

"There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy. . . ." Perhaps even more to the point is a line in J. R. R. Tolkien's novel *The Lord of the Rings*: "Always after a defeat and respite, [evil] takes another shape and grows again."<sup>150</sup> No matter what we do, human suffering and evil can't be eradicated. Even when you put all your force into stopping it—it just takes another form and grows in some new way. If we are going to face it, it takes more than earthly resources.

Naaman eventually turned not to wealth, technique, or expert power but to God himself. Instead of proudly trusting in his own or others' expertise, he was called to the soul work of humility. As a result, he not only got a cure for his body but a new relationship with God and a soul infused with grace and joy. Suffering led to his salvation. This does not even begin to answer the question "Why does God allow so much evil and suffering in the world to persist?" Nor does such an example justify suffering. And yet one of the main teachings of the Bible is that almost no one grows into greatness or finds God without suffering, without pain coming into our lives like smelling salts to wake us up to all sorts of facts about life and our own hearts to which we were blind.

For reasons past our finding out, even Christ did not bring salvation and grace to us apart from infinite suffering on the cross. As he loved us enough to face the suffering with patience and courage, so we must learn to trust in him enough to do the same. And as his weakness and suffering, thus faced, led to resurrection power, so can ours.

## Life Story: Scars of Beauty and Depth

by Kendra

Silence. Stillness. "I'm sorry . . . but I can't seem to find a heartbeat," said the ultrasound technician. More silence. All of a sudden, everything in that dark room seemed darker and colder. Just moments before, my husband, John, and I were chatting with the technician. We had been waiting twenty long weeks to learn the

## The Challenge to the Secular

gender of our child . . . hoping it would be the encouragement that we needed to carry us through the second half of this difficult season. But, in an instant, the room had grown cold and lifeless. As the technician stepped out to call the doctor, the darkness of the room echoed the darkness that began to invade our hearts. *It can't be true. . . . The doctor will come in, and he will find the heartbeat, and everything will be all right, our hearts desperately willed. On a bleak February day and in one simple sentence, death had altered our hopes and dreams.*

Not often is the news of a desired pregnancy met with a foreboding anxiety—joy, yes—but mixed with a fear of what is probably inevitable. For our family, the joyous news of a new life—a second baby on the way—brought with it the weight of holding both fear and hope all at once. This is our story of suffering and loss, mystery and peace, joy and sorrow.

Our first child, a baby girl, was born two years earlier. She came into the world beautiful and healthy, but my pregnancy with her was something quite opposite. A few weeks into the pregnancy, I was diagnosed with a rare condition of pregnancy called hyperemesis gravidarum (HG). Affecting about two percent of all pregnancies, HG is marked by rapid weight loss, malnutrition, and dehydration due to unrelenting nausea and vomiting. I lost twenty-five pounds in the first trimester, had repeated IVs to treat dehydration, intravenous medications, and depended on a powerful anti-nausea drug for the duration of the pregnancy. All the symptoms disappeared the day she was born and as my health continued to improve, we settled into the wonderful chaos of life with a newborn. In the end, it seemed a small price to pay for the abundant joy a longed-for child brings. Although the doctors told us it was very possible that I would experience HG again, our desire to have another child was stronger than our memory. Foolishly believing that experience had taught us something about managing the condition, we moved forward with trying to conceive.

Only one week after celebrating our good news—a positive pregnancy test—the condition returned. Unfortunately, this time,

it promised to be an even more severe case. In fact, only .5 percent of all pregnancies are diagnosed with this severe a case of HG. My doctor immediately began an aggressive treatment plan, including hospitalization. A peripherally inserted central catheter (PICC) was inserted near my heart to administer the medications and nutrients my body needed to support the life growing inside me. I didn't eat for four months and I was weak and nauseated every waking moment, vomiting multiple times a day. A host of family and friends gave us round-the-clock care, took care of our daughter, prepared meals, sat with me, prayed for us. They were the hands and feet of Christ, and we have often wondered how we would have survived this time without our community. Their love literally nourished and sustained us.

