

Working Title:

Does God Always Get What God Wants?

An Exploration of God's Activity and Christian Hope in the Face of Suffering

By Tim Reddish



Anne, Tim's wife, died of breast cancer at the age of 49 having battled with the disease for over 6 years. Her suffering understandably impacted greatly on their lives and that of their church, raising challenging questions, such as:

- If "God is in control" does this mean God is to blame for suffering?
- Why did God not heal Anne?
- Does prayer make any difference?
- Is Anne's death what God *wanted* to happen?
- What is God *doing* about evil?

The crucible of suffering causes us to examine *the kind of God we believe in* and *the nature of the world God made*. This book explores the problem of evil and so responds constructively to the complex issues that such questions pose, so providing powerful reasons for hope.

About the Author:

Tim Reddish (PhD, Physics; MDiv, Knox College, Toronto) met and married Anne when they were university students in Manchester, England and Philip is their son. They moved to Canada in 2002 where, until 2011, Tim was a Professor of Physics at the University of Windsor (Ontario) when he resigned to study theology. Upon graduation in 2015, Tim was awarded Knox College's Gold medal for academic excellence. He spent his formative years in Nigeria, where his parents were missionaries. Tim has a diverse church background—Pentecostal, Baptist, Anglican, and Presbyterian. Tim is now remarried and enjoys being a stepdad to four children.



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Introduction

The question “How can a loving and powerful God allow suffering?” is one of the most formidable obstacles to faith in God that the postmodern generation faces. Many are unwilling to open themselves to any other dimensions of Christianity unless Christians are prepared to engage in serious and honest discussion on this issue. And there are Christians who have abandoned their faith because personal tragedy has destroyed their understanding of God and his ways in the world. The issue of linking the God of love with the existence of suffering and evil is one that will not go away. Everyone has a view on this topic—professionals, such as philosophers, theologians, chaplains, pastors, and medical practitioners, as well as the everyday person. These views are tested in the fire of suffering, and some of them evaporate in smoke leaving us in a state of crisis and confusion. Yet we need a response to this question—even if it is only a tentative one—if we are to have some kind of meaning to our existence and so live grounded with a strong sense of hope and purpose.

Whatever worldview we have provides us with some sort of answer to the perennial issue of suffering. A worldview of merit leaves us with something of substance—not just ash—in the bottom of the crucible, once the fire has cooled. If that residue is precious we can treasure it and build upon it for the future. After all, being left with stony bitterness is counterproductive to wholesome living. Too often our experiences leave us with more questions than answers and we are left in a state of meaninglessness. What are we to do?

During the raging fires of suffering is *not* the time to explore such questions. But once the initial pain subsides, it is wise to reflect and examine the remains in the crucible. An intense experience of personal suffering can help us re-write our *embedded* theology—our *assumed* understanding of God and his activities in the world. Indeed, theology is informed by Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience; all four aspects are important. Although the relative proportions vary in different Christian traditions, Scripture is foundational. At the end of the day, however, a theology that is not grounded in reality, our *experience*, will not be taken seriously—either by ourselves or by others.

This book arises from experience. In January 2011, my first wife, Anne, died of breast cancer at the age of 49. We had been married for 28 years. Any wisdom within these pages has emerged

because of Anne’s story and our six-year journey down the road of living with cancer. These insights were therefore gained while travelling along an uncomfortable and unwanted path, and from questions raised by friends and fellow Christians.

