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Have you ever been raped? Have you ever had your dignity and self worth stripped from you like a cheap rehearsal costume? Have you ever soaked in a tub trying desperately to scrub away a filthy feeling that you simply can't get rid of? Have you ever woken up in a cold sweat because you just re-experienced the horrible ordeal – only this time the horror and feelings of helplessness were intensified? Rape: The gift that keeps on giving. Have you ever seen your future flushed down the drain along with your vomit while a little blue + added up to your doom? Have you ever laid perfectly still while you let a man kill your baby? I have.

My name is Bethany Burnett, to all appearances a good Christian girl and daughter of the well-known minister Dr. Darryl Burnett. There are a lot of things that my dad doesn't know about me. He doesn't know that I disobeyed his strict orders and went out with Kevin. He doesn't know about the rape. He doesn't know about the pregnancy. He doesn't know about the abortion.

One day, I had had it with what I thought were the accusing stares of others. On my way home after running errands, I ducked into an alley to get away – from what? Myself more than anything else, I guess. It was the perfect place to be, right there with the rest of the garbage. What hurt the most that fateful day was the fact that I killed my baby. Mothers are supposed to protect and care for their babies. Not me. I killed mine. I was sobbing uncontrollably when I heard a man approach. I stiffened. This short bald guy must have heard me crying and came to check it out. I could tell the homely fellow felt sympathy for me, but I wanted no part of it. I was angry – with me, with Kevin, with the doctor, and with God... if there was a God.

The man gently asked what was wrong. In hindsight, I don't know what I was thinking, but I dumped everything on him – a bitter, corrosive dump. It felt good to tell someone, to let it all out. The poor man, who later told me he was Paul, said something about God being there for me. That made me livid.

“God – there for me? Don't give me that garbage. Where was God when that monster violently accosted me and I screamed out for Him? And why did God let that jerk get me pregnant – as if being raped wasn't painful enough? Where was God when He let me kill my baby? Where was

He? Don't say He'll be there for me!" Paul was silent while I sobbed. After several minutes, Paul gently began. "Bethany, a horrible injustice has been done. I don't know why God has allowed these painful things to occur in your life, but I do know He is in control of every situation. He would not have allowed you to endure this unless He had a good purpose for it. He is a good God!"

If God is in Control then He can't Be Good

"How can you say that?" I wiped the tears off my cheeks and sank down to ground, leaning back against the rough slats of an alley fence. "If He is in control, there is no way He can be good! You can't have it both ways! What kind of a good God would allow this?"

"I don't know, but I know He sees the big picture – "

"The big picture?! You want to know about the big picture? I have been doing a lot of thinking about this issue of evil in the world. Not just my little problems, either. I went on a mission trip to Peru last year. What I saw would make you sick! A two-year-old lay bloated by the side of the road; she had starved to death. All she needed was food. Then there was a little blind boy who was born without legs. All day he just sat by the side of the road, begging whatever food he could get. No, sir! If God is good, then He certainly is not in control!"

Paul was visibly moved; it was clear I was not dealing with a calloused man. "Bethany," his voice choked, "I know you are hurting right now. Pain has a way of consuming us. It fills our mind till that is all we can think of. I don't understand the ways of God. But I want you to find relief from your pain and healing for your soul. God cares and He offers you healing."

Even though the words were spoken with deep sincerity, they still struck my bitter mind as trite. "Don't tell me He cares! If He cared, He wouldn't let me suffer like this in the first place."

Paul sighed, his eyes betraying the fact that he also wrestled with pain. "I cannot explain the mind of God to you. I can only show you His heart and His heart is one of love. Our perspective is limited down here. We can only see little bits of the bigger picture. But when we recognize that only God sees the bigger picture, and we trust that He is good, we can rest in that."

"I still don't see how you can say that He is good when He lets tragedy after tragedy ruin this crazy world!"

"Oh little one, we only see a small glimpse of what is going on, but it is possible that what looks cruel and horrible may actually be a kind act

of mercy.”

“How?” I shot back.

Paul sat down beside me on the ground. I could tell by the way this man creaked and groaned that pain was his constant companion.

“Let me give you an example. You walk into a room and see a woman lying on her back screaming in pain because beside her is a man with his fist in her mouth. If this is all you know, how would you feel?”

“Angry, probably...disgusted, too.”

“But what if that woman has a tooth infection that has been hurting for weeks? She hasn’t been able to eat or sleep. This tooth is ruining her life. The man is a dentist who knows that all this woman needs is to have that tooth pulled and that’s what he was doing when you walked in. Now how do you feel about the situation?”

“You’re right, it makes more sense.”

“You see, hearing more information made the situation look completely different. I think it is that way with God. The things that look cruel to us may actually be God mercifully extracting the rot from our souls.”

The Problem is Choice

“Okay, to continue in your example, then... if God is so loving and all-powerful, why would He let that woman get a toothache in the first place?”

“Let’s say the woman’s tooth rotted because she didn’t clean her teeth properly. It was her choice not to. Her parents told her to make sure she cleaned them. She thought her parents were mean and bossy to force her to do something she didn’t want and she told them that. So they gave up, and she ended up with a toothache.”

“Yeah, but if those parents were truly loving they should have kept forcing her to keep her from the pain, just like parents will physically remove a little child away from a fire whether the child wants to or not.”

“Yes, and God often does sovereignly protect us in spite of our free-will. But what God really wants is for us to love Him. Let’s go back to the example of the child and the parents. What would happen if the parents kept forcing the child to obey even when the child was grown? Would that child love her parents? Or would the child need some freedom for love to be possible?”

