

WHEN  
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ANSWERS



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*Thinking Differently About  
God, Suffering, and Evil*

JOHN S. FEINBERG

 Kregel  
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*When There Are No Easy Answers: Thinking Differently About God,  
Suffering, and Evil*

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Dedicated to Josiah Stephen, Jonathan Seth,  
and Jeremy Samuel.  
Three gifts of God's love.



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# PREFACE

There are many hurting people in our world today. No one can predict where and when tragedy may strike. Sometimes because we haven't faced serious affliction, we think it won't happen to us. Especially if we live our lives in conformity to God's Word, we assume that we won't have to face the most horrible kinds of tragedies. Christians know the story of Job, but everyone agrees that his was a special case. It is natural to assume that most who suffer terribly do so in punishment for some serious sin.

All of these common conceptions seemed worthless when my family learned something far beyond our worst fears. This book recounts what happened and what I have learned from it. This is not a book that I ever imagined I would write. And of course, I wish I hadn't learned the things I'll share in the way I did. But God's will and way don't always match what we would like to happen. Hence, I have a story that I never would have imagined. I share it because I hope it will help you if you are suffering, and I also trust that it will help those who minister to the afflicted.

This book has been in print before. Though it was tempting not to republish it, I have found that when I tell our story, people who

hear it find it quite helpful. Often they ask if our story is in print, because they can think of family members or friends with whom they would like to share it. And so I pursued republication. It has also been a long time since the previous edition was in print, and various things have happened since the book was last published. The major themes of the earlier editions have not changed, but I have amplified some of them, and have added information about what we are currently experiencing as we continue to deal with my wife's disease.

Since this book is about struggles with suffering and evil, some readers may wonder why I haven't referred to other classical treatments of the topic. C. S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed*, D. A. Carson's *How Long, O Lord?*, and Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Lament for a Son* are all very well worth reading. I don't refer to them only because this book is not the result of an academic research project. It is, instead, the story of my family, and what has happened to us in various ways unique. The story is a very personal one—one that I would just as soon have kept private. However, through the leading of the Lord and the encouragement of others, I realized many years ago that I should write this book, but I wanted it to be *our* story told in *my* own way and words. I offer it as a personal testimony of God's specific dealings with me and my family.

To produce any book requires the encouragement and help of various people. I must initially express my appreciation to Dennis Hillman and Kregel Publications. Their willingness to reprint this book is most appreciated! A special word of thanks is due to Dawn Anderson, editor at Kregel, for her tireless efforts. I am confident that none of us view this book as a money-making venture but rather as an opportunity to minister to hurting people.

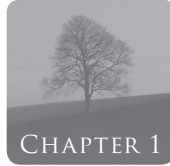
There are, of course, other books about suffering, but often Christian discussions of personal struggles with suffering tend to minimize the severity of afflictions, and in some cases even attempt to convince readers that the evils confronted are not actually evil after all. All of that may make sense to people who have never had

to deal with anything genuinely tragic, but real people dealing with horrible situations know different. You should not expect anyone to be comforted—and you cannot comfort anyone—if your basic strategy is to try to convince them that what has happened is not really so bad after all, and that the appropriate response from a Christian is to rejoice over what is happening. Don't expect to find such platitudes in the pages of this book! Terrible things do happen to godly people. Don't think that the way to help them deal with the evil that has happened is to minimize the cause of their pain. Even though Jesus knew that he would resurrect a dead Lazarus, when he saw Lazarus's dead body and saw the grief of Martha and Mary (Lazarus's sisters), he wept (John 11:35)! We are not required to be happy that evil has happened to anyone.

Many years ago, in preparation for an earlier edition of this book, Pat wrote an afterword, and I am including it in this edition. It reflects accurately the way she has always handled this disease. I believe you will find it to be moving and encouraging as you confront your own trials and afflictions.

If you are suffering at this time, I hope this book will minister to you. Some points I make in the book may bear rereading at a later time when you have had more time to deal with the trials you are facing. The things that have been and are helpful to me didn't happen all at the same time, so I fully understand that you may find parts of this book helpful at one time and others helpful at another. I also hope and pray that this book will be of use to those who minister to the afflicted. May God be pleased to use it in these ways to his glory!





