

THE *Refiner's
Fire*

G A V I N A N T H O N Y

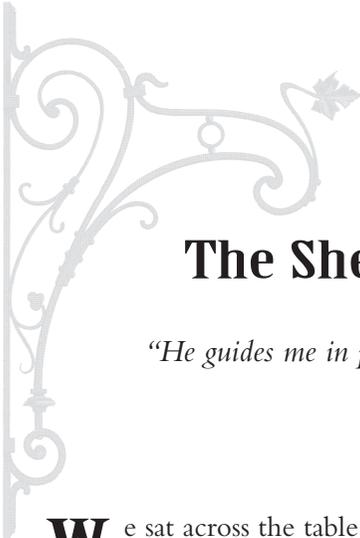
► IN ALL THINGS *God* WORKS FOR GOOD ◀



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CHAPTER 1

The Shepherd's Crucible

"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

Psalm 23:3

We sat across the table from each other sipping chamomile tea, but it was not an ordinary day. Tears flowed freely down her wrinkled cheeks, and her pain and anger was obvious. As she got to the end of her story she asked me, "So where was God? Where was God!"

As I sat there stunned I didn't really know what to say. My degree in theology hadn't quite prepared me for this, and I wasn't sure what if anything could have.

The story I had listened to was filled with anguish and tragedy. Many years before, she had been living in the southern part of Albania as the Communists had begun to take control. Realizing the implications for her family, she had made plans to escape across the border into Greece. Telling only those in her Bible study group, she along with her husband and two children made a midnight trek to the border. But to their astonishment, just as they were nearing the border, waiting soldiers sprang a trap. Someone in their Bible study group was an informer.

The authorities took her young son and daughter away from her and sent both her and her husband to a labor camp. The sentence was particularly hard on her husband. Every time that he refused to work on the Sabbath he received a beating. Eventually he died of the abuse and the exhausting work.

The stress on her two children was overwhelming. They would come and talk to their mother at the prison through the wire fence. It broke her heart to see them standing there barefoot, denied shoes because of the "crimes" of their parents.

The mother had her own traumas. For a period of 18 months the prison authorities kept her in a metal box, one meter square, too small for her ever to lie down in. She remained there through the bitter cold of winter and the stifling heat of summer.

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Eventually the government released her, but now she was an enemy of the state. The authorities refused her a place to live and forbade anyone to help her.

And here we were, more than 40 years later, sipping chamomile tea together. I was a young twentysomething free Westerner who had just flown in to help out for a few months now that the Communist dictatorship had finally collapsed. And then I would be leaving. But she, and her questions, would be staying.

So while she was suffering, where was God, and what was He doing?

To be honest, I felt like a fraud trying to answer her question. I could describe a little bit of theory from the Bible, but who was I to explain why she had been hurting so intensely, for so many different reasons, for so many years? What did I know about suffering?

While her question was still hanging in the air, I prayed. Oh how I prayed. I desperately needed something to bring comfort to her.

To be honest, I can't remember exactly what I said, but as I finished, she reached across the table and squeezed my hand, then smiled.

"Thank you," she said with a nod.

She's not the only one to have asked this question. I have raised it myself, and I'm sure you have too. We may not have suffered as she did, but at some point in our lives, with a deep ache in our hearts, we all have cried out, "Where are You?"

Grasping for the Bigger Picture

The problem is that when our hearts are breaking, it's hard to think clearly enough to make sense of what we're enduring, to understand somehow how our personal pain fits into the larger scheme of things.

I know it was about 10 years after my visit to that heartbroken Albanian woman that I began to grasp a sense of a bigger picture that I had not noticed before.

I was on study leave abroad when a friend called my cell phone with some bitter news. Hurrying back to my room, I closed the door and leaned back against it. As the news sank in, I slid onto the floor. The report confirmed something that I had been fearing. Someone that I had considered a friend and a support in my work was spreading very unpleasant gossip about me. What he was saying was not just unkind but intentionally poisonous. It hurt me so much that I hardly knew how to respond. I just couldn't understand how anyone could say such things. Especially someone whom I had thought a friend.

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After some time I pulled my Bible off my bed and opened it. Trying to focus through the tears, my eyes finally fixed on some familiar words: “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Ps. 23:3, 4).