Paul’s example couldn’t have hit closer to home. I will never forget the fight I had with my parents the day I was raped. Dad had given me strict instructions not to go anywhere alone with Kevin. I thought he

was being ridiculous. Now I see what he was trying to protect me from. I wish he had been more forceful. But I also remember enough to know that that would have just made me madder and driven me further away.

Paul continued, “Bethany, let me try another angle. Sex is one of God’s most beautiful gifts to mankind. It is a favorite activity among married ...”

“Please don’t talk about sex right now!” I begged. But Paul continued his point.

“But when it is forced on someone, like it was on you, it becomes something hideous.”

“You’ve got that right.” I tried to block the nightmarish memories out of my mind.

“God created us to enjoy an intimate relationship with us, but it can’t be forced. Forced love is a contradiction in terms. God created this world full of good things and He wanted us to be able to enjoy them.

Without the gift of choice – without the ability to choose – I don’t think we would be able to enjoy. Because in order to enjoy something, it must be something we want to do, in other words *choose* to do. But with this ability, we chose evil and ruined things.”

Did God Create Evil?

“I see your point about choice, but if God is good, why did He create evil? I mean, if there was no evil, we wouldn’t hurt ourselves or others by choosing evil things.”

“Bethany, God did not create evil. Evil is not a thing. Evil is a perversion of a good thing. Evil is the result of our choosing to disobey. God created only good things, but it is our choice which can turn them into something evil. Like the way the awesome pleasure of sex became something evil when Kevin ignored God’s rules on how to use the gift. Food is a good thing, but if you are a glutton, it will make you fat.”

I have always had a mind that loved debate. I also loved a good argument, a fact that drives my parents crazy. This Paul fellow was making some compelling points and I wanted to contest them. I stood up and brushed the dirt from my jeans.

“Look,” I said, “Why don’t we walk to the park?”

Why do the Innocent Pay for the Wrong Choices of Others?

As we walked, I said, “I can see how our wrong choices lead to consequences and that a lot of the evil in this world can be explained by

that. But not all of it! I mean my rape happened on a night that I disobeyed my dad, but many women are raped when they were completely innocent. I know a family with little girls and their dad molests them. You're not gonna say that those girls deserve that for some sin they've done, are you? What kind of God would allow these little angels to be tormented by such a jerk?!"

Paul furrowed his brow and sighed. He silently looked away. "Much of our suffering is caused by the wrong choices of others. That is one of the worst things about sin - that it not only hurts us, but also others. I know God cares about little children. He hates it when children are abused or taken advantage of. Those who mistreat children will pay the price."

"But if God is so loving, why doesn't He stop these men?"

"God *has* stopped these men in the past and He *does* send His guardian angels to protect many of these children. I don't know why God allows some little ones to suffer, but I know He offers healing to those who have been abused. He has a good purpose for letting the children suffer."

"What?" I asked incredulously.

"God's ways are so far beyond us. He has His reasons for not telling us, and I'm sure that even if He did explain things to us, we wouldn't get it. Have you ever had a dog, Bethany? Oh, here's a bench. Would you like to sit down?"

"Sure," I said, and sat, puzzled by his other question. "Yes, we had a border collie named Sheba. Why?"

"Did Sheba ever get porcupine quills?" Paul asked as he painfully lowered himself to the bench.

"Did she ever! I remember one night she was covered. Her face must have had thirty quills in it. She had them in her nose, in gums, in her tongue. It was horrible."

"When you tried to pull them, did she understand what you were doing?"

"No, she fought like a wild cat. We finally had to tie her front legs to her back legs so we could keep her still enough."

"That must have seemed awfully cruel to poor Sheba. Here she is in so much pain and what does her master do? Pulls at her face with pliers, causing even more pain, then to make it worse, you tie her up. Did you explain why you were being so cruel?"

"Of course, but Sheba didn't understand. She couldn't, she's just a dog."

"If she didn't understand, then why did you continue to torment her so cruelly?"

"Because we had to get the quills out or she could have got an infection, maybe even died!" I said defensively.

"So, just like trying to explain to a dog why you have to put him through

the painful process of pulling the porcupine quills, the dog doesn't get it, but you continue to put the dog through the ordeal because you know it will be good for him. In the same way, God continues to bring us through painful ordeals, even though we don't understand, because in the end it will be good us."

"I still think if He were loving, He would stop these men from abusing children. I don't see how that could have a good end!"

"That is just the point. Your dog couldn't see how what you were doing could have a good end. God is God and we are not."

"But why doesn't God stop people from sinning?"

"I have already given you the reason that we must have free choice to be able to love or enjoy life. Bethany, you need to think more carefully about what you are suggesting: You want God to stop people from sinning? Where would you draw the line? Do you want God to stop you from every sin you commit? How would you feel if every time you were about to gossip, God froze your tongue, or every time you went to eat a chocolate bar when you weren't hungry, God sealed your mouth shut? Would you love that kind of God or would you find that oppressive?"

What about the innocent who suffer in natural disasters?

"I guess I would. Okay, I see that much of the suffering in this world is because we screw up with wrong choices, but what about famines and natural disasters? Or what about cancer or people who are born blind or crippled? You're not saying that these things always happen because we deserve it, are you?"

"Sometimes God does send these things as chastisement, but not always. In fact, it makes Him very angry when we judge those who are suffering, assuming it is because of sin in their life. It is not our place to judge why people are suffering. Only God knows. We are called to comfort the hurt and help the needy."

