

Copyrighted Material

3

Chapter Three:

Why Did God Allow This to Happen to Me?

In this chapter, let's consider the possibility that there is more to your situation than what you see. This can be difficult because there are so many details that have your attention right now, and for good reason. The changes in your life have given you more to deal with than you bargained for, and the stress of the situation can filter the way you see things. Despite all of this, there is a bigger picture. It's time to take a step outside of yourself, stand beside Christ, and try to see what he sees. He already knows the whole story, so take this time to ask him the questions you have about what is happening.

Does God really have a plan? Was this divorce part of his plan? It seems difficult to believe that he would want such terrible pain and suffering to be a part of his great design. How about the way in which divorce affects children? They suffer tremendously for so many reasons; could that really be part of God's plan too? How could a loving God allow these terrible things to happen?

Some people don't believe in God, and instead believe that life is simply what you make of it. They believe each individual is in control of his own destiny and things that happen are either something he made happen, or are just a bunch of unrelated circumstances and occurrences.

Other people believe that God is present and watching over everyone, but does not have a plan because that might constitute predestination and be an infringement of our personal freedom of choice. With this perspective also comes the assumption that whatever happens in life is either something we made happen or simply a coincidence, accident or some other non-related occurrence.

Copyrighted Material

There are also those people who believe God has a plan. They believe that at all times, good or bad, easy or difficult, God is not only aware of what is happening, but is involved as well. They believe that their own actions create consequences, and after that everything else that comes their way during the course of the day is brought forth by God's hands. Even when bad things happen, their perspective is that God will take it and bring forth good from it.

The major difference between the perspective of the last group of believers and the first two is hope. Sometimes, particularly in the face of disaster and distress, our beliefs are challenged and it is difficult to find a reason why God has allowed bad things to happen to us. If you are able to find hope, you are able to light your path through the darkness. Hope gives you the ability to rise above the despair and confusion and set your feet firmly upon the path you need to walk, even though you may not understand why things are happening.

The goal of this chapter is to realize that, although it is difficult to see how, God is working in your life, and throughout all this difficulty he is closer to you now than ever before.

The Case

Sometimes, you may think that you just can't understand why God has allowed your marriage to end; why has he allowed all this pain? If he intended marriage to be forever, why hasn't he done something to stop all the hurting, the fighting, and the breakdown? Even before the separation took place, how could he allow the relationship to become so broken? Doesn't he hear my prayers?

Michael remembers:

I have always been faithful to God and faithful to my wife. I've worked hard and always did the right thing, even if it meant others didn't like my decision. But I'm not trying to be a martyr here; I've always been in love with my wife and had a strong relationship with God, so it was easy to be that way. I've struggled to build my career for my family's benefit and raised my kids as good Catholics. But when Kathryn left me, I kept wondering—after being true to God and my family—how could God take away my marriage? How could he allow my children

Copyrighted Material

to suffer so much? It was my whole life and now I feel all my hard work has gone to waste.

When it all happened and I was left alone, trying to understand and get a grip on things, I had to—absolutely had to—believe there was some bigger reason for what was happening. Nothing made sense to me at that point, not even going to work in the morning. I always had blind faith, but when my wife filed for divorce, my world was crumbling all around me and I couldn't buy into that theory anymore. I needed more than that because if I didn't find a real reason to sustain hope for my future, I saw very little value in continuing to practice my faith at all.

That was almost nine months ago and I have to admit, I don't have any better answers now than I did back then. I continue to practice my faith because when I think about it, I want to believe that God has a reason for what happened, but I certainly don't have clarity on the situation.

A Loving God or a Stone God?

Despite the agony of your situation, God does not want your life to be miserable. God is not sitting up in heaven, aloof, like some cold, distant observer, unmoved and unloving. Quite the contrary, God is so close to you now, closer than you know.

There have been many books written on the subject of suffering, and it's safe to say this issue could be discussed and debated endlessly and you still won't have full understanding of it. Why? Because suffering is one of the mysteries of life that you won't have complete knowledge of until you reach heaven. However, you can use your ability to reason, coupled with faith, to understand at least some of it.

