can come from this sorrow and pain?"

These questions become more acute if we have a robust doctrine of God's providence, believing in his active sovereignty over the smallest details of everyday life. A sparrow cannot die apart from God's will, and even the hairs of our head are numbered (Matt.10:29-30). God can convert any sinner, at any time—even one breathing out murderous threats against his disciples (Acts 9). God can effortlessly heal every sickness known to humankind (Ps. 103:3). God can make any prison door swing open, setting the captives free (Acts 16:26). God's blessing of his Word can produce mass conversions (2:41). Indeed, God actively holds together every atom in the universe, and nothing can happen apart from his will. Knowing the dimensions of providence both comforts and challenges us. We are comforted when we look to the future, for it is in his hands. But we are challenged by human suffering. Whenever anything happens that brings his children pain, we ask "Why, O Lord?!" And we find (along with Job and the psalmists) that God does not give direct explanations now. But I believe he will reveal everything in the world to come.

Some of you may feel ambivalent about that. It is not only our sins that we would like to forget forever and not carry into eternity. What about the most painful moments of our lives? Why would we want to relive the agonies of burying a child, the relentless pain of a long battle with cancer, the disappointments of ministry failures, or the sorrows of financial ruin? In this life, God mercifully gives his children a therapeutic amnesia, so our first experience of tragedy fades and we can go on with our lives ("Time heals all wounds"). But we will have perfect memories in heaven. What good can come from reliving life's bitterest moments?

Why God Will Review Our Suffering

God's darkest providences can cause serious doubt in his people, particularly regarding his power, his wisdom, or his love for us. Human suffering is the crucible of theology, and false doctrine has flowed from its hottest flames. Theodicy is the term referring to the vindication of God's actions in relationship to evil, especially human suffering. Christians who defend the faith in this groaning world must be able to answer those who question the existence of God because of seemingly pointless suffering. But no vindication of God will ever be complete in this world, because God's actions are often mysterious. The only perfect theodicy will be done by God himself in heaven, explaining the details of his be-loved children's suffering. As the psalmist said

to God, “You yourself have recorded my wanderings. Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?” (Ps.56:8 CSB). God wants us to understand the necessity of each dark thread of providence to make the intricately beautiful tapestry we will review in heaven. His power, wisdom, and love will be perfectly vindicated.

Scriptural Support

God intends to reveal himself completely—his thoughts, purposes, and works—to his chosen people. God's self-disclosure began here in this world but will be completed in heaven. Jesus said to the Father, “This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). In Jesus's ministry, he taught in parables. Outsiders were excluded; insiders received detailed interpretations: “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables. . . . Privately to his own disciples he explained everything” (Mark 4:11,34).

The Holy Spirit is in this present world to guide God's people into all truth (John 16:13). This full sharing of truth, nothing held back, characterizes the Trinity; Jesus said, “All that the Father has is mine” (v. 15). The Spirit's role is to bring the children of God into that possession. This process is not completed on earth, since we cannot now bear everything that Christ could say to us (v. 12). Our spirits are weak, and we could not handle full disclosure. But in heaven, when the danger is past, we will be ready for everything Christ wants to reveal to us: “I do not call you servants anymore, because a servant doesn't know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my Father” (15:15 CSB). Because we are his friends, Christ does not want to hold anything back from us ultimately. Part of the love relationship he is working between us, himself, and the Father is one of full disclosure, not concealment. He will hold nothing back but will reveal everything to us as the consummation of his love for us. Jesus equates love with his self-disclosure: “He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” (14:21). In heaven, this manifestation of Christ to us will be completed.

Consider God's internal question concerning his imminent destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I have chosen him” (Gen.18:17-19). The Hebrew verb translated “hide” means “to cover up.” Abraham was chosen by the Lord for his role as the “father” of the elect and was privileged to know the very mind of God. And five hundred years later, as Moses was writing this account in Genesis, the Holy Spirit invited Moses into God's self-deliberation concerning Sodom and Abraham! God brings his

chosen people into the secret counsels of his will. Therefore, in heaven, God will fully disclose the purposes of his heart in his people's suffering while they were on earth.