Our experience of suffering challenges the *kind of God* we believe in, along with questions about the *kind of world* God has created—and the *relationship between the two*. All three are addressed in this book. For many, the first is a “no brainer,” God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, God of perfect love. Many regard God as the one who is in ultimate control of everything. We imagine God as having a supreme voice-activated console that runs the world; God speaks and it comes to pass. After all, in Genesis 1 we read that the world was created and ordered by God’s almighty command! If that is the case, and if God is good as Christians maintain, then *why* is there evil in the world? And so *much* of it? If we are honest, suffering causes us to doubt or question that traditional understanding of the divine. If God is omnipotent, why doesn’t he do *more* to alleviate pain and suffering in the world? Or, more personally, why didn’t God heal Anne? And did our prayers make *any* difference? How *do* we make sense of these issues? *Can* we make sense of them? *Should* we even *try*? These kinds of questions are explored in this book. It’s OK to ask hard questions. It’s OK to express our doubts, and even our anger. Remember, there is no such thing as faith without doubt—they are two sides of the same coin.¹

In comfortable Western society, we have a tendency to think we are “in control” of our lives and our futures. We plan, we set goals, we have expectations—and we work hard to achieve our objectives. But then “life happens”: accidents, serious illness, divorce, job loss, cancer, and—much worse—terrible tragedies like the Sandy Hook Elementary School mass shooting in Connecticut, and our dreams and aspirations are shattered. It is then that we suddenly realize we are not as “in control” of our lives as we imagine ourselves to be. One of the sobering things about pain and suffering is that we are confronted with our own mortality, and we are forced to recognize how small we are in the grand scheme of things. For many, such times make us think more about God.

The Christian tradition emphasizes that God has revealed himself to humankind—ultimately in the person of Jesus, the *very* image of God (Col 1:15). That’s pretty *amazing* if you think about it; but it is so easy to distort that picture. For example, some Christians subconsciously view the relationship between Jesus and God the Father to be a bit like a “good cop, bad cop” duo. The “human” *Jesus* they can relate to, but *God* is perceived to be stern and unapproachable—yet the one with real power. We pray to Jesus as if he is the one who can *persuade* God the Father come to our aid and to be on *our* side. There is doubt as to whether Jesus and God the Father are truly team players having the same end in mind. While we may know in our *heads* this misrepresentation is not the case, our *heart’s* response reveals what we truly believe. In the middle a crisis, we resort to our heart’s perception of God, i.e., our unreflective, embedded theology. And that view of the divine may collapse under the burden of suffering. What *kind of God* we believe in is vitally important. God’s *character* matters.

While Christian creeds affirm a trinitarian God, we too often fragment the Father, Son, and Spirit—as mentioned above. For some the Spirit is not personal, but merely an ethereal positive sentiment or a life-force, and Jesus was simply an inspirational moral teacher. What remains then is

¹ I often say, “The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty;” we walk by faith *not* by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

“God,” the Creator—or a Higher Being. But such a deity, though powerful, can all too easily be perceived to be disinterested and distant. This kind of God is not very inspiring, especially in a crisis.

There are other Christians who faithfully attend church each week and give 10% of their income to “God’s work.” That is a mark of their strong commitment. Yet for some of these Christians this loyalty is really an expression of their subliminal personal covenant with God. They go to church and give their money and in return they expect an all-powerful God to *protect* them, and their loved ones. This seems to function well until “life happens.” Then they wonder what went wrong on God’s side of this divine protection racket. Like the righteous Job, God has “let them down” and there is disappointment with God.² Evidently, it is not just the *kind* of God we believe in that is important, but God’s *activity* within his creation.

This book is divided into three parts. Like a healthy sandwich, the first and last chapters are the bread made with the gritty whole grains of real life. The other chapters are the meat, together with a mixture of other fresh ingredients and spiced with condiments. There is a intermingling of theology, church history, philosophy, science, and biblical studies; an accessible combination providing a synthesis to chew on. Since life is complex, we must expect diverse ingredients to contribute to this exploration of God’s activity in a suffering world. I wholeheartedly believe this sandwich is tasty and satisfying. It contains a good news message that gives hope and leads to wholeness as we discover what God has done—and is doing—about evil.