"You still haven't answered my question about innocent people who suffer for things that weren't their fault!" Snap! I looked down and realized I'd broken the twig I'd been toying with. I tossed the pieces to the ground.

"Bethany, we need to keep one thing in mind. This is hard to accept, but it is true - *there is no such thing as an innocent human*; every one of us has sinned against God and are deserving of death. When we are alive, that is a mercy from God – it's not our *right*. So when someone dies in an earthquake or in a famine that should not puzzle us. God creates life and God has the right to take life whenever He chooses. What we need to be concerned with is whether or not we are prepared to meet our Maker."

At this point in our conversation, a pretty young woman walked past pushing a stroller. Inside was an adorable little toddler. But something was wrong; it was missing its legs.

After she was gone, I asked Paul, “But what about little babies who have done nothing wrong and die? Or that little child we just saw who was born without legs? They didn’t deserve punishment!”

“When a little child dies, God takes that precious little one to a far better place than this corrupted earth. You don’t need to feel pity for the babies who die. As for the little baby without legs, only God knows the whole story. From our perspective, the most valuable things are the health of our physical bodies and wealth and prosperity, but maybe from God’s perspective other things are more important, like relationships and the health of our soul – in other words, our relationship with God.”

“Why?”

“Because of sin, every one of us is alienated from God. Apart from God’s grace, when we die, we will be separated from God completely, which is the most miserable existence imaginable. So our suffering here on earth is often a mercy of God. In the suffering, we see our need for Him and we call out for Him to save us. Let me give you a scenario, okay? Which is more loving – to give a child toys and candy and play games with it or grab it by the arms and whisk the screaming child away?”

I eyed Paul suspiciously. “The first option,” I answered tentatively.

“But what if you say that the child was playing a burning building? Then which would be more loving?”

“The second, of course.”

“Exactly, and it is that way with God. He knows that if we do not humble ourselves and ask Him to save us; we are headed for a miserable eternity. And compared to eternity this life is a drop in the bucket. When you look at it that way it makes more sense. Which is better, to have a great pleasure for a minute and agony for a hundred years? Or to suffer for a minute and enjoy bliss for a thousand years?”

I didn’t need to answer that.

He continued, “So if in suffering, say, being born without legs, we turn to God and find His salvation and for all eternity we worship Him and enjoy a perfect, glorified body, don’t you think it’s worth it? Conversely, how good does a life filled with health and prosperity look when it ends in a Godless, never-ending hell?”

How could a good God create Hell?

I had to admit Paul was making a lot of sense. But he touched on

something else that has always bothered me - the topic of hell.

“Paul, what you’re saying makes sense in light of hell. But the idea of hell itself doesn’t make any sense. If God is loving, why did He create hell in the first place? Why make a place of torture? Why not let everyone go to heaven?”

“Bethany, if everyone went to heaven, it wouldn’t be long before heaven was just as miserable as earth. Down here little children suffer and women are abused because humanity is in rebellion against God’s rules. In heaven there will be no rebellious people to corrupt paradise. Heaven will be heaven because everyone will obey God and His good gifts will only be enjoyed – not abused.”

“Okay, that makes some sense. But why make hell a place of torture? It doesn’t seem fair that some happy person is going along, minding their own business, when suddenly God kills them and sends them to a place of torture and the poor fellow doesn’t know what hit him.”

“Bethany, we don’t know exactly what hell will be like, but we know that God is just and will not punish anybody beyond what they deserve.”

“Okay, just a second here. You just assumed something that I thought we were debating.”

“What was that?”

“Whether or not God is just. I look around at this world and I don’t see evidence of God being just. Some kids are born into happy and loving homes while others are born into broken homes where they are abused and molested. That doesn’t look like a just God is behind that.”

“Remember, Bethany, we are in no position to judge God because our perspective is so limited. I have a question I want you to consider. It is a bit difficult, but you seem like a very intelligent girl. ‘If God is not just, where did our concept of justice come from?’”

“I don’t see your point.”

“If God is not just, by what standard does He fall short?”

Oh, good point. I had never thought it that way before. It seemed ridiculous to measure an all-powerful God by a human standard.

“Bethany, we have a concept of goodness and justice because God is the ultimate standard. We don’t know that something is *crooked* until we know what *straight* is. God cannot be anything but good because He is the ultimate standard by which we judge good and evil.”

“So are you saying that God is good but that is meaningless to us, because He will define goodness different from us?”

“No. While we in our limited perspective won’t always see goodness in something that God sees, our basic concept of goodness comes from God.

He has given us good gifts, like beauty, brilliant color, delicious flavors, and taste buds to enjoy them. He gave us relationships that fill us with joy. These are just a few of the many things that hint at God's goodness."

"You claim God is good, but then you continue to contradict that by saying that there is a hell. If there really is a hell, then God can't be all-good and all-powerful. Either God doesn't want his creatures to go there and they do, then He is not all-powerful, or He does want some to go there, in which case He is a devil to want such a horrid thing!" I crossed my arms and leaned back. There. Answer *that*, Paul.

"Bethany, we have already looked at the fact that for us to be able to love God and others we had to have the ability to freely choose. So if we are to be able to freely choose God, then we must also be able to reject Him. Hell is the necessary result of that rejection. You want everyone to go to heaven, but what if they don't want to go to heaven?"

Who wouldn't want heaven?

"Who wouldn't want to go to heaven? Who would be that stupid?!"

"Bethany, let me ask you a question, what makes heaven so heavenly?"

"It is a place full of good things, a place where there is always joy, and no sorrows."

"And why is it like that?"

"Because God finally got it right and didn't let evil in."