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” Yes, it certainly felt like that. But suddenly my gaze jumped back to the previous text: “He guides me in paths of righteousness . . .” My eyes widened quickly. Could it be that this path of righteousness actually passes through the valley of the shadow of death? Could going through the valley of the shadow of death also be “for his name’s sake”? I stared, frowning at the text. As I thought about it, I slowly began to view Psalm 23 in a totally new light.

Now, I could see how the paths of righteousness wind their way through green pastures and along quiet waters, but are they still paths of righteousness when we find ourselves in the dark and exposed to our enemies? Could it also be God’s design that sometimes He will permit us to experience severe trials, even to lead us into them, “for his name’s sake”? It began to dawn on me that perhaps it was possible for the path of righteousness to still be that even when it went down into the valley of shadows.

The Journey of Psalm 23

Before we explore suffering more closely in later chapters, let’s first stand back and look at the larger context of suffering as seen through the lens of Psalm 23.

Imagine a picture. All across the canvas in front of us we notice a series of paths—the small, narrow kind that sheep use. They begin on the left-hand side of the canvas, but then twist and turn, going upward, downward, crisscrossing every now and again, before they all finally merge together on our far right. There they become a single path that leads right up to a very large door on the front of a very large house—the house of the Lord (Ps. 23:6).

The house of the Lord is where we are all headed. In the original context the house of the Lord was the Temple where God’s people went to worship Him. Of course, we can have intimate communion with God and worship Him now, but we are still on a journey to meet Him in His heavenly temple.

We must always keep in mind that we are not yet there, but we are beginning to walk this path.

Now let’s fill in some details from the psalm. The Shepherd (verse 1)

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stands to the far left, watching over the paths and the sheep that follow them.

Along the paths we see some beautiful lush green pastures (verse 2). Some of the sheep are enjoying a feast.

A little further along the paths we notice some quiet pools of water (verse 2). The Shepherd has already dammed up the stream so that the water is still enough for the sheep to be able to pluck up courage to drink. It is because of the grass and the fresh water that some sheep are feeling totally refreshed and at peace (verse 3).

However, further ahead there looms a very large and dark valley (verse 4). Some of the sheep have already found themselves surrounded by its high walls that seem to block out almost all the light. It looks an evil and terrifying place.

Further down some of the paths we notice what look like picnic tables (verse 5). The Shepherd must have walked ahead and been here earlier too, because He has covered the tables with as much food as the hungry sheep could possibly need. But while some of the sheep are feasting there, enemies lurk nearby. Extremely hungry wolves totally surround the tables, outnumbering the sheep (verse 5).

If you stand back a moment from your painting, you will clearly see that Psalm 23 is a journey. The sheep don't stay in one place all the time, but are moving, always continuing toward the Shepherd's house.

Thus Psalm 23 is a picture of life. It is a depiction both of God's care and of the unexpected. Although the Shepherd provides everything His sheep need (as we can easily see), they will regularly find themselves in unpleasant, difficult, and painful places, ones that they would never choose to be in themselves.

Tips for Surviving the Journey

So how do we prepare for the unexpected? Of course, the simple answer is that we can't completely—otherwise it would not be unexpected. But what we can do is allow Psalm 23 to reshape our perspective on life. So when the unexpected does happen, we will have some idea of how to keep going until we arrive with thanksgiving at the Shepherd's front door.

1. No matter how unprepared and weak we might feel on our journey, the Shepherd promises to provide everything we need.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want” (verse 1).

I remember reading that verse one day and blurting out loud to God, somewhat agitated, “But I do want—I *do* want!”

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Here is our first challenge for the journey: if we are to travel without complaining against the Shepherd, we have to accept the fact that our expectations of the journey will start out very different from His. The first obstacle we face is learning to relinquish our escalating demands, expectations, and ambitions for ourselves, and then learning to accept that what God provides is all, and everything, that we need.

2. No matter how bewildering or confusing our journey might be, walking the Shepherd's paths will always accomplish His purposes for our lives.

"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake" (verse 3).

Notice how Scripture calls all of them "paths of righteousness" (NIV) or "right paths" (NRSV). But why does it refer to them as right or righteous paths?