The first short chapter introduces you to Anne’s story. It is a reminder—not that we ever really need one—that pain and suffering are *real*. Dreams are shattered; families, friendships, and our social circles are impacted indelibly. Those whose lives have been touched by cancer will vividly recall that this involves waiting for medical tests . . . and their results, followed by surgery, then chemo- and radio-therapy . . . and more tests. All this tests our patience and perseverance. And our faith too.

Living with cancer for six years caused me to read, reflect, and process. What I believed at the time of Anne’s death is summarized at the end of chapter 1 and provides the launching pad for the meaty part of the sandwich. Briefly, I came to the conclusion that pain and suffering are *outside* of God’s desires for our lives, rather than something God specifically *planned* or *sent* as a test of faith or as a means to refine character. Consequently, God was *not* to blame for Anne’s cancer. This seems so obvious, with hindsight, yet I don’t recall ever hearing a sermon on this kind of thinking. So I did more reading and discovered many theologians agreed; *God does not always get what God wants*. Some might find this conclusion surprising, shocking, even radically disturbing, because they believe God is “in control.” Yet this insight liberates us to partner with God in opposing suffering, rather than fighting against God who is nevertheless sovereign.

But what do we mean by “sovereignty,” and how does that relate with our understanding of God’s power? This matter, along with the character and nature of God, will be explored briefly in chapter 2. The metaphor of God as an almighty “king” has a long history, beginning during the monarchic period of the Old Testament. Much later, following Emperor Constantine, the ties between

² This can be compounded if a Christian believes that God has clearly “guided” them in making a major decision and then “life happens,” and one is left wondering how this enforced detour fits in with God’s plan. . .

church and state in the West established Christendom. This reinforced the connection between God and a monarch or ruler, so infusing influence, power, and dominance into a Christian worldview. In such a cultural and religious setting it is relatively easy to believe in the classic attributes of God, namely: unchanging, invulnerable, all-powerful, and all-knowing. It is *this* “all-controlling” God that is deemed to be the Creator and Sustainer of the world. Despite the collapse of Christendom over the last century, this traditional view of God—referred to as classical theism—is still very influential.³ It is preached every Sunday in our churches and is an integral part of theological discourse in our seminaries. Yet, as mentioned earlier, we claim to believe in a *trinitarian* God. Chapter 2 reminds us what that entails as we tend to overlook this post-biblical doctrine that is fundamental to Christianity. Moreover, I believe a trinitarian view of God is vitally important in our understanding of God and the problem of suffering.

The relationality within the Trinity is explored further in chapter 3, where we briefly consider the question: “Why did Jesus ‘have’ to die?” As we will see, our traditional responses to that question tend to fragment the Trinity, driving a wedge between Jesus and God the Father. If we really believe that God did not “*spare*” his son but “*sent*” him into the world to die, then that inevitably colors how we regard God when *we* experience pain and suffering. Are there alternative ways to view the cross? Yes! I believe we need to embrace what Luther termed “the crucified God,” and view the cross as the ultimate expression of the relational Trinity’s identification with a suffering creation. Of necessity, this is a *suffering* God, the antithesis of a deity that is invulnerable to—or uninterested in—creation.

The next two chapters consider various Christian responses to the problem of evil; chapter 4 and 5 focus on “natural” and “moral evil,” respectively—although there is necessarily some overlap. Natural evils include: earthquakes, tsunamis, hurricanes, and volcanoes, together with disease and death. Chapter 4 also addresses the pain and suffering—even “cruelty”—that we observe in the biological world, acknowledging that this existed long before humans arose on our planet. While Christians affirm God’s creation is “good” (Gen 1:31), it is evidently an *untamed* world. Chapter 5 considers the many evils that arise from the choices humans make, whether that be by individuals (e.g., abuse, rape, murder, etc.) or collectively, even state-supported (e.g., slavery, torture, ethnic cleansing, etc.). This chapter explores the question: “Does God always get what God wants?” Some Christians respond, “Emphatically, yes,” others say, “Definitely not.” We will explore various rationales; each can claim biblical support, and so further insights from theology, philosophy, and science can prove helpful. Each perspective has strengths and weaknesses; while I think some are much better than others, we can’t help but acknowledge suffering never makes perfect sense. But *where* we locate the mystery is helpful; we have three choices: (a) the mind of God, (b) God’s complex creation, and (c) the relationship between the two—the mystery of divine action.⁴ For those Christians who believe “God is in control,” the location of the mystery can ultimately *only* be in the