"Yes, heaven will be without evil, but that is because heaven will be so full of God's glory. If you have surrendered your will to God you will find God's presence to be blissful. That is the true joy of heaven. To enjoy the fact that God is your supreme ruler. The joy is in worshipping and surrendering to His control."

Paul thoughtfully stroked his chin. "Now on the other hand, if you wanted to be your own boss, if your greatest pleasure is self-worship, if your little world revolves around your wants and wishes, then to be forced into God's presence would be hell."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"You see this attitude in small ways down here. Parents tell their kids not to smoke or hang out with the wrong crowd. The parents know what is good for their child and try to help – like the parents of the woman who had her tooth pulled – but the child see them as narrow minded and oppressive. Because of the hardness in the child's heart their parent's love is seen as something they want no part of. Just like a sinner wants no part of God down here and certainly doesn't want to be with God in all of His

holy splendor, so God gives that person what they want.”

Why does Hell have to be so horrible?

“But why torture them in such a horrible place? Why does hell have to be so horrible? In Sunday school they said it was eternal fire. God could have at least put them in a place without fire!”

“The images in Scripture are simply metaphors warning us about how terrible a life apart from God is. What really makes hell so terrible is the fact that it is devoid of God. Because God is the source of all good, hell will be the total absence of good. Self-centeredness makes us feel lousy; to be given over completely to our selfish wants will be horrible. I also think that hell is locked from the inside, that even if God were to open the doors to let them into Heaven, the sinner still wouldn’t want to enter the holy presence of God. Oh, that person will want relief, but he still won’t want God. There is much we don’t know about hell. But we do know it exists and you need to carefully examine where *you* will go after you die.”

Paul’s mention of death brought a wave of grief for what I had done to my baby. And a renewed anger for what God had allowed Kevin to do to me. Turning away from Paul, I laid my head on my arms and sobbed. The whole conversation suddenly seemed so academic. I was hurting and wanted relief.

Why do I have to suffer again?

“Why, Paul? Why do I have to suffer like this?” As soon as I asked, I was afraid Paul would tell me I was responsible for everything that happened, but he didn’t. He was quiet for a minute.

“I don’t know, Bethany. I have wrestled with this issue of pain and sorrow many times. Just when it seems like it makes sense, something so painful, something that seems so undeserved, takes place and I question God. I think God knows that in our suffering, an explanation is not what we really want.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was staying with my sister. My little niece had whooping cough. She could hardly breathe. It was so hard to watch her suffer. One night I was walking her, trying to calm her down...” Paul’s voice choked, “and then she quit breathing. Just like that, she was gone. I was filled with anger toward God. ‘How could you do this to my sister?’ All my theories about our free will bringing suffering into the world and God’s greater purposes seemed worthless. It made no sense to me. The pain was so great that no

theory or explanation would have eased the pain. In that moment it hit me. Even if God's reason for taking the life of little Gracie would have been comprehensible to me, God's telling me would not have lessened to pain I felt that night. Let me ask you a question. You see a boy in the hospital. He is clutching his arm and moaning in pain. It is obvious that the arm is broken. Would explaining to that boy the cause of his broken his arm – say, because he fell off a horse – would that make the pain he was feeling any easier to bear?"

"No" I said, wiping a tear from my cheek.

Paul continued, his voice full of compassion, "God knows how painful the tragedies are that He brings into our life. He also knows that these things are only tragedies from our perspective. He knows the good that they will eventually bring us. So He brings these things into our life, despite the pain that they cause. He also knows that what we really need in the midst of our suffering and grief is not an explanation, but comfort."

I was strangely drawn to this man. He had something in him that I was hungry for. It certainly wasn't a romantic attraction. He had such a – a *presence* about him. He spoke with such authority. I felt secure in his company. At this point, I understood what he was saying. What I wanted more than anything was healing and comfort, not cold answers.

God - a comfort?

"How can I find this comfort?"

"When I had the awful task of waking my sister to tell her that her only daughter had died, she wailed and sobbed uncontrollably. Then she got on her knees and cried out to God for His presence. She later told me that during that time of grief, mingled with the heartache, were times of worship unlike anything she had ever experienced. She said that they were a taste of heaven - a taste that made her long for more. You see, Bethany, whether we are in the midst of grief or not, God offers us the only thing that will ever satisfy us, Himself."

"The way I feel about God right now, that doesn't seem like a fair exchange."

"How do you feel about God?"

"He seems overbearing, insensitive, harsh and rigid."

"Bethany, God took on human flesh so that we could really know Him. Ever since Satan was cast out of heaven, he takes his wrath towards God out on us. The enemy is constantly lying to us about God. He paints a false picture of God, one that repels us from our only source of life. Do you want to know what God is really like?"

I nodded.

“Then look to Jesus. In the face of Christ we see love and compassion. We see One who is very well acquainted with suffering and One who cares deeply about our pain and grief. God is not some distant, insensitive deity, but rather a fiercely loving God who is willing to do whatever it takes to rescue us from the hell of our own making. You see, God created us to be dependent on Him for life, meaning, fulfillment, joy, and peace. Apart from this communion with God, life will become hell. Apart from God, life is not worth living.”

“But I know several atheists who seem very happy with life. Most people claim to be plenty happy apart from God.”

“That is because God filled this world with gifts for us to enjoy. These gifts contain traces of God’s goodness. If people fill their lives with these gifts – food, money, family, sex - they will feel satisfied for a season. But the further we drift from God, the emptier we will feel. Only God Himself can truly satisfy. When we are in a right relationship with Him, when our souls are filled with His Holy Spirit, we will enjoy life like it was meant to be.”