First, they are right paths because they lead to the right place, the Shepherd's home.

Second, they are right paths because they keep us on a journey in the company of the right person, the Shepherd.

And third, they are right paths because they shape us into the right people. Notice how we travel the paths of righteousness "for his name's sake" (verse 3). "For his name's sake" means for the honor and glory of the Shepherd.

But exactly how do we honor and glorify the Shepherd? We don't honor Him simply by surviving long enough to get to His house without giving up. To become the right people is to live out the purposes of the Shepherd. As we shall increasingly see, we honor the Shepherd most by reflecting His character, and the strange truth is that the Shepherd may accomplish this in us most through permitting us to suffer.

We find this last idea further expanded in the next point.

3. No matter how frightening our journey might be, the darkness is not a place to fear, for it is something that the Shepherd uses to mature us.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (verse 4).

When we cannot see the Shepherd because the darkness is so thick, Satan will tempt us to believe that God has abandoned us or that we have taken the wrong route. The reality is the opposite, as Elisabeth Elliot explains: "A lamb who found himself in the valley of the shadow of death might conclude that he had been falsely led. It was needful for him to

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traverse that darkness in order to learn not to fear. The shepherd is still with him” (Elisabeth Elliot, *Quest for Love* [Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1996], p. 218).

Indeed, in the darkness as our enemies endeavor to spring a surprise attack, we suddenly glimpse flashes of our Shepherd at work, beating back our enemies with His rod. And as we sometimes wander off blindly by ourselves and find ourselves so terribly alone and frightened by the sounds in the dark and what we imagine to be out there, we feel the unexpected, and sometimes painful, grip of a shepherd's staff hauling us back to safety.

In those dark valleys, perhaps more than anywhere else, we experience the salvation of the Shepherd and thus we develop confidence in His care.

4. No matter how easy we expect our journey should be, the Shepherd may regularly allow our enemies to surround us in order for us to gain a deeper understanding of His love for us.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (verse 5).

“What would you be thinking,” I asked the children at church, “if you had a table with everything you could possibly want on it, but your enemies were standing nearby?”

“I think my enemies would want to steal it all!” chipped in one little boy. He was right! How many times we find ourselves concerned that our enemies are going to rob us of our happiness, our jobs, or God's purposes for us? That is one of the lessons of the table. God places it even under the noses of our enemies, enabling us to realize that nothing they can do will ever take away what He has promised us.

When we see how abundant His blessings are for us, and how nothing and no one can prevent us from receiving them, we find ourselves filled with a renewed wonder and thankfulness at the goodness of our Father. Then we can declare with the psalmist, “I will exalt you, O Lord, for you lifted me out of the depths and did not let my enemies gloat over me” (Ps. 30:1).

5. No matter how lonely our journey might appear to be, the Shepherd is always present.

“Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6).

Both goodness and love are divine attributes. So to be followed by goodness and love is to be followed by God Himself. As David assures us here, goodness and love follows him every single day, not only through the fields of green grass, but also right into the dark valleys. Whether or not

the Shepherd has led him into the darkness or whether David has charged off on his own, goodness and love still accompany him. And when his enemies mock him, goodness and love still provide his every need.

Goodness and love never leave him. The Shepherd, Emmanuel, will be with him, even to the very end of the world. And so it is with us.

The Key to Suffering

In her writings Ellen White comments extensively on suffering. In this passage she summarizes much of what we have noticed in Psalm 23 regarding the journey we are on: “Those who are finally victorious will have seasons of terrible perplexity and trial in their religious life; but they must not cast away their confidence, for this is part of their discipline in the school of Christ, and it is essential in order that all the dross may be purged away. The servant of God must endure with fortitude the attacks of the enemy, his grievous taunts, and must overcome the obstacles which Satan will place in his way. . . . But if you keep looking up, not down at your difficulties, you will not faint in the way, you will soon see Jesus reaching His hand to help you, and you will only have to give Him your hand in simple confidence, and let Him lead you. As you become trustful, you will become hopeful. . . . You will find help in Christ to form a strong, symmetrical, beautiful character. Satan cannot make of none effect the light shining forth from such a character. . . . God has given us His best gift, even His only-begotten Son, to uplift, ennoble, and fit us, by putting on us His own perfection of character, for a home in His kingdom” (Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* [Nashville: Southern Pub. Assn., 1930], pp. 63, 64).