# PRELUDE TO A PROBLEM

November 4, 1987, was the day that changed my life forever. Let me back up. I grew up in a Christian home, though not an ordinary one. My father and mother were born into extremely devout Orthodox Jewish homes. My mom was born in Kovel, Ukraine, just a few years before World War I began, while my dad was born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. What are the chances, humanly speaking, that the two of them would ever meet? Of course, chance had nothing to do with it. Mom was one of those immigrants you sometimes read about who came to America, first entering at Ellis Island in New York harbor. Her father had gone to the United States seven years before the rest of the family came. Eventually, the family reunited and settled on the south side of Chicago.

During Dad's college days at the University of Pittsburgh, the Lord revealed himself to Dad, and by the end of 1929 he accepted Jesus as his Messiah and Savior. In her teenage years, Mom was

given the gospel by missionaries to the Jews, and she too received Jesus as her Messiah and Savior.

Of course, both of their families were horrified. Neither Mom nor Dad wanted to hurt their families, but what could they do? The truth that Jesus is Israel's long-awaited Messiah could not be denied. Eventually, Mom wanted to go for Bible training at Moody Bible Institute. Her parents insisted that she give up her new religion or move out of the family home. Mom loved her family, but, determined to follow her Lord, Mom enrolled at Moody and moved into the dorms.

Not long after accepting Christ, Dad was gripped by a clear call to full-time ministry. Following that call, he enrolled in Dallas Seminary. In a brief five-year span, he earned a Bachelor of Divinity, a Master of Theology, and a Doctor of Theology degrees. During those student years, Dad was already in demand as a Bible teacher and preacher. On one occasion, he had a speaking engagement in Michigan, representing Chosen People Ministries (the mission that led him to the Lord). Those were the days before regular and reliable travel by air, so the options were to go either by train or by car. Dad and a friend went by car, and their route led them through Chicago where they stopped for the night. Dad's traveling companion had a friend at Moody. The Moody student told Dad and his friend that there was a social event scheduled for Moody students the next day, and invited them to attend.

At that social, Dad met Mom, and before too long, they were engaged. The plan was for Mom to finish at Moody and stay in Chicago while Dad finished doctoral studies at Dallas. On May 14, 1935, Dad graduated from Dallas Seminary, and the same day, in the home of Dr. and Mrs. Lewis Sperry Chafer, Mom and Dad were married.

Dad was already teaching at Dallas Seminary even before he finished his degree programs. He stayed on faculty until 1948 when he accepted a call to go to Southern California, teach at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, and eventually start Talbot Theological

Seminary. During Mom and Dad's years in Dallas, my brother, sister, and I were born. I was two years old when the family moved to California.

As a child, I often heard about how Jews throughout history had been persecuted for no other reason than that they were Jews. I learned slowly but surely that there is a lot of pain and suffering in this life, even for those who trust Christ as their Savior. And I had a vivid illustration of that truth in my own family. During her childhood, my mom had not gotten proper nutrition—Jewish peasants living in Ukraine could hardly make ends meet. As a result of this and other physical difficulties, throughout her adult years Mom was forced to deal with one physical problem after another. In fact, I cannot remember a day in my life while my mother was alive that she was not in pain and dealing with one health concern or another. So I grew up fully aware that no one gets exemption from suffering just because he or she accepts Christ and obeys the commands of Scripture.

I was also taught by my parents and in church that the key in life is to find God's will and obey it. Christian hymns like "Have Thine Own Way, Lord" and "Where He Leads Me I Will Follow" express those desires quite well. But I wondered whether it is actually possible to know God's will for our lives. I think most Christians have the same desires and questions.

As I grew up, I sought God's will about what he wanted me to do with my life, and about whom I should marry. By the time I was twenty-six, I was certain that I had found God's answers to both questions. And I have never doubted the answers.

But after November 4, 1987, I began to have questions that I'd never before thought to ask. Questions like, does God ever hide information from us in order to get us to do his will? Is it possible to seek God's will, find it, and do it, and then discover that what God wanted brought great suffering and evil into your life? If that happened, wouldn't it mean that God had tricked or even deceived you into doing his will?

After your initial shock from reading that paragraph, you are probably thinking, “That’s just crazy! That couldn’t happen, because God just doesn’t work that way. Scripture tells us to ask God to show us his will. In fact, Jesus instructed his disciples to ask God to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven (Matt. 6:10). So, of course, God’s people should ask him to do his will in their own lives. In fact, the apostle John offers the following encouragement: “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him” (1 John 5:14–15 NASB).