“But I don’t know anybody who is really enjoying life like you say. Even the godliest people I know still have their struggles.”

“The problem is that as long as we are down here, with our sin-stained natures, we will never fully realize this sweet communion with God. Conversely, because this world is filled with God’s good gifts, no matter how far we stray from Him, we will never know the full despair of Hell this side of death. But my point remains. If we find God, we find life abundant. If we lose Him, we have absolutely nothing.”

Ouch! Guilt hurts!!

That was how I felt, like I had nothing. My virginity was stolen along with my innocence. I knew that if my parents found out what I had done, they would never forgive me. Part of me longed to turn back to God. To feel again what I felt as a little girl and the love I had for God. But the picture of a little girl in pigtails singing as she fell asleep was replaced by one of a hideous monster mutilating a baby – my baby. And I was the monster. The weight of guilt began to crush me. When I thought of what I had done I was filled with self-loathing, the guilt began to choke me, like twisted fingers around my neck. If I thought of myself like this, I could only imagine what God must think of me. I broke down again.

“I can’t believe I killed my baby! *That* hurts worse than being raped did!”

Paul sighed deeply, “Sin is a horribly ugly thing, it hurts, and it brings terrible harm. These acts of rebellion are devastating. Maybe now you can see why God hates sin so vehemently.”

“I see that now, but it’s too late for me. I’ve lost my virginity and murdered my baby.”

Paul’s gentle tone seemed incongruous with the harshness of his answer, “Child, sin brings a curse. You’re tasting part of that curse right now. The punishment for sin is death. I once thought it was blasphemous to follow a messiah who was cursed, but now I see that there was no other way for Jesus to save us but to be cursed.”

“What do you mean?”

“His justice demands that sin be punished. His justice can not be compromised. We sinned and the sins needed to be punished. God is too perfectly pure to overlook sin. So what could God do about it?

“If He’s so loving, why couldn’t He just forgive us?”

“Bethany, what if Kevin was arrested for raping you and was taken before a judge? How would you feel if the judge simply said, ‘I’m a loving judge, so I’m gonna let you off scot free’?”

My anger boiled at the thought, but I saw Paul’s point. My own sense of justice knew that Kevin had to be punished. But that same sense of justice knew that I deserved to be punished for what I had done.

I thought about it for a moment, picked up a rock and tossed it into the street, “I don’t know, Paul. Why doesn’t He just throw us away like a piece of garbage? That’s probably what He wants to do with me now.”

“Yes, that would make sense because it’s what we deserve. But we can’t comprehend the love of God. Bethany, this is where the story becomes totally amazing. God was completely happy... He’s God, after all, so He has everything He could ever need. We were pieces of garbage, nothing good in us, and even worse than that, we had made ourselves God’s enemies! Do you see the dilemma? Let us off the hook and His justice is compromised. But punish us with what we deserve – death – and God loses the ones He fiercely loves. But God’s love is so great that He devised a plan to save us. Do you know what that was?”

“Dying on the cross? I never really understood that.”

Why did Jesus have to die?

“Jesus was cursed on that cross, but not because of anything wrong that He had done. The Judge of the Universe, rather than compromise His justice or His love, solved the problem by becoming a man, while retaining His deity. So when He died on the cross, His justice and His love

were satisfied. Because He was man, He could pay the fine, since justice demanded that because it was a human who sinned, a human must pay the price. And because He was God, it wasn't a case of the Judge punishing an innocent bystander, but rather the Judge paying the fine Himself."

Paul paused and then looked me in the eye, his eyes blazing with intensity.

"We deserved to be cursed by God and die, but He took our place. He paid the price for all your sins and now offers you a pardon if you will just make him your Boss and put your trust in Him to be your Savior. Have you done that?"

I thought back to that night as a little girl... "When I was five, I prayed and asked Jesus into my heart. It felt so real. I don't know when I began to drift from God. Somewhere in my childhood I lost that faith. Boy, have I ever messed things up."

"Bethany, even if you hadn't committed these painful sins, you would still need a Savior. No person can be good enough to be right with God on their own. You can't earn God's favor by doing good deeds. As long as you are on this earth, you will continue to fail and make mistakes. Jesus paid for all of your sins."

"But you said I had to make Jesus my boss if I want to be forgiven. My disobedience is proof that Jesus isn't my boss, so does this mean I'm not forgiven?"

"You are not forgiven because you are obedient; you are forgiven because Jesus paid the penalty for every one of your sins. You are saved when you acknowledge that there is nothing good in you and that your only hope for reconciliation with God is placing your trust in what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus gave His life for you. If you want to be saved, you must give your life to Him. Let the *Author* of your life become your *Authority*. But if you continue to run your own life by your own rules and give no thought to the One who holds your every breath in his hands, you are proving that you want no part of God, and therefore no part of His salvation."

We sat there silently while I thought about what Paul had said. For the first time in my life, I questioned my salvation. I wanted to know if I was really saved. That if I had succeeded in taking my life, where would I have gone? I had really ignored God. But I did want to be saved.

I want to be free from this guilt!

"Paul, I do want to be saved. I do want this relationship with God

that you were talking about. But I have ignored Him. I feel so guilty. What should I do now?"

"As long as you are breathing, you can return to Jesus. If you confess your sins you will be forgiven, and there is no sin too great. Do you know what *confess* means?"

"To tell what I've done?"

Paul smiled. "That's part of it, but *confess* means to agree. When you confess your sins, you are agreeing that what you did was wrong and that you will purpose to not commit that sin anymore. Do agree that this abortion was wrong?"

