

Jonathan Edwards once said: "God is glorified not only by His glory's being seen, but by its being rejoiced in."<sup>273</sup> It is not enough to say, "I guess he is God, so I have got to knuckle under." You have to see his beauty. Glorifying God does not mean obeying him only because you have to. It means to obey him because you *want* to—because you are attracted to him, because you delight in him. This is what C. S. Lewis grasped and explained so well in his chapter on praising. We need beauty. We go to lengths to put ourselves in front of beautiful places, or surround ourselves with beautiful music, or hang out with beautiful people. But these will leave us empty if we don't learn to see all of these things as mere tributaries and God himself as the fountain, the headwaters of it all.

So to see God as glorious is not only to admit his incomprehensibility and beyondness, and make him the thing that matters the most, but it is also to work your heart so it finds him the most pleasurable and beautiful thing you know.

### No Graven Image

How, then, can we glorify God in our suffering—and how can suffering help us glorify God?

In 1966, Elisabeth Elliot, who had been a missionary to the Aucas (Waorani) of the South American Amazon rain forest, wrote a novel entitled *No Graven Image*.<sup>274</sup> It is the story of a young unmarried woman named Margaret Sparhawk who had dedicated her life to translating the Bible for remote tribes whose languages had not yet been written down. She took up Bible translation work among the Quechua people of the mountains of Ecuador. Key to her work was the discovery of a man, Pedro, who knew the unwritten dialect that Margaret needed to learn in order to translate the Bible into that particular language. He began to teach her the language, and her painstaking work of systematically recording and documenting it moved forward.

One day, Margaret is feeling grateful as she travels to see Pedro. She remembers the Bible verse "Wait for the Lord; be strong; and let your

heart take courage." And she prays to God, "I've been waiting, Lord. Waiting and waiting. . . . You know I waited a long time to be a missionary to mountain Indians. . . . You seemed to say translation and medical work. So you gave me Pedro. . . . Just being here today is an answer to prayer."<sup>275</sup> She thinks of all it has taken to bring her to where she is that day—the support of friends, financial help from many people in the United States, years of training, years of building relationships, and of course the provision of the one man who knew both Spanish and the dialect she needed. God now seemed to be bringing things together. Margaret imagines the possibility of bringing the Bible to a million people in remote regions of the mountains.

Finally, she arrives at Pedro's home and discovers that he has an infected, painful wound in his leg. As part of her duties Margaret provided ordinary medical care and therefore she had with her a syringe and some penicillin. Pedro asks her for an injection and she decides to give it. But within seconds, Pedro begins to experience anaphylaxis, a severe, whole-body allergic reaction to the penicillin. The entire family gathers around in tears as he lies convulsing.

"Can't you see he's dying?" his wife, Rosa, cries to her. "You killed him."

Margaret is astonished at what is happening and prays, "Lord God, Father of us all, if You've never heard me pray before, hear me now. . . . Save him, Lord, save him."<sup>276</sup> But Pedro worsens and begins to retch, bent over in tormented spasms. Rosa puts both of her hands on the top of her head and begins the death wail of women in her community. But Margaret continues to pray in her mind, "O Lord, what will become of Rosa? . . . What will become of *your work*? You started all this, Lord. It wasn't I. You led me here. You answered prayers and gave me Pedro—he is the only one. . . . O Lord, remember that. There is no one else."<sup>277</sup>

But Pedro dies, and indeed it means her work is over. All the years of labor are wiped away: "As for the translation of the Bible, of course, I cannot go ahead without an informant. God knew about that when Pedro died. I do not write prayer letters [to my supporters] anymore, for I have nothing to say about my work. It seemed, on the night of Pedro's death, as though *Finis* were written below all I had done."<sup>278</sup>

The book ends with a profoundly confused young missionary. There is no last-minute reversal, and no "silver lining." She stands at Pedro's grave and thinks, "And God? What of Him? 'I am with thee,' He had said. With me in *this*? He had allowed Pedro to die, or—and I could not then nor can I today deny the possibility—He had perhaps caused me to destroy him. And does He now, I asked myself there at the graveside, ask me to worship Him?"<sup>279</sup>

The answer was yes—as my wife, Kathy, and I learned a few years later when we listened to Elisabeth Elliot's lectures in the theological seminary where we were graduate students. She pointed to the last page, where, she said, was the key line.

"God, if He was merely my accomplice, had betrayed me. If, on the other hand, He was God, He had freed me."<sup>280</sup>

She went on to explain to us that the graven image, the idol of the title, was a God who always acted the way we thought he should. Or more to the point—he was a God who supported our plans, how *we* thought the world and history should go. That is a God of our own creation, a counterfeit god. Such a god is really just a projection of our own wisdom, of our own self. In that way of operating, God is our "accomplice," someone to whom we relate as long as he is doing what we want. If he does something else, we want to "fire" him, or "unfriend him," as we would any personal assistant or acquaintance who was in-subordinate or incompetent.

But at the very end, Margaret realizes that the demise of her plans had shattered her false god, and now she was free for the first time to worship the True One. When serving the god-of-my-plans, she had been extraordinarily anxious. She had never been sure that God was going to come through for her and "get it right." She was always trying to figure out how to bring God to do what she had planned. But she had not really been treating him *as* God—as the all-wise, all-good, all-powerful one. Now she had been liberated to put her hope not in her agendas and plans but in God himself. If she could make *this* change, it would bring a rest and security she had never had. In short, suffering had pointed her

to a glorious God, and it had taught her to treat him as such. And she did so, it freed her from the desperate, doomed, exhausting effort to seek to control all the circumstances of her life and of those she loved.

Elliot's novel was extraordinarily bold, and it offended traditional religious as well as secular sensibilities. In spite of the fact that we expect young children to trust adults that they cannot understand, most modern people are horrified to be asked to trust a God they cannot understand. But the novel was just as outrageous to many in the evangelical Christian world. Many readers wrote Elliot and protested vehemently that God would *never* allow such a thing to happen to a woman who had so prayerfully dedicated her life to his cause. A leading evangelical pastor told her with much satisfaction that he had personally kept the book off the Christian "book of the year" list.

However, Elisabeth told us, her own actual life experience had run almost exactly parallel to this novel—and actually had been even worse. In *These Strange Ashes*, an account of her first years as a Bible-translating missionary in South America, she tells of a man named Macario, who was "God's answer to prayer . . . the key to the whole of the language work; he was (God knew) the only man on earth who spoke both Spanish and Colorado with equal ease." But he was senselessly murdered, shot to death. Their translation work "now came to a sudden full stop."<sup>281</sup>

Later a flood and then a theft robbed the translators of their card files—in which they had invested years of work.<sup>282</sup> And after all this, Elisabeth married Jim Elliot, one of five young missionaries who were trying to reach out to the then isolated and hostile Waorani people of the Amazonian rain forest. One evening they sang a hymn, "We rest on thee, our Shield and our Defender," and the next day they traveled into the forest, met a party of Waoranis, and were all speared to death, leaving behind many widows and orphans.<sup>283</sup> All the Christians who were indignantly telling the author that God would never allow such things to happen to faithful believers simply didn't know what they were talking about.

In her 1996 epilogue to *Through Gates of Splendor*, the account of the missionaries' deaths, she challenged both the secular and traditional

Very profound, contrast that's often possibility have with the modern world.