As we have already begun to notice here and in Psalm 23, the key to understanding suffering is to recognize that suffering is a key. God often permits suffering in our lives because He has the ability to use it as an agent of transformation that enables us to become increasingly similar to the people He originally created in Eden. But this process of God's work in our lives does not happen in a day. It lasts a lifetime.

Joseph: Suffering Transformed

Joseph endured such a process (Gen. 37-50). In three distinctive periods spanning 13 years of unexpected suffering—through family rejection, slavery, and prison—God worked to transform him. The Bible does not give much indication of how Joseph felt during this time, but in the following comments from Ellen White, notice how God is always working to use the situation for unbelievable good. This good was not just for

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Joseph, but for the entire ancient Near East, thus shaping the whole future of God's people.

Period 1: God transforms family hatred and rejection into a school to equip a future prime minister with the character he must have to accomplish his role.

When Joseph was 17 God sent him two dreams. The moment he shared those divinely given dreams with his closest family members, his brothers' hatred toward him intensified. When the opportunity arose, they made plans to kill him, but then decided to take the less-painful route by selling him to a caravan of Ishmaelite traders, and made some pocket money as a bonus.

When his brothers first rejected him, Ellen White notes that "for a time Joseph gave himself up to uncontrolled grief and terror.

"But, in the providence of God, even this experience was to be a blessing to him" (Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* [Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1890], p. 213).

Yet as he reflected on his life, a new determination filled him. "His soul thrilled with the high resolve to prove himself true to God—under all circumstances to act as became a subject of the King of heaven. He would serve the Lord with undivided heart; he would meet the trials of his lot with fortitude and perform every duty with fidelity" (*ibid.*, p. 214).

Period 2: God transforms slavery in Egypt into a school to equip a future prime minister with diplomatic skills.

For 10 years Joseph remained a slave. He had no contact with his family, and his father believed him to be dead.

Joseph could have found lots of good reasons to become depressed working so long as a slave. But he did not give in to bitterness. Ellen White comments that "Joseph's gentleness and fidelity won the heart of the chief captain, who came to regard him as a son rather than a slave. The youth was brought in contact with men of rank and learning, and he acquired a knowledge of science, of languages, and of affairs—an education needful to the future prime minister of Egypt" (*ibid.*, p. 217).

Period 3: God transforms false accusation and prison into a school to teach a future prime minister wise leadership.

The next three years Joseph spent in prison because his master's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape. To add insult to injury, someone he had encouraged in prison and who promised to return the favor forgot his promise.

Joseph's attitude under pressure was remarkable, and the consequences

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far-reaching. “He found a work to do, even in the prison. God was preparing him in the school of affliction for greater usefulness, and he did not refuse the needful discipline. In the prison, witnessing the results of oppression and tyranny and the effects of crime, he learned lessons of justice, sympathy, and mercy, that prepared him to exercise power with wisdom and compassion” (*ibid.*, p. 218).

During his time of great suffering, do you think Joseph had any clue about what God was doing in his life, or could see any evidence that his pain would eventually serve a greater good? I doubt it. But throughout the process he trusted his heavenly Father.

Always for Good

Like Joseph, those who have been closest to God have often suffered the most. Could anyone have been closer to the Father than Jesus, yet has anyone suffered more? David, Moses, Abraham, Paul, and the disciples all endured much, but as the years of their journey rolled by, God demonstrated again and again that indeed “all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purposes” (Rom. 8:28, NKJV).

The good news is that His purposes are just as good and as noble for us as they were for His people in Bible times, and the transformational blessings He wishes to pour through us are just as great.

God’s work in us is the journey of a lifetime. It is often unexpected, sometimes painful, but always under the guidance of a loving Shepherd, and always, always, for good.

Father,

Thank You that I do not walk alone.

Thank You that are with me, in the dark as well as in the light.

Thank You also that the path we tread is for Your glory.

May the pursuit of Your glory grow in importance and value within my life.

In Jesus’ name, amen.