"Yes," I said softly.

"Do you repent of this sin? Meaning, you'll never do it again?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then because of what Jesus did on the cross, you have been forgiven! Your slate has been wiped clean!"

"But I feel so guilty – "

"Bethany, look at me. Who is the one who condemns you? Jesus Christ is the judge and He is also your lawyer defending you! He is very successful one at that; He has never lost a case! So who will condemn you if you are in Christ Jesus? There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Picture a legal document indicting you of every sin you've ever committed. Now picture stamped over that list, in big bloody letters 'Paid in Full.' You have been given a clean slate. Jesus paid a tremendous price for you to walk in freedom, don't deny Him the fruit of His cross."

"But if I'm forgiven, why does it hurt so much?"

"I say again, sin is painful. This is why God hates sin, because it hurts the ones He loves. God is not trying to rob you of fun when He says to save all the joys of sex for marriage. He is trying to spare you this pain. It is that way with all of God's commands. The enemy will lie to you and tell you that God is keeping you from having fun. But it is God who created pleasure and He wants you to enjoy it abundantly. So when God tells you not to do something, He always has a good reason. He wants to spare you this grief. You may not see it at first, but you will eventually. Your sin has been forgiven, but the painful consequences will linger on. But Jesus loves you more than you can know. Nothing can separate you from that love. He will use even your wrong choices for good in your life."

Healing for your soul

Paul glanced up at the horizon. The sun was already setting, I noticed with surprise. Then he looked at me with a mixture of compassion

mingled with excitement. “Bethany, near the beginning of this conversation, you asked about why there is so much physical suffering in this world and why God hasn’t done something about it. Well, He has done something about it. You see, God sees the whole picture, the end from the beginning. He sees the visible and the invisible. He knows what is eternal and what is passing. We are concerned with the health of the body and the quality of life down here. But God is more concerned with our souls.”

“Wait. Are you saying that God doesn’t care about our health or whether we are enjoying life?”

“Of course He does. But He is more concerned about the health of our soul that is eternal than He is about this temporary body. All of us, no matter how healthy or energetic we are this moment, have bodies that are decaying. It is simply a matter of time before this body quits and we die. But our soul will continue to exist forever. God knew that before He could remedy the suffering that takes place in our physical bodies, He first had to remedy the sickness of the soul. And He has done just that. His death on the cross, wiped away our sins, and His resurrection from the dead has dealt death itself a mortal blow. God offers you healing for your soul right now.”

“So God doesn’t care about the physical realm – only the spiritual? That doesn’t seem like much use to me right now. The physical world is all I can see.”

“God created the physical realm. He created our bodies, so of course He cares. And once our souls are healed, He will fashion for us a new heaven and a new earth where we enjoy the physical realm like we never were able to down here. You said that the spiritual wasn’t much use to you. But it is often spiritual things that cause us the most grief.”

“How?”

“Your guilt for example, isn’t physical, but it’s real and it causes you physical grief. It is the same with bitterness, anger, lust, worry, and greed. All of these spiritual realities have physical consequences. God wants to take your entire being, the visible and the invisible parts and make them whole again. He wants to restore you to completeness. He takes the broken pieces of the world we shattered with our sin and rebellion and will, with these shards, create something breathtaking. This new world will have a richness to it and a beauty that will never fade, it will be incorruptible. But He won’t force you, Bethany. You still have the choice to walk away.”

“That thought scares me. I know my own sinfulness and how easily I am deceived. How do I know that I won’t fall away?”

“There is only one way, Bethany. Cling to Christ. He is the only one who can save you. You don’t have the strength in your self to remain faithful to

Him. But He is all-powerful and willing to save every one who cries out for help. He began a good work in you, Bethany, and will be faithful to complete it. Trust Him with your life. He holds your it in His hands. You cannot die one second before your time, and you can't live one minute beyond it either. You don't know how much time you have left, but let God use it to glorify Himself. Make God the center of your life. In the end, you will have all your questions answered; you will have every tear wiped away. All your suffering will be over and you will find the complete joy and fulfillment you long for down here."

"Are you saying that if I seek God more diligently, everything will suddenly become easy?"

"Hardly! Life down here still won't be easy. But God sees how rewarding the finished project will be so He will continue the refining work. Even though the process seems cruel and harsh, trust Him and remember what He has in store for you. Heaven is more wonderful than anything you have ever experienced in this life. It is a place that will make the suffering of this life seem like nothing more than a mild inconvenience."

After Paul left, I got down on my knees by the bench and cried out silently, *"God, I need you. I have made a horrible mess of this life you gave me. I feel broken. I feel so unworthy to come into your presence, but I have nowhere else to go. I am at the end of my self. Please forgive me for the terrible sins that I have done. I am in desperate need of your forgiveness. Please, please forgive me. Wash me, Lord. Restore my soul. Take what is left of me and use it for your purposes. So many times I've wanted to end my life... Well, in this moment, I do want to end my self-centered lifestyle. I surrender the rest of my life to your control. Save me Jesus. I am yours. Do with me as you wish."*

At that moment, I felt flooded with joy and peace. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I knelt there, overwhelmed by the fact that God loved me so intensely. Right then, I knew what Paul meant when he said that God was more valuable than anything this world has to offer. It didn't make any sense an hour ago, but it sure did now. People walking by saw only a girl bawling her eyes out in the city park. But inside – where it really counted – I felt like gentle hands had lifted me out of Garbage Alley and given me a solid, clean place to stand. God's sweet presence truly made me feel like I had everything. Praise be to Him. I see in a little clearer way now that He does all things well.

