



# CONVERSATIONS GUIDE

BY KIM ENGELMANN



## IN A WORLD OF PAIN... WHAT GOOD IS GOD?

An Interview with Philip Yancey

This is an interview with Yancey that grapples with theodicy issues as they are dealt with in his new book, *What Good Is God?* Yancey was in a recent car accident where he almost died and as he recovered three questions presented themselves as follows: 1) Who do I love? 2) What have I done with my life? and 3) Am I ready for whatever is next? These questions have been pivotal since the accident; Yancey surmises that pain is like a hearing aid that helps us tune into what truly matters. In fact, research shows that painful times are the times that foster spiritual formation the most. Psychological or spiritual pain helps us “tune in” to something that needs changing—as does physical pain. The pain is not just there to make us feel bad. When we experience pain we should seek counsel about it so that we can become redirected.

Part of the process of working through our pain is praying through pain. This is a process in which we should not hold back. Honesty and raw emotion are necessary as is shown in scripture (Job, Lamentations, Psalms, Jesus weeping, etc). There is also a deep need for community during difficult times. Yancey suggests a sign for all painful experiences: DANGER! Do not experience alone!

Studies have shown that those in community with one another during difficult times heal faster than those in

Finally, love and pain are discussed as prime movers in people’s ability to embrace radical surrender to God. Yancey ends with a story of women who were recovering from prostitution and who shared that when they were down, as low as they could go, they reached out with open hands for God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness. In essence they “tuned in” to the better plan God had for their lives and were personally transformed. Sometimes when we are at our lowest there is no

- 1. When has pain moved you or someone you care about closer to God?**
- 2. Do you think most people use pain to instigate change, or do they just grin and bear it?**
- 3. What is it about the Bible that validates honesty with our emotions in prayer and in working through tough situations?**

## THE DIFFICULT STORY OF DISPLAYED GLORY

by Larry Crabb

In this article Larry Crabb reveals that the cancer that nearly killed him 14 years ago and from which he recovered, has now returned to his body. When he agreed to do this Conversations article months ago on the theme “The Problem of Pain” he did not know that he would be writing out of the pain of his illness. This article is a powerful statement about surrendering to God’s story, what it means to glorify God in our lives, and what the core of our faith is really all about.

There is an insidious draw for the Christian to believe that, as Crabb put it, “If God loves me, he will bless me”. The subtext here, of course, is “God will bless me the way that I see fit.” This puts God at our disposal rather than putting us at God’s disposal. In other words we were created to help God write his story, act out his purposes or as Crabb quotes Lewis, to “be

ingredients of Divine delight.” Crabb writes, “Either we try to fit God into our story and never know real joy or we live to tell His story, to bring Him glory by revealing Him in how we relate, and discover that joy is not circumstance-dependent.” Salvation is a good thing. So is heaven. We also feel entitled as Christians to receive God’s blessings along the way. After all, we believe so we ought to get what we want, right? However, the crux of the gospel is not that Jesus died to give us stuff we think we want. Rather Jesus died to give us God—the close intimate presence of the Divine that we long for. God’s love, revealed to us in the 66 books of scripture that Kierkegaard defined as God’s love letter to us, is all we really need, and we know this internally once we experience this unconditional agape. Glorifying God is surrendering to His will and purpose for us; recognizing that no matter what our state if God loves us that much, and can tell his story through us, the conditions of our lives are of little import.

- 1. What does it mean for you to glorify God?**
- 2. How do circumstances affect your image of God from one day to the next? If undesirable things happen, do you ever feel that God is displeased with you? Punishing you? Doesn’t care? Discuss as a group.**
- 3. How might Crabb’s suggestions about glorifying God help you to keep God’s unconditional love for you constant, despite changing circumstances?**

## THE PROBLEM OF PAINLESSNESS

by Mark Buchanan

This article deals with the paradox of pain and grapples with whether pain is a curse or a blessing. To answer this paradox Buchanan says, “Yes”. He states, “Pain is an oddity. It’s a paradox. It makes us human, and keeps us healthy. And it diminishes our humanness, and ruins our health. It is blessing and curse both.” The pain was a blessing for the

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# When has pain pulled you away from God, if ever?

leper who was touched by Jesus; as he began to feel jagged rocks under his feet, he knew he was healed. (The disease of leprosy creates numbness.) For Job, the pain was a curse. It was a satanic ambush underwritten by God, where he lost everything. It seemed to serve no purpose, nor does it make Job a better person in terms of virtue. He was already virtuous and had done nothing wrong. Job is confronted in the end with a revelation of God's immensity in terms of creation, in terms of purpose, in terms of majesty and also in terms of the immensity of God's great compassion. The suffering of Job ends in a revelation of God himself. And this is the point. Suffering will shove God into our face. Buchanan points out that in Psalm 23 the pronoun changes from "he", when referring to God's presence in green pastures/still waters (when all is going well), to "you" when walking through the valley of the shadow. The psalmist stops talking about God, and starts talking to him when the going gets rough. Buchanan shares his own struggles and states, "Seasons of trial have awakened in me dependency, and pulled God close, whereas long stretches of uninterrupted comfort have tended toward the opposite effect: bred in me feelings of entitlement and independence, and held God at bay". The paradox of pain is the paradox of the cross. It is at the same time brutal, horrific, inhumane AND the place of healing and revelation of who God is for the world.