Several times in the book of Revelation, John is invited into discussion about the meaning of the visions as they unfold. "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this" (4:1); "Come, I will show you the judgment of the great prostitute who is seated on many waters" (17:1); "Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9); "I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her" (17:7). John represents all the elect in both their present earthly limitations and their future glory. Presently, there are some things we cannot know. John is restricted from writing what the seven thunders said in Revelation 10:4; it is sealed for the future. But other times, John is forcefully commanded to write down what he sees and hears because these things are meant to be understood immediately by the people of God (21:5). There will be a sweet consummation in heaven when God will hold nothing back from any of his children.

Many Painful Providences

Death is the "last enemy" (1 Cor.15:26), and Jesus wept right before raising Lazarus from the dead because he knew how many tears his people would shed before his bitterest foe would finally be vanquished.

The death of loved ones, especially children. There is no trial more agonizing than the death of a child. Martin Luther was in deep agony over the loss of his precious daughter Magdalena on September 20, 1542. He wrote to a friend,

My wife and I...cannot think of it without sobs and groans which tear the heart apart. The memory of her face, her words, her expressions in life and death-everything about 'our most obedient and loving daughter lingers in our hearts so that even the death of Christ (and what are all deaths compared to his?) is almost powerless to lift our minds above our loss. So would you give thanks to God in our stead? For hasn't he honored us greatly in glorifying our child?

After the little coffin had been lowered down into the cold earth, watered by the anguished tears of the parents, many laid their weary heads on their pillows that night with one burning unanswered question: "Why, O Lord?" God's reasons will be explained fully in heaven, and no parents will grieve then.

Untimely deaths of fruitful people. When particularly effective and gifted servants of the Lord die "before [their] time" (Eccles.7:17), those who are left to

carry on the work wonder why the Lord took them so soon. How can we understand the early deaths of Perpetua (22), King Edward VI of England (15), David Brainerd (29), Robert Murray McCheyne (29), William Borden (25), Jim Elliot (28), and countless others? Read accounts of their lives, and you may find yourself growing in perplexity. Borden was a wealthy heir who gave it all up to become a missionary to China's Muslims. He died of spinal meningitis while traveling to the mission field. In our limited perspective, we think a long career of service to the Lord would have been far more effective in furthering God's kingdom. But God disagreed.

Accidents. Church history is filled with tragic accidents that beg for explanation. In 1873, the ship *Ville du Havre* collided with another ship in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, broke in two, and sank within twelve minutes. Aboard were Anna Spafford and her four young daughters. Anna was rescued, but all four of her daughters died. She wired her husband, Horatio, "Saved alone." Anna said, "God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday, I will understand why." As her husband was sailing to reunite with her, he passed over the watery grave of their daughters. He began writing the words to the hymn "It Is Well with My Soul" there. Two of the greatest preachers ever, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon, had similar accidents with very different outcomes. During a midweek service in 1737, the gallery in the church building where Edwards was preaching collapsed, but there were no deaths, nor even any serious injuries. Edwards marveled over this amazing display of the providence of God: "None can give an account, or conceive, by what means people's lives and limbs should be thus preserved, when so great a multitude were thus eminently exposed."

Spurgeon did not experience the providence of God so sweetly. On the evening of October 19, 1856, Spurgeon was about to preach to over twelve thousand people in the Surrey Garden Music Hall. Someone yelled "Fire!" In the ensuing panic, the frenzied movement of the crowd caused a balcony to collapse, leaving seven dead and twenty-eight seriously injured. The incident shook Spurgeon so deeply that he felt he would never preach again. "Accidents" may seem random, but all are under the watchful eye of a sovereign God who could have prevented each and every one of them or delivered people from them. God owes no explanations, but in heaven he will give them.