Freedom of Choice

First, let's talk about the issue of free will. You don't always make good choices, and the same applies to everyone else in the world. But God will not force us to choose one way or another. That is his gift to us as human beings and you are free to choose what you want in life. Killing, steal-

Copyrighted Material

ing, rudeness, lies, gossip, abandoning your spouses and children, substance abuse, etc.; it's all your choice. So if you are free to choose what you want in life, and you know for a fact that you don't always choose wisely, it's safe to say that suffering will be caused as a result of poor choices made. And in the realm of divorce, there are lifetimes of suffering caused by one person's decision to have an affair and cheat on their spouse, or to allow an addiction to ruin their family or any of the many other reasons why divorce is so rampant in our society. So you can at least understand that God allows suffering because he will not take away our freedom of choice.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People

People often wonder, "I am a good person! Why did this terrible thing happen to me? I pay my taxes, go to church, teach my kids right from wrong; I even point out when the cashier has given me too much money back at the store! Why am I suffering so much?"

Peter Kreeft, PhD., a well-known Catholic author and professor of philosophy at Boston College, directly addresses this question in his book, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, and brings incredible insight to this question. In it, he makes the case that the question "Why do bad things happen to good people?" is valid, but will not lead to much understanding of the issue. Rather, Kreeft proposes the question should be, "Why do good things happen to bad people?" Let that question sink in for a moment. Again, one might revolt and cry, "But I am good!" Of course you are good, God made you that way, and he gives us the grace to do the good things we do. But the point that Kreeft illustrates so well is that we are all, every one of us, sinners. We are not perfect human beings and we all have our faults and failings. But God is perfect, and moreover, God is perfect Love. We offend him daily with our sins, yet he continues to bless us with many good things, hence the new perspective, *Why DO good things happen to bad people?* And here is the best part of that point; even the crosses you bear are blessings because when you suffer, you learn, you grow, you change, you become wiser and more loving. You become more like Christ. Suffering can be the door to new life. You become gold purified by the fire.

Copyrighted Material

What does Scripture Say?

Let's listen to St. Paul's exhortation in his letter to the Romans:

So then, now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; it is through him, by faith, that we have been admitted into God's favor in which we are living, and look forward exultantly to God's glory. Not only that; let us exult, too, in our hardships, understanding that hardship develops perseverance, and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope, and a hope which will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

When we were still helpless, at the appointed time, Christ died for the godless. You could hardly find anyone ready to die even for someone upright; though it is possible that, for a really good person, someone might undertake to die. So it is proof of God's own love for us, that Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5: 1 - 8).

St. Paul, with all that he suffered during his life, found great peace and joy in the fact that Christ died for him so he could have eternal life and that was the hope that outweighed every suffering.

What else can you know about this issue of suffering? Only good things can come from God; bad things that happen are due to the absence of God. Bad things happen among people because somewhere in the situation, God's presence is lacking. Somewhere in your marriage God's presence was lacking. When you look closely at your circumstances, you can detect the trouble . . . did you practice your faith as a family? Was either of the spouses holding back some truth from the other? Maybe the lack of God's presence was really from the beginning, from the day your relationship with your spouse began. Only you, your spouse, and God know the true details of the relationship.

Copyrighted Material

A Golden Opportunity

Here's the flip side of that coin . . . we know for a fact that God brings good things out of suffering. That is, if we allow him to enter our lives and give us his grace. The fact is that God has allowed this to happen to you because he respects the gift of free will he gave you, but it doesn't mean he doesn't love you or that he wants you to suffer needlessly. But it is precisely at this point—when bad things have happened—that Christ is ready to create new, good things for you. He is simply waiting for your permission to take the situation and bring good out of it. Imagine it this way: you can take your broken heart to the foot of the cross and say to Christ, “Why, Lord? Help me!” And Christ comes down from the cross, puts his arms around you and says, “I know you are suffering. I love you, and now I want to show you the way through your suffering into happiness.” And so in trying to make sense out of what happened, you also need to look at what good things you can find in it all.

Can you not buy two sparrows for a penny?
And yet, not one falls to the ground
without your Father knowing.
Why, every hair on your head has been counted.
So there is no need to be afraid;
you are worth more than many sparrows
(Matthew 10: 29 – 31).