Looking back, we see that the early weeks of this pregnancy were when our grieving really began. We knew that this would have to be our last pregnancy. Due to the "chemical incompatibility" that my body has with pregnancy, we could not intentionally put our family—or me—through the suffering again. We were just trying our very best to hold on and make it through each day, understanding it might be like this for the entire nine months.

We had made it to the halfway point of the pregnancy on that gray February day. Our hopes were lifted as we celebrated this significant milestone. However, instead of it being a celebration, we have come to view that day as the day our innocence was lost. *Babies are not supposed to die!* I often found myself thinking and, literally, screaming out. This tragic ending to months of physical suffering seemed too cruel. Yet we had to face an induced labor to deliver our second child, a son, whom we would never know in this life.

John Wilson was born peacefully the next morning. As we held his lifeless body, a torrent of emotion overcame us. The news of new life has a mysterious power that leads us into hope and we find ourselves dreaming of the future we will know with our child as they grow. We wept for the loss of this dream. As we commended him to God's keeping, I felt God's arms tenderly encircling us,

joining us in our sorrow. Our dear friends and our church community planned a beautiful memorial service, and we began the process of letting go of the vision we had for our family.

The days following were profoundly dark and empty. I couldn't sleep—or even breathe, it seemed. I felt so very tender and limp. I'm a psychotherapist. . . . I know the stages of grief intellectually. But now here I was experiencing them firsthand. . . . Words to describe the feelings don't seem adequate. I believed that God could handle my emotions and I wasn't afraid to express them to him. . . . often. There were moments of anger, but more often I felt anguish, despair, jealousy, bitterness, and profound sorrow. But somehow, in the midst of the range of emotions I felt daily, a strong and powerful peace found its way into my heart and brought comfort. I felt God's presence deeply, and slowly began the process of learning that, although He allows tragedies to befall us, he will not abandon us, nor deny us an intimate and life-giving relationship with Him. My relationship with him was growing in new ways and becoming more real. He was drawing me closer to him through each painful question and doubt. He was truly IN this dark place with us. The words of the psalmist, "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Ps 34:18 NIV), carried me through the days and months of healing. God was truly our refuge.

"Blessed are those who mourn" are not just words on a page anymore. We have experienced these words as the living and breathing Word of God. We have lived them and breathed them. Like most of you reading this, we feel sure we would NEVER have chosen to endure the fiery furnace of having a stillborn baby. However, we have been able to recognize the rich gifts we would never have received had we not been through this fire. God longs for us to experience a rich relationship with him and with one another. Each time I truly connect with another in their pain, I am thankful for the gift of my pain. It reminds me of our vulnerability and dependence. It is our nature to be strong and independent. Yet, there is no room for the ego in suffering. This stripping of my ego opens

the doors to authentic relating to others. As I am drawn closer to others, I am experiencing God in the here and now.

In the days after losing our son, a friend told me that we would always “walk with a limp” from then on. Although our scars are not physical, the pain has left a mark on our hearts. But I like to think of these scars as unique marks of beauty and depth. Although our story does not end here—God brought four lives together in a miraculous and wondrous way to birth beauty from the ashes. We now enjoy the vibrancy of a life with two precious children, our nine-year-old daughter and a son, our miracle child, who is turning five this very week. We look forward to the day when we will be reunited with our first son in heaven, but until then, it is gratitude we feel for experiencing God in a very real and dynamic way, and we rejoice in the life he has given us.

## FOUR

### The Problem of Evil

*“Since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence?”*

*Tarrow nodded. “Yes. But your victories will never be lasting that's all.”*

*Rieux's face darkened. “Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle.”*

*“No reason, I agree. Only, I now can picture what this plague must mean for you.”*

*“Yes. A never ending defeat.”*

—Albert Camus, *The Plague*<sup>51</sup>

### The Problem of Evil in Context

The “problem of evil” is well known. If you believe in a God who is all-powerful and sovereign over the world and at the same time is also perfectly good and just, then the existence of evil and suffering poses a problem. The classic statement of it was given by David Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. “Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able *and* willing? Whence then is evil?”<sup>52</sup> This has also been called the argument against God from evil, or just the argument from evil.