³ Nevertheless, as Douglas John Hall³ reminds us, as Christians we believe “that God is at work in history, and that the divine Spirit creates, recreates, judges and renews the ‘body of Christ.’ What is happening in the churches of Europe and North America today cannot, therefore, be received by us as if it were devoid of purpose. The hand of God is in it!” Douglas John Hall, *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997), 41.

⁴ Depending on one’s theology, these three options are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

mind of God. But this, I suggest, is not only too simplistic, it is also dangerously misleading. . .

Rational insights are important, for God gave us minds to use, and they can be faith enhancing. Nevertheless, our frustration at the existence and persistence of evil brings us to the *key* question: “*What is God doing about evil?*” This is explored in chapter 6 by considering the overall biblical narrative. The Bible should not be seen as simply a depository of promises to “claim” in tough times, rather its authors are telling stories of God’s activity in the world. What, then, is God *doing* about evil, pain, and suffering? Many Christians are familiar, perhaps overly so, with well-known biblical stories and Israel’s history. But if God inspired the authors, are there repetitive themes that—taken together—reinforce each other and so provide a bigger picture of God’s activity within history? I believe so; in which case, the biblical story is not just about Israel, but the story *we find ourselves in*. A story in which we can not only recognize and experience God’s presence—critically important though that undoubtedly is—but also one that brings genuine hope in suffering and purpose to our lives. The plotline inevitably passes through the “data point” of Jesus the Messiah, the person who defies all categorization—eventually resulting in the doctrine of the Trinity. And so we return briefly to the cross and there we discover afresh what the trinitarian God did—and is doing—about evil.

The mystery of divine action is explored further in chapters 7 and 8 where we consider miracles and prayer, respectively. Is praying for a miracle a bit like a quarterback’s last ditch “hail Mary” pass in American Football? But even there, there has to be a receiver suitably placed and able to catch the ball! Is there a more *positive* way of thinking about miracles? Chapter 7 presents a preliminary theology of miracles as “glimpses of the future in the present.” It also considers some of the troubling questions we have concerning miracles, such as why we don’t see more of them today. Chapter 8 explores aspects of Romans 8, focusing on Paul’s remarkable claim that the Christian’s prayer is *co-prayer with Spirit*—we *never* pray alone. Knowing that God *always* hears our prayers, and that they make a *real* difference in the world, is a powerful message of encouragement, especially in times of suffering.

Chapter 9 returns to Anne’s story, the complementary part of the sandwich to chapter 1. Written months after Anne died, it relates Anne’s death and her funeral, and meditates on dying, waiting, and the foundational Christian hope of the resurrection—which we celebrated on the first Easter after Anne died. Suffering is *never* the last word.

I invite you to share in this human story of Anne and, in doing so, find encouragement, hope and recognize God powerfully at work. But more than that, let us wrestle with these complex issues together. In so doing, we must be willing to have our own theological worldview challenged. The intent here is not to simply rile against God—although a theology of protest is a valid response—but to explore and develop what I consider to be the refined gold in the bottom of the crucible. The goal is to nurture faith and to better understand God and his activity in the world. But this is not merely a matter of “head knowledge,” we also need to acclimatize ourselves to the Spirit’s presence and so experience the suffering God with us on our journey. Finally, let us remember that as Christians we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and called to be God’s agents of justice, restoration, and hope. So let us therefore move forwards together and partner with our trinitarian God to counter all the effects of evil in this needy world, and to help further God’s reign.