Natural disasters (earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, landslides, wildfires). God's involvement in such disasters has long been a source of theological extremes. Some deny that God would ever do anything that would destroy human life; others interpret natural disasters as God's punishment for human sins. For example, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and much of the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, one TV preacher proclaimed that

Katrina was God's judgment on New Orleans's sinful culture as well as a warning for the entire nation? Other Christian leaders said such statements dishonored the character of God and missed opportunities to show compassion for the victims. In heaven we will hear the official explanation from God about his intentions in every natural disaster that has ever occurred. And his explanations will be deep and complex. When a tornado sweeps through a town, it completely destroys some houses, damages others, and entirely spares still others. The homes of Christians and non-Christians alike are found in all three categories. God was doing specific things in each life affected, but his "paths [are] beyond tracing out" (Rom.11:33 NIV).

One dies, another lives. Tragic deaths occur in which we can ask why one was saved and another not. Both John Bunyan and John Newton saw another man take their place at a key moment, leading immediately to that man's death. Another soldier took Bunyan's place on sentry duty during the English Civil War and was shot by the enemy. Another sailor took Newton's place on watch during a storm and was swept overboard by a rogue wave.' Neither Bunyan nor Newton was converted at the time. Both felt that God gave another person's life for their own final salvation. Because Bunyan and Newton became great Christians, we can easily vindicate God's wisdom in these instances. But what about the opposite? There are many moments when God's rationale for those who survived and those who perished is absolutely unclear.

The sparing of tyrants. Why do wicked oppressors survive, only to continue their works of tyranny? On July 20, 1944, a powerful bomb exploded in Adolf Hitler's staff meeting. It killed three people, but a heavy oak table effectively shielded Hitler from the deadly blast. World War II continued in Europe for another ten months, dooming countless people (including many Christians) to death. On April 4, 1945, Hitler took one of the last actions of his tyrannical reign, condemning theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to death because of his involvement in the assassination plot. The lives of Bonhoeffer and many in the concentration camps, as well as in all the armies, were radically affected by Hitler's survival. Corrie ten Boom and her sister Betsie were arrested in Holland on February 28, 1944, for harboring Jewish people in their "hiding place." They were eventually imprisoned in the notorious Ravensbruck concentration camp, where Betsie died on December 16, 1944. On her deathbed, she said to Corrie, "There is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still." If Hitler had died in that blast, the Ten Booms' history might have been radically different. One day we will know the deep reasons for such choices in his providential plan.

Outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics. Disease has played a crucial role in the shaping of human history. I am writing this chapter during the worldwide pandemic of the COVID-19 coronavirus. The effect on the world economy and society is incalculable. This virus is structurally very similar to the SARS virus of 2003, which infected 8,098 people and killed 773. As of December 2020, the COVID-19 virus had infected 68 million people worldwide, with over 1.5 million deaths. Why the one coronavirus should have such a minimal impact and the other such a massive one is a mystery. But disease and immunity have deeply shaped human history. Jared Diamond made this argument in *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, based on the impact of European carriers of diseases for which indigenous peoples had no immunity: "Smallpox, measles, influenza, typhus, bubonic plague, and other infectious diseases endemic in Europe played a decisive role in European conquests." What appears random on earth will be explained in clear detail by the Author of history in heaven.

The "Insanity" of God

In 2013, Nik Ripken published a powerful book cataloging his fifteen-year journey studying the experiences of persecuted Christians around the world. The book's title concerned some Christians because it sounded irreverent or even blasphemous: *The Insanity of God*. Ripken's own questions began in Somalia, where Muslim warlords were systematically crushing the church while roving bands of young men were shooting innocent people in the streets. He asked, "Can the gospel really flourish in the hardest places on earth?" Around that time, his own son died of an asthma attack on Easter Sunday morning in Nairobi, Kenya, an attack he would have likely survived if they were in America. That church asked Ripkin a bitter question: "How can God allow your son to die on Easter?"