Appendix 1

Questioning God: My personal Struggle

Charles was a man passionate for God. In his late teens, he was rescued from a life of rubbish and filled with the Holy Spirit. His conversion dramatically changed the course of his life. Eager to put his new found faith into practice, Charles poured his life into evangelism. In his early twenties, he became close friends with Billy Graham. They hit the spotlight almost simultaneously. Their sincerity and fervent, yet thoughtful invitations to Christ were an effective combination. Charles' success continued into his thirties. After attending Princeton Seminary, he carried on his evangelistic mission. A sought-after speaker and an able debater with a very compelling personality, he persuaded many to go to the mission field or to attend seminary. He also hosted a weekly show on CBS and was a rising star in the Presbyterian denomination. If you were looking for a hero of the faith, Charles Templeton was your man. Despite his outward fervor and success, Charles was haunted by intellectual doubts about his faith. He simply could not reconcile what the Bible had to say with his own intuition and the "facts" of history and science. Charles judged the God of the Old Testament as a "petty, jealous, inept, vindictive, unjust, tribal god." This god repented from making men and then killed them with a flood, hardened the heart of Pharaoh so he could murder all of Egypt's firstborns, and ruthlessly commanded the slaughter of entire people groups. To Charles, this god simply was not compatible with the God of love he had been told about. Regarding the story of Job, Charles asked "How would *you* feel if God killed all your children just to make a point in an argument?" He denounced the story and the god as "immoral."

I read about Charles Templeton's spiritual derailment in his book, *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. People like Templeton pique my curiosity. Like a moth drawn to a candle flame, I am attracted to atheist websites. I want to understand how "the other side" thinks so that I know how to reach them. I also want to better equip young people to respond to the objections of agnostics like Templeton. But as I read the writings of former Christians and "ex-apologists," my faith is shaken and my heart is saddened. The website, www.ex-christians.net, has the testimonials of hundreds who have abandoned the faith.

In my earlier years, I was naïvely optimistic about the facts of Christianity. The evidence was so clear, I reasoned, and the arguments so compelling, that anyone who walked away from the faith must have been simply uninformed. If only these people would read *The Case for*

Christ or, I Don't have Enough Faith to be an Atheist, then they would be able to see! But I was deeply disturbed to hear about former apologists walking away. "What ominous information have these people discovered that caused them to lose faith?" I feared that I too would discover some dark secret revelation and my own de-conversion process would some day be chronicled online. I had to dig deeper. As I read the arguments and reasons given by those "un-born-again," I realized I wasn't as equipped to answer their objections as I had thought. Here I encountered the "bitter root of unbelief that defiles many." (Heb 12:15 NLT)

What is this compelling case against Christianity? It isn't well-documented historical details, or airtight logical proofs against God and Jesus Christ. Rather, it is bitter emotional attacks on the character of God. These writers question the idea of a God who sends billions to eternal conscious torment in hell: *Hitler burned Anne Frank for an hour and we call him a despot, but God will burn her for all eternity!* I also found several variations on the basic problem of evil: *A God who stands by while cancer destroys a little girl and while another girl is raped and beaten can't be good. If any father just stood there and let his son be run over by a truck, we all would call him cruel and immoral, yet God sits on His hands and lets tragedy after tragedy ruin those He is supposed to love!* A God who once condoned slavery and commanded genocide, a God who leaves the fate of the billions of un-evangelized in the hands of a bumbling, self-centered church... To the sensitive "de-converted," such a God is blatantly immoral and cannot exist.

Reading these charges against the God that I thought I knew battered my faith. In some ways I felt betrayed and disappointed. As a bitter root of unbelief sprang up, I began to resent God. I fired my own accusations against Him, "Is picking up sticks on the Sabbath really worthy of *death*?

Why do You create people against their will, put them where they won't even have a chance to hear about Jesus, withhold Your grace from them so they cannot choose You, and then punish them for all eternity? Why don't You just show Yourself to those who doubt? Your appearing didn't violate Paul's free will!" The residue of these bitter accusations formed a dark cloud of doubt over my soul. The doctrine of hell especially began to gnaw at me. After years of studying apologetics, I was shocked to find myself doubting His existence.

Stepping back from the emotional weight of these arguments, I decided to evaluate them critically. I soon realized that none of them could refute the overwhelming scientific and philosophical proof that there is a God. Just because a person doesn't like God is certainly no proof that He doesn't exist! Among these atheist writings, I saw no historical *disproof* of Jesus'

miracles or resurrection – only unfounded dismissals.

I felt a wave of relief when I realized that, as an apologist, I didn't have to answer *why* God does what He does (a nearly impossible task) but rather show that these arguments do not refute the strong case for God's existence. In fact, if there is a God, you would expect Him to do things beyond our comprehension.

But what about the charge that God is immoral or cruel? The question is begging to be asked, "By what standard can God be judged immoral?" The standard of man? Hardly! The irony is that if there is no God, there is no standard of morality. If there is no standard of good, then there is no rule for the way things *should* be. Morality would be nothing more than a changing description of what *is*. Slavery, genocide, and rape, in the atheist's naturalistic worldview, can't be called *immoral* because there is nothing outside of nature by which we can measure *moral* or *immoral*. So the atheist has no logical footing to call God or Christianity "immoral."