It is awesome to think that God knows us so well; he knows every single hair on our head. He knows everything we've ever thought or done and he knows every desire within our hearts. God was present through the years you were married and saw every good time, every argument, every laugh, every tear.

Concluding Thoughts

Then suddenly from behind him came a woman, who had been suffering from a hemorrhage for twelve years, and she touched the fringe of

Copyrighted Material

his cloak, for she was thinking, “If only I can touch his cloak I shall be saved.” Jesus turned round and saw her; and he said to her, “Courage, my daughter, your faith has saved you.” And from that moment the woman was saved (Matthew 9: 20 – 22).

Male or female, it is easy to identify with this woman in the passage. Your pain is the “internal bleeding” you experience as a result of your divorce. But Christ heals the deepest wounds, the most painful hurts in life. Place yourself in the shoes of this woman. Her faith is so great that although it seems impossible, she believes Christ can heal her. She believes Christ can bring good things out of the bad. She knows all she needs to do is extend her hand out in faith and she will be healed. She was healed, and you can be healed too. There is a future waiting for you, and a great one at that.

There comes a time in your life when you have to take a step out in faith and really believe that God has a plan for your life. Believe that when you love God and place your trust in him, your life is not just a bunch of unrelated circumstances that happen by accident. Everyone you know and everything that happens is God’s hand trying to bring you closer to him.

To take a step further, you need to believe that God’s plan will make you happy. This may seem contradictory to your current situation, but remember, things are not always what they seem. You are in the thick of the situation. You are filled with anger, resentment, grief, loneliness . . . but God knows your pain! He knows what you are going through, he is very aware of what is happening in your life, and he is trying to help you learn and grow through these circumstances. It may all seem a jumbled mess now, but if you allow God access to your life, he will take it and make it something wonderful. He will make you happier than you could ever imagine.

In addition to being present in your life, God has a plan. It takes hope for the future to survive the devastation of divorce, and hope is possible, even on the darkest of nights. It also takes faith—trust in God.

Now What?

Here are some things you can do that will help you endure the suffering as well as restore a sense of hopefulness to your life:

Copyrighted Material

1. **Pray:** (Hardships are the pathway to peace!) The Serenity Prayer is a very powerful prayer that speaks to the peace that comes from accepting and enduring hardships. Recite this prayer daily, especially when you are feeling overwhelmed or abandoned:

The Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.

Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;

Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;

Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it;

Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will;

That I may be reasonably happy in this life

and supremely happy with him forever in the next. Amen.

—Reinhold Niebuhr

2. **Plan:** (Focus on the future) It is easy to get caught up in the pain of today and lose the hopefulness that tomorrow can bring. While you can't change the past, you can certainly shape your future. On page 40 of the Workbook companion, you will find the following column headings: Tomorrow, Next year, Three Years From Now, Five Years From Now. In each column, write down how you want your life to be at that point in time, and this should include your goals, dreams and aspirations, etc. Be as detailed as you would like. The key is to try and move beyond today's hardship.
3. **Change:** (Offset negative changes with positive changes) Make a list of all the things in your life you would like to change. It could be the obvious things like your weight, your hairstyle, or your income. Or, it could be the more subtle things like developing a new skill, being more consistent in a particular area, taking on a new activity you've been meaning to do, or breaking a bad habit. Pick the one thing that you can commit to doing and start doing it, everyday. Don't begin to work on the other items on your list until you have mastered the

Copyrighted Material

current item or reached a specific goal. Resist the temptation to start doing too many things at once. You will wind up getting frustrated and not getting anything done. While there is a lot of turmoil in your life, much of which you have little or no control over, there are still many things in your life you can control, starting with you. So, take that karate class, start that exercise program, start going to mass every Sunday, join that scripture study, or quit smoking. There is no reason the negative changes in your life cannot be used as motivation to create some positive changes as well.