These experiences propelled Ripken on his journey to understand the inscrutable purposes of God in the world's dark places. The so-called insanity came from the examples of mindless depravity of the regional warlords, who were allowing starving Somali children to sit waiting outside a compound that had just been captured. These desperate children, near death, waited for some scraps to fall from the warlords' table. Ripkin watched the children descend upon an animal carcass that was heaved over the wall. Like locusts, they devoured whatever was left so that they could live in that hell-hole another day. A compassionate and anguished Christian asked the questions that burned inside them: "God, where are you? Do you know what is happening in this place? What kind of God would allow this to happen?" The provocative, controversial title of Ripken's book is based on this one theme: How can a loving, wise God put his beloved children through such overwhelming sorrow, pain, suffering, and death at the hands of irrational servants of Satan? There seems to be no answer to the details of that suffering. It all seems so ... insane. Yet heaven will reveal that, while human sin

is utterly irrational to the core, God is perfect and purely reasonable; he says "Come now, let us reason together" (Isa. 1:18). When Paul was accused of insanity by the Roman governor Festus, he answered, "I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and reasonable words" (Acts 26:25). The gospel is exquisitely reasonable because it comes from the mind of God. God doesn't do luck. God doesn't do random. God doesn't shrug and say, "I don't know why I did that." And God certainly doesn't do insane. God is pure reason as well as pure love. There is a perfectly developed thought process behind every moment of redemptive history.

Not only will there be a full telling of all of God's reasons but the explanations will be deep and rich, fully satisfying to the redeemed in heaven. Like a chess expert has delight in re-playing all the moves of a masterpiece game by Bobby Fischer; like a lover of music has delight in understanding Bach's use of dissonance in the final movement of St. Matthew Passion or a certain chord progression in his ethereal fugues; like a lover of football theory has delight in studying the West Coast Offense devised by the genius Bill Walsh; like a lover of science has delight in the story of Albert Einstein discovering relativity and equating energy, mass, and light in the most famous and elegant formula in all of science, $E=mc^2$ like the intelligence behind all of these achievements brings sheer mental delight to the enlightened minds of enthralled students—how much more will we delight to learn in heaven how God's wise plan utilized the most irrational motions of sin to complete such evident glory. There is a reason for absolutely everything. And those reasons will be delightful to study.

J. I. Packer's Train Station Analogy Completed. In a chapter entitled "God's Wisdom and Ours" in his classic book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer considers the kind of wisdom God gives on earth. Packer tempers our expectations to protect us from unhealthy speculations. He uses an analogy from the York train station, one of the busiest terminals in England. If you were to watch the trains coming and going, you might be bewildered with many of the trains' actions. However, if you were in the control center high above the platform, you could see the master panel with all the lines coming in and out of the station; there the stationmaster can control the flow. You would understand why this train was stopped for five minutes, that one was diverted to a side rail for an hour, and others were allowed to proceed. All of the movements would become clearer to you once you saw the control panel and had the explanation from the stationmaster. But then, Packer adds,

Now, the mistake that is commonly made is to suppose that this is an illustration of what God does when he bestows wisdom. People feel if they were really walking close to God, so that he could impart wisdom to them freely, then they would, so to speak, find themselves in the signal-box they

would discern the real purpose of everything that happened to them, and it would be clear to them every moment how God was making all things work together for good.

Packer properly lowers our expectations for earthly insight. We are never invited up into the heavenly realms for perspective on the “mystery of providence.” As Paul said, “Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33). Instead of detailed inside information, Packer says God gives theological principles—rules of the road by which we can navigate the twists and turns on the complex and winding road of providence. At the end of the chapter, Packer completes his meditation with these words: “Let us see to it, then, that...we do not frustrate the wise purpose of God by neglecting faith and faithfulness in order to pursue a kind of knowledge which in this world it is not given to us to have.” But note the phrase “in this world”! Packer didn't address the eternal world, the heavenly one, where God will invite us into the signal-box for a retrospective view of his wise ways in this present age.

God Is His Own Interpreter

William Cowper, an eighteenth-century English hymnwriter, battled depression for most of his life. His most famous hymn is known by its first line:

God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.
Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill;
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.
Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.
Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his work in vain;
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

Look carefully at the last stanza: “God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.” God will interpret his own works, however peculiar and mysterious they seem to us when we experience them. And he will make plain each detail and what it accomplished in his overall perfect plan. But when will he do that? Certainly not here on earth. God did not tell Job about the challenge

issued by Satan, nor why all ten of his children died. We know more of those details now than Job did then. But we cannot possibly believe we know more now than Job knows in heaven or what we will know for all eternity when God gives his full interpretation for all the elect. "He will make it plain."