As for the doctrine of hell and other charges that call God's character into question, I recognized a critical fact. *I am in no position to judge God*. What percent of all knowledge do I possess? Far less than even one percent! I could never judge the plot of a book or the mind of the author from one phrase in that book. I could never judge the master plan of a blueprint if all I saw was a fragment that contained intersecting lines. Yet, here I was – a mere man – judging the plan of God from my extremely limited vantage point! Something that appears to be an act of cruelty can turn out to be an act of kindness when more information is revealed. A man plunging steel into another man has the appearance of cruelty – until you discover that the steel is a scalpel and the man is a surgeon removing a cancerous tumor.

Who am I to judge God? I don't know who will be saved or who won't be. I don't know all the factors that prompted to God ask His people to wipe out the Canaanites. I don't know what happens to someone after they die, *so how can I accuse God of being unjust?* I have insufficient data to make an accurate judgment! When Job began to chew the root of unbelief, he spit out the same questions that continue to be hurled at God today. God answered by putting Job in the hot seat. A few simple questions and Job was repenting in the dust, very much aware of little he really knew.

I don't know the whole plan of God, but I do know His heart. Jesus Christ is the clearest revelation of God's character. In Jesus, we find someone who longs to free the captives and to heal the broken-hearted, Someone who forgave His enemies while on the cross, and laid down His

life for His sheep. Revealed in Christ, we see that God is pure goodness – there is nothing evil in Him. This should bring us comfort, but it should also alarm us. The wrath and jealousy of God flow from this uncorrupted goodness. Because we are corrupt, we don't get upset with sin and can't comprehend the wrath of God. We turn a blind eye to the destructive power of sin... until it affects us with its deadly sting. It is easy to wink at lust until your wife is raped. Then sin's destructive power is suddenly abhorred. But the omniscient God knows in detail the destructive power of Evil. His love fuels His wrath.

We also have an enemy who complicates the problem. For millennia, Satan has been using his power of deception to cast doubt on the goodness of God. He causes men to sin, tempts them to destroy themselves, sabotages the paradise that God has given us, and then blames God! People, God is not the problem. He is the *solution* to our problem. If you walk away from God, you reject the only source of goodness. Yes, in this tiny piece of the picture, we see decay and misery and injustice, but we also see an abundance of goodness. If you are going to blame God for the evil in the world, at least thank Him for His goodness while you're at it. Think about your own life. He has showered you with pleasure and joy and the hope of heaven *where every wrong will be made right*.

I have chosen to trust the character of God. He is the source of life and goodness. Apart from Him, words like *goodness*, *justice*, and *morality* are only illusions. Sure, there are some really tough questions when it comes to God's plan and all the evil in the world. But how can I stop believing in the God who gave us the good gifts in life and instead put my faith in man, who is responsible for all this misery and pain? If I walk away from God, my problems only increase.

In Christ, I don't find all the answers to my intellectual problems, but I do find soothing comfort in the midst of my struggles. Only in Christ do I find hope and assurance. I cannot grasp God's purposes for why He does what He does. But I know with confidence that the One who defines goodness is good, and that the One who is the standard of justice will do justly.

Charles Templeton remained agnostic till he died of Alzheimer's disease in 2001. His life is a sober warning of the danger of putting our faith in limited and misinformed reason, rather than in the God of the universe, the One revealed in Jesus Christ. Don't waste your life by making the same costly mistake.

A final word:

If you are someone who has walked away from God because of the objections mentioned above, you may be wondering if I have chosen the route of intellectual suicide in order to keep my faith. Am I letting my emotions override my mind? Absolutely not! Rather than be blinded by emotional rhetoric, I choose to think critically. When one encounters difficulties in his faith or worldview, it is easy to give up and walk away. But what will take its place? Yes, as a Christian, I struggle to reconcile the loving God revealed in Christ with the evil and suffering in the world, but if were to walk away from God; my intellectual problems would only increase. Can I really believe that the complex human body is the result of nothingness exploding? If matter is all that is, then thinking is nothing more than a chemical reaction – and the idea of truth disappears. For if someone disagrees with me, I can't call his ideas *untrue*. His brain is merely having a different interaction of atoms. For an atheist, the intellectual problem of evil dissolves but the actual problem of pain and suffering still remains, only now there is no hope of a solution.

Admitting that I only see a miniscule fraction of the big picture is not turning my brain off. Intellectual honesty means intellectual humility. Far from intellectual suicide, I choose to remain faithful to the One who makes thought valid and reason possible.

I don't see how it is foolish to take the word of the Man who conquered death and who has had more impact on this world than any dynasty or dictator. What would be foolish, is to take the word of mortal man over the word of God in the flesh. When you begin to doubt the character of God or if God is even there, meditate on how little you know, then look to Jesus. Ask yourself: Who are you going to believe? Another human who also only sees a tiny piece of the picture? Or someone who confirmed His claim to be God by rising from the dead? Who else has the words of life?

“Have you ever been raped? Have you ever had your dignity and self-worth stripped from you like a cheap rehearsal costume? Have you ever soaked in a tub trying desperately to scrub away a filthy feeling that you simply can’t get rid of? Have you ever woken up in a cold sweat because you just re-experienced the horrible ordeal - only this time the horror and feelings of helplessness were intensified? Rape - the gift that keeps on giving. Have you ever seen your future flushed down the drain along with your vomit while a little blue + added up to your doom? Have you ever laid perfectly still while you let a man kill your baby? I have.”

Imagine that the apostle Paul was transported into the 21st century. What might he say to a girl that had been raped, and how would he answer her questions about the problem of the suffering and evil that is in this world?



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Since graduation Jesse has extensively studied church history and apologetics. He loves speaking to youth groups and camps about his passion to discover God’s truth and make it known.