4. **Charity:** (Acts of kindness restore hope) When bad things happen to us, it is easy to allow ourselves to be consumed by the negativity. When you shift your focus away from your challenges and onto others and their needs, you gain a better, more rounded perspective. Helping others in need not only makes us feel better and makes the world a better place, it helps us understand that you are not the only one suffering—that there are other people suffering badly too. Consider doing random acts of kindness for someone you know who is in need, or volunteer to do charity work at your church. Sometimes, the smallest acts of kindness can have the biggest impact on restoring your sense of hope.
5. **Reflect:** (Overcoming past struggles provides hope) Think of a different time in your life when you were really struggling. Did the situation seem hopeless at the time? How did you overcome that struggle? Reflect on the lessons you learned from that struggle, how it changed the course of your life, and how life is better because you endured that hardship.
6. **Trust:** (God has a great plan for you!) Divorce can bring a tremendous amount of suffering and uncertainty. In a moment, a lifetime of dreams and plans can be destroyed. It is during these times that it can feel like you were dropped in a foreign land—with no map—in the dark. It can be a very scary feeling! Scripture repeatedly reassures us that God will never abandon us and that He has a tremendous plan for us. Try to trust in that for it is through that trust that a sense of hopefulness will return. While you may not have a clue as to what God has planned for you in the future, you can rest assured that it is going to be better than you can imagine.

Copyrighted Material

Trust wholeheartedly in Yahweh
put no faith in your own perception;
acknowledge him in every course you take,
and he will see that your paths are smooth.
Proverbs 3: 5-6

“And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time.”
Mark 28: 20

Meditation

Mark 10: 46 - 52

“Then they came to Jericho. As Jesus and his disciples, together with a large crowd, were leaving the city, a blind man, Bartimaeus (that is, the Son of Timaeus), was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” So they called to the blind man, “Cheer up! On your feet! He’s calling you.” Throwing his cloak aside, he jumped to his feet and came to Jesus. Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man replied to him, “I want to see.” Jesus told him, “Go your way, your faith has saved you.” Immediately he received his sight and followed him on the way.”

Opening Prayer: My Lord and my God, I am grateful for this opportunity to talk to you. I want to share with you all that is troubling me and listen to your words. Lord, I believe in you, I trust in you, I love you!

Petition: Lord, grant me the grace to walk this journey with hope and a desire to become a better person because of the experience. Help me to be convinced that, no matter how difficult things may get, there is never any reason to give up because you are by my side.

Copyrighted Material

1. *Have mercy on me!*

Bartimaeus' desperate cry for help from the Lord sounds much the way you sound sometimes. You want to be healed of your affliction. You want the pain to pass and to be able to move on to a better life. When you look at Bartimaeus, you see what an example of hope he is, even in the face of others trying to quiet him and being rude to him, he does not give up his appeal because he believes that Jesus can heal him. He believes, and his actions show Jesus how strong his faith is. When I look at my own situation, at my own prayers to God, do I sustain this same spirit of faith and do my actions reinforce that faith?

2. *What do you want me to do for you?*

Bartimaeus wanted to see. What is it that you want? What are you praying for? God wants you to come to him with all your cares, worries, concerns, hopes, dreams and desires. It is not selfish to ask God for things that benefit you. He wants us to come and speak with him about these things. What is it that your heart most desires at this point in time?

3. *Your faith has saved you.*

Jesus loved Bartimaeus and wanted him to be healed, yet he made him work for it to a certain degree. He did not answer him at first, but allowed Bartimaeus to work harder before Jesus turned his attention to him. When Bartimaeus showed Jesus the level of faith he had, Jesus blessed him with the miracle of restoring his sight. Jesus loves us the same way, with a passionate love that never holds us back from what is good for us. When you pray, do you feel you are praying with hope? Do you believe that Christ will give you all that is good for you?

Closing Prayer: Lord, hear my prayer and open my heart to your words. Grant me the grace of a greater sense of hope that you are taking care of me and will bring all things to good because I love you. I offer my suffering up for all those men, women and children who are also suffering the affects of divorce. In your name, I pray. Amen.

Copyrighted Material

Resolution

Make a visit to Christ in the tabernacle for thirty minutes and specifically ask him for peacefulness amid the turmoil. Ask him to increase your faith in him.

Suggested Reading

Peter Kreeft, *Making Sense Out of Suffering*, Servant Ministries (May 1986)

Andre Frossard, *Forget Not Love*, Ignatius Press (October 1991)

Matt Pinto and Jeff Cavins, *Amazing Grace for Those Who Suffer*, Ascension Press (October 2002)