That seems rather clear. We must seek God’s will and as long as we pray in accordance with it, he will grant our requests. But if we pray according to God’s will, he wouldn’t give us something evil, would he? After all, remember what Jesus said:

Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt. 7:9–11 NASB)

Surely, then, if God reveals his will and we do it, evil won’t befall us. God won’t give us a stone when we ask for a loaf or a snake when we ask for a fish, especially not when we ask according to his will for us. Thoughts to the contrary must be absurd, if not blasphemous. They imagine the unthinkable, the impossible.

Or do they? For most of my life I would not have even thought to raise such questions. Oh, I knew bad things happen to good people, and for much of my life I wondered why God lets that happen to those he loves so dearly. As I grew up I was fascinated by the story of Job, especially with what we learn in Job 1–2 about how it all began. Being Jewish by background I heard my parents speak frequently about the Holocaust, and I was horrified at such



inhumanity to man. Even more, I couldn't understand how a loving God would allow this to happen to his "chosen people." And then there was my mother and her many physical ailments. She was seldom so ill for days on end that she couldn't run the household, but I could tell that she constantly functioned while dealing with a great amount of pain.

That's not the whole story about my mother, however. Her life had been filled with persecution. She was born in a little Ukrainian village in the early twentieth century. Peasants at that time didn't matter to the government, and Jewish peasants were worth even less. Not long after her birth, the Bolshevik Revolution came to Russia. In the midst of the persecution, she and her family eventually fled from their homeland and came to America. But experiencing cruelty at the hands of soldiers and hiding to avoid capture left indelible marks on her personality. For many years into adulthood, she had nightmares about her childhood.

All of this made me wonder why a God of love would allow such suffering and hardship to happen to innocent people. At various times in my life I pondered whether I would still want to worship and serve God if he rewarded my faithfulness with severe affliction. But I didn't expect to personally address such questions, because I never dreamed that terrible affliction might come in the process of seeking, finding, and doing God's will. Nor would I have thought that God's ways might include getting someone to do his will by withholding information—information which, if known, would have kept them from doing what God wanted, but also would have avoided much personal pain and anguish. That would seem to be trickery, even deceit, and it would also be cruel, especially if by doing God's will we ended up in the midst of severe affliction. Who would think God does this to get his way?

And yet, in the late 1980s something happened that led me to ask such questions and to think the unthinkable. For reasons mentioned above, throughout my life I have thought a lot about

the problem of evil, the question of why there is evil and suffering in our world if there is a God who loves us enough to stop it and has the power to do so. In fact, I even wrote my doctoral dissertation in philosophy on the problem of evil. I had learned that there is a difference between asking why there is evil *in general* if an all-loving, all-powerful God exists, and asking why God allows a *specific* evil to happen to someone.

Philosophers and theologians debate intellectually how the evil in our world is consistent with an all-powerful, all-loving God. On the other hand, the *personal experience* of evil creates a different kind of problem. Those dealing with personal affliction may find that their suffering disrupts their relationship with God. They may find it hard to serve or even worship God. They may even be tempted to stop believing in God altogether. The personal experience of evil precipitates a crisis of faith in the believer's life. As one philosopher wisely observes, "Such a problem calls, not for philosophical enlightenment, but for pastoral care."<sup>\*</sup>

I read that statement many years ago. Intellectually, I agreed with it, but experientially, I didn't really understand it. I had always seen the problem of evil as a major hindrance to getting non-Christians to consider Christ. I knew it could be devastating to the faith of Christians as well. But I thought that as long as one had intellectual answers to explain why God allowed evil in the world, that would satisfy those who suffer. I thought those answers would give the necessary strength to withstand the afflictions. Even more, I believed that if comforters could just point to all the positive things God might use affliction to accomplish in the lives of those who suffer, the afflicted might reach a point where they could even thank God for the affliction.

When I saw others struggle in their relationship with God because of some tragedy, I naïvely thought that if I could just

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<sup>\*</sup>Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 63–64.

talk with them and offer some intellectual answers, that would resolve everything. I was somewhat impatient with them when they seemed unable to move past their struggles. In principle, I agreed that sufferers need pastoral care, but I thought that a lot of that care involved explaining intellectually God's purposes in allowing evil. Maybe personal struggles in the face of evil aren't problems needing philosophical enlightenment, but a healthy dose of academic philosophy couldn't hurt. Or so I thought.