- 1. When has pain pulled you away from God, if ever?**
- 2. When has it pulled you toward God?**
- 3. Explain the paradox of pain as Buchanan describes it. How can something like pain be both a blessing and a curse?**
- 4. How has God used painful experiences in your life?**

## LIKE A ROARING LION

by Richard Foster

Foster begins by talking to us about the realities of the spiritual world. There is God and his angels (thousands upon thousands) and then there is Satan and his angels. Of special note is Foster's reference to C.S. Lewis' observation that Satan is not the opposite of God, but rather the opposite of Michael. Although Satan may be "a roaring lion" there is another Lion who is greater than Satan—Jesus, "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (Rev 5:5). This is the Lion who has conquered sin and death and hell. John declares, "The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

Foster reminds us that it is the Holy Spirit that leads Jesus into the wilderness, and he is there for 40 days before Satan is even allowed to tempt him. The temptations he brings to Jesus are three-fold—economic, political, and religious. These are evils in our day that we also must confront and overcome. Jesus also went about "casting out demons" and healing the sick. He always demonstrated ultimate power and authority over Satan.

Involving oneself in spiritual darkness whether it is consulting with a medium, engaging in witchcraft, participating in tarot readings, Ouiji boards is expressly prohibited in scripture. "No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead" (Deut 18:10-11). Foster also cautions against prayers for those who feel "demonized". A simple prayer asking Jesus to free the person from such spiritual bondage is sufficient; Foster

notes that many times these prayers of "exorcism" are prayed without compassion.

Finally he warns about giving Satan too much credit. He recognizes that people beat themselves up just fine without any help from Satan at all. He shares a story of a woman who was sure she was demonized but after being prayed for it was clear that "she had a great big hurt, and very tiny demon."

Satan is real, but God is bigger and much more powerful. We must resist Satan, pray for protection, but never fear. Jesus, the Lion of the tribe of Judah is absolutely sovereign over "the roaring lion (Satan) who seeks to devour" God's people.

- 1. What are the pitfalls of focusing too much on Satan and his influence in the world?**
- 2. What are the pitfalls of refusing to recognize that Satan exists, or has influence?**
- 3. What are some good ways to maintain a healthy balance, focusing on Jesus and at the same time resisting Satan?**

## A GOD WHO WEEPS

by Jan Johnson

In this article Jan Johnson writes about a God who weeps with us, and weeps for a broken hurting world. She challenges the superficial Christian perspective that tries to make everything OK in the midst of human pain ("God knew you were strong enough to handle this," "God wanted your loved one in heaven") and shows scriptural evidence for God's anguish and tears when tragedy and loss come our way. Especially moving is the fact that in scripture God's tears are shed not just for Israel, but for foreign nations as well. God's heart is broken for all people. As Johnson quotes, "All this fits

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well with what Talmud scholars wrote about God: 'Our rabbis taught, When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, 'My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?'"[1]

God knows our sufferings from the inside out and feels our pain. God is also depicted Biblically as a weeping parent, anguishing over his children. Even when giving out consequences for bad behavior, God's heart "recoils within him" and he turns again to tenderness and compassion. Jesus' compassion for people was so deep that he actually wept for those who

were going to destroy him as he weeps over Jerusalem (the verb indicates he was walking and sobbing) and in fragmented sentences, indicating powerful emotion, says "if only you had known what would bring you peace." Harsh images of God are often created in people's minds when bad things happen to them. Although it is true that we learn from our difficulties, and that God works all things together for good, as Willard states "this is never God's preferred way of dealing with us." Johnson also quotes Willard as saying "Never think anything bad about God." Our image of God must never be distorted by the world we live in, which is harsh,

judgmental, and violent. Rather, as Hebrew history bears out, God's determined and relentless love, as Fretheim notes, "... is able to absorb the arrows of outrageous fortune that pierce him through and, instead of becoming callous or removing himself from the line of fire, (God) still seeks to bring about a future which is good for those who inflict the wounds....In this respect, God offers the supreme example of what to do with suffering. God does not become hardened and bitter or mean and sarcastic but instead never gives up."

1. Does the image of God weeping for people in pain help you to connect more readily with his great love for you and for the world?
2. Have you ever heard Christian lingo being touted that has made God seem harsh and punitive? What was said, and how did it affect you?
3. How does the image of God weeping for a broken world connect with the theological truth of an "all powerful" God who is able to move mountains and change circumstances?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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