Since November 4, 1987, I have come to see things quite differently, especially because of the way evil has deeply touched my wife and family. Before this happened, I couldn't have written this book. I thought it was enough just to have intellectual answers, and that those answers would be sufficient for handling any personal evil that might come into my life. For a long time after we learned about my wife's condition, I found it too painful to speak about what had happened, let alone write about it.

What happened that so revolutionized my thinking? Let me share my story. Like many people, I grew up, went to school, got married, and began a career in relatively trouble-free circumstances. There were problems and afflictions along the way, like most people experience, but nothing catastrophic or truly tragic. I knew that those who stand for Christ can expect to suffer, and I had a vivid illustration of that in my mother's constant faith despite illness after illness. I remembered as well that in the early 1950s my father almost died, but God marvelously preserved his life. Dad had undergone an operation at the University of California, Los Angeles Medical Center, and recovery at home was going quite smoothly. But one evening after I had gone to bed, he began to hemorrhage. No matter what Mom tried, the flow of blood continued. She took him to several local hospitals but was advised that she had to take him to see the doctor who had done the operation. Unfortunately, the UCLA Medical Center and Dad's doctor were some thirty-five to forty miles away. And that was in the days before the elaborate freeway system in Los Angeles had been

built. The situation seemed hopeless, but Mom wouldn't give up. She and my sister got Dad into the car and set out for UCLA. By the time they arrived Dad had lost a substantial amount of blood. The doctors said his blood level was so low that he should have been dead. Thankfully, he wasn't, and they were able to stabilize his condition. Dad recovered, but my realization that I could have lost my father indelibly showed me how tenuous a hold on life any of us has.

Because of these experiences, I figured that there were more troubles coming. I assumed that they would be like the rest I had endured—annoying, frustrating, and painful to a certain degree, but nothing totally devastating. After all, I reasoned, once one goes a certain distance with Christ and reaches a certain level of spiritual maturity, even really big problems won't derail spiritual growth. There might be temporary setbacks in one's relationship with the Lord, but they would soon be over. Surely my dad's near brush with death and my mom's continued faith in spite of constantly dealing with painful physical problems confirmed such thoughts.

All of that changed for me on November 4, 1987, when I learned something that went far beyond my worst nightmare. For some years my wife, Pat, had experienced certain physical difficulties. As best as we can figure, there were signs of problems as early as 1979. At first there was a periodic twitching of her shoulder. And, as each day wore on, Pat became extremely tired. These symptoms weren't painful, and neither Pat nor I thought of them as real physical problems. She thought that her shoulder moving was just a habit she could break. I thought her lack of energy wasn't unusual for a woman with two small children under the age of five. As the years passed, the difficulties became more pronounced, and were now in other parts of her body as well. It seemed that the movements came once every few minutes. One evening, without telling Pat, I decided to time how frequently she moved. To my surprise and dismay she had these movements every few seconds. This could no longer be interpreted as a habit that she could break.

We decided that we had to find out what the problem was and get it corrected. Pat eventually went to a neurologist who made the diagnosis. When she came home from the doctor's office, I could tell something was wrong, but I never could have imagined what she was about to tell me. The doctor had diagnosed her as having Huntington's chorea.

At the time, I knew nothing about Huntington's disease. I was forced to learn very quickly. Huntington's is a genetically transmitted disease that involves the premature deterioration of cells deep within the brain. Brain cells are killed, and the result isn't entirely unlike what happens when an older person shows signs of dementia as a result of aging. Symptoms are both physical and psychological.

On the physical side, there is gradual loss of control of voluntary bodily movement. At first Pat had problems with her balance, and found it increasingly difficult to walk more than a short distance. Eventually, she was not able to stand or walk at all, even with help. As of this writing, she has for many years been confined to a wheelchair, and must be lifted to get in and out of it. The physical deterioration also resulted in slurred speech, and gradually she also lost her ability to swallow. In 2001 a feeding tube was inserted into her stomach, and for the last decade or so she has been able to get food and fluid only through that tube.

On the mental and psychological side of this disease, initially she began to be forgetful. Gradually, she lost her ability to pay attention to anything for very long. It has now been more than five and a half years since she has spoken a word. If I can get her to look me straight in the eyes and if I speak slowly and don't try to discuss complicated ideas, I can see from a slight reaction in her eyes that she understands what I am saying. But I have no idea whether even a few moments later she remembers what was said to her. And she cannot respond verbally to what she hears. Because she can't talk, I don't know what she thinks about most of the time.

Then, as with many Huntington's patients, depression is a major

problem, though Pat has taken medication for it and has to this point responded well to the medication. Huntington's patients can also have hallucinations and can ultimately become paranoid schizophrenic. Thankfully, so far we have not seen evidence of these symptoms, but one of the frustrating aspects of this disease is that you never know how rapidly it will progress or which symptoms anyone with it will exhibit. In fact, it is impossible to make any generalizations about the course of the disease, even if one uses the patient's own condition as the basis for predicting future symptoms. Some potential symptoms may never show themselves, while others that seemed initially transitory may never go away.

Though someone might begin to deal with Huntington's as a teenager, symptoms usually begin in one's thirties or forties. It is a slow-developing disease, but over several decades it takes its toll, and it is fatal. Medications may minimize symptoms, but there is still no known cure. Doctors had only identified the chromosome involved just a few years prior to my wife's diagnosis. It wasn't until 1993 that the exact genetic marker was discovered. Around the turn of the century, researchers discovered how this disease kills brain cells. They just haven't yet figured out how to stop it from happening.

Though all of this is very bad news, the situation is actually even worse. Huntington's disease is controlled by a dominant gene. This means that only one parent needs to have it in order to transfer it to their children. Each child has a fifty-fifty chance of getting it, but as mentioned, symptoms don't usually start to appear before one's thirties or forties. Our three sons were born prior to Pat's diagnosis.

Since Huntington's is controlled by a dominant gene, those who have the gene get the disease. If they don't get the disease, they can't be a carrier. There are tests to determine beforehand how likely it is that one will have it. The accuracy of those tests increased as researchers zeroed in on and finally discovered the exact gene involved. Still, there is a real dilemma about taking the test versus remaining in the dark about one's chances of getting the disease.

During an office visit many years ago, I asked Pat's doctor what was involved in getting tested so that I could find out what percentage of the cost the health insurance company would cover. The doctor replied that whatever we did, we should avoid reporting any of it to the insurance company. If the test showed that one of our sons would get the disease, it might be impossible for him to get health insurance. In addition, prospective employers might refuse to hire someone known to have the gene for Huntington's. During the 1990s laws were passed by the US Congress to make this sort of discrimination illegal. But anyone should know that despite whatever the law says, there are usually "creative" ways of getting around it. On the other hand, if our sons didn't take the test, they would have to make important life decisions—about career, marriage, and having children—in the dark.

When news of Pat's disease came, my initial reactions were shock, confusion, and disbelief. How could this be happening? Before we were married, we knew that Pat's mother had mental problems. At the time of our wedding, she had been in a mental institution for five years. We asked several people how likely it was that this might happen to Pat, believing all along that it was purely psychological. Psychologists assured us that if Pat were to have such problems, they would have already surfaced. Since she was in her twenties and nothing of that sort had happened, we were led to believe there was no need to worry. We never imagined that there was a physiological base to my mother-in-law's condition or that the difficulty could be passed genetically to my wife. Nor, apparently, did anyone else in her family. Immediate family members knew nothing about this, and others who might have known said nothing. My father-in-law had at one time heard the name of the disease, but didn't ask for details about it. Everyone who might have known the truth either didn't know it or withheld the information. Before we started our family, we checked again to see if anything hereditary could be passed on to harm the children. Again, we were assured there was nothing to fear.

We had wanted to discover whether it was God's will for us to marry and later to have children. We told God that we were willing to do whatever he wanted. If he didn't want us to marry, we asked him to show us that. One way to do so would be for us to learn that Pat could get her mother's disease. We searched for this information, but we didn't find it. When we didn't find such information, in addition to other factors I'll mention later, we were led to believe that God wanted us to marry.

So when Pat was diagnosed with Huntington's, we found it hard to believe that this was happening, but it was, anyway. Professionals who were supposed to know about such things had said it wouldn't, but it did. It was also unbelievable because of the basis of the doctor's diagnosis. He did nothing more than watch Pat move and ask her about her family history. No genetic tests or tests of any other kind were done that day. I complained that this was all too inferential. Such skimpy data shouldn't warrant that conclusion. No philosopher would accept that kind of argument.

For several months I was torn between the hope that it wasn't true and the fear that Pat's problems could be nothing else. When a second opinion by a specialist doing research on the disease confirmed the diagnosis, all hope that she didn't have Huntington's collapsed.