

## INTRODUCTION

### *Why Did God Do This?*

This is a book about the mystery of why tragic things happen the way they do. So it seems fitting to introduce this book with one of the toughest *why* questions a person can ever face: Why did a woman's precious baby die in childbirth?

#### MELANIE'S STORY

Several years ago, after delivering a sermon on living with passion, I was approached by Melanie, a distraught middle-aged woman.<sup>1</sup> "I have lost my passion for God and my joy in life," she said. "I used to be a fired-up Christian who poured herself into her faith, but now I feel nothing toward God and I'm always depressed. I used to run marathons, but now I'm a blimp. My husband and I used to be so close," Melanie informed me, "but now we're almost total strangers. Church used to seem so exciting, but now it bores me to death. I used to love to read the Bible and pray, but now I find both laborious and aggravating. I just feel dead!"

Melanie desired the passion I preached about that Sunday. She wanted to know how to come alive again.

After some conversation I learned that Melanie's downward spiral began about four years earlier when she lost a baby in childbirth. As long as she could remember, Melanie had wanted to mother children. She didn't marry till her mid-thirties, so to beat the biological clock she and





her husband immediately began trying to have a baby. After three years with no success they discovered that because of a medical condition, it was unlikely they would ever be able to conceive a child. Melanie's extreme disappointment was short-lived, however, for quite remarkably Melanie conceived. "We thought it was a miracle," she told me.

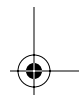
Her pregnancy went forward without incident. But her delivery had tragic complications. The umbilical cord was wrapped around her baby's neck, choking the child to death during the delivery. Their miracle had turned into a nightmare, and their life turned into one tormenting *why* question. Why would God miraculously give them a child, only to take the baby away while coming into the world? Why did this happen to them? Even more tormenting, why was God preventing them from conceiving again? Melanie's biological clock had all but wound down in the four years since the tragedy.

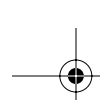
After about two years of struggling with doubt and depression, Melanie and her husband sought answers to their questions from a Bible teacher she knew and respected. The answer they received was consistent with the theology she had grown up with.

"God has a reason for everything," this teacher confidently told her. "There are no accidents in God's providence," he continued. "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, and you just have to trust that God knows and always does what is best. The hand that smites is also the hand that heals. You just have to trust him."

When Melanie asked what good the Lord might have intended by taking her baby and now leaving her without a child, the teacher suggested there was a lesson she and her husband were to learn from this event. "When the timing is right—and God's timing is always right—and when you've learned what God wants to teach you, perhaps then God will bless you with another child," the teacher intoned. "Or perhaps it's simply not his will for you to have children."

Melanie accepted this instruction as gospel truth. She felt guilty because she had difficulty trusting "God's plan." The fact that her life, in-





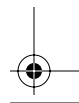
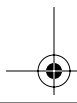
cluding her relationship with God and her husband, was slowly deteriorating intensified her guilt. Melanie had come to me with a question about passion, but at this point in our conversation her request changed. She wanted me to help figure out what lesson God might be trying to teach her. Maybe this would enable her to have a baby and get her life back on track.

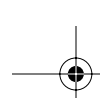
### **A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE**

My heart broke as Melanie told me her story. “Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re supposed to believe that God gave you this strong desire to mother a child and then miraculously set you up to believe he was going to fulfill this desire, only to kill the baby he gave to you?” “Well, yes,” Melanie sheepishly replied. I asked, “Does that seem like something a loving God would do? Can you picture Jesus doing that to someone?” Melanie was completely stunned by my reply. She had been under the impression that the perspective of her upbringing and of the teacher she consulted was basically the perspective of all Christians.

“What are you saying?” she asked. I took Melanie’s hand and looked deeply into her eyes as I continued: “Melanie, do you really believe that God kills babies to teach parents a lesson? And do you really think that God is now refusing to give you any more children until you learn this lesson—though he won’t tell you what the lesson is?” “And the clock is running out, so I need to figure it out fast!” Melanie interjected with a desperate tone of voice.

I began to weep when Melanie said this. I felt such grief for the tormented state her theology had put her in. “Wouldn’t a good, wise and loving teacher at least tell you what you’re supposed to learn?” I could almost hear the wheels turning in Melanie’s brain as her eyes stared into mine for a long moment. Finally, as though confessing a deep sin, Melanie spoke up, this time with a tinge of anger in her voice. “To be honest, I know we’re not supposed to get mad at God. And I’ve been afraid to admit this before because it might further jeopardize God’s willingness





to give me a baby. But this whole thing makes me mad. I just don't get it!"

Then, like an erupting geyser, Melanie exploded with anger and frustration. She pulled her hands away from mine, threw them up in the air and with a loud voice protested, "God lets irresponsible teenage girls and women strung out on crack have babies, but *I* have a lesson to learn! I mean, we must *really* be terrible people to be disqualified from having kids when the bar is set so low!"

When Melanie was done venting, I said to her, "Given your picture of God, Melanie, I'm not at all surprised that you're finding it hard to have a passionate, loving relationship with him. If I can be perfectly frank with you, what you were told to believe sounds like a sick game. God takes your child and refuses you future children till you learn the lesson you're supposed to learn—but he won't tell you what the lesson is. This doesn't sound like a wise and loving teacher, to say the least. How are you supposed to be passionately living for God when *this* is the picture of God you're trying to live for?"

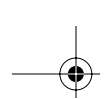
"Are you saying God didn't do this to me?" Melanie asked.

"I have absolutely no reason to think this," I replied. "The one thing I know for sure is that God is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. When we see him, we see the very heart of God. And everything I know about Jesus leads me to believe that God grieves over this situation even more profoundly than you do, if you can imagine that."

Melanie was all ears as I continued. "When things went wrong in people's lives, whether it was about their physical or spiritual condition or some tragedy that happened to them, I don't recall Jesus ever looking for the hand of God in it. Instead, he had compassion on suffering people and treated them like casualties of war. He expressed God's heart by bringing relief to people's suffering. Melanie, I know the Lord is deeply in love with you, your husband and the child you lost. And now he wants to heal you and restore the abundant life he died to give you."

My words were striking a deep chord. Melanie's rage turned to tears, which in a few moments turned to loud cries. For several minutes she





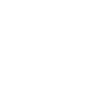
hugged me as she wailed. In between her cries she kept on repeating, “He didn’t do this to me? God didn’t do this to me?” The picture of God that had tormented Melanie for the last four years and had sucked the passion out of her life was beginning to change.

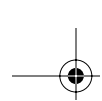
Of course Melanie and her husband would have many questions that would need to be addressed over time—questions that this book wrestles with. But the foundation for their transformation was being laid. In time, Melanie and her husband would learn to define who God is by looking at Jesus Christ. And though grief for their lost child would remain, they would in time learn to live with passion for Christ once again.

#### WHAT IS YOUR PICTURE OF GOD?

Our attitude toward God is completely determined by our mental picture of God. Like Melanie, many people have trouble passionately loving and living for God because they have a mental picture of him that inspires anything but passion. Indeed, many people who refuse to believe in God do so because they have a picture of God they find untenable. They assume that believing in God means accepting that he orchestrates the kind of misery Melanie was experiencing. If God exists, they reason, he would be responsible for all the evil in the world. Everything that happens would be the working out of his plan. And since these people can’t with integrity accept that, they reject God.

This book offers a very different picture of God. Though it will be new to some, it really is not new at all, for it is rooted in the biblical depiction of Jesus Christ. When someone asked Jesus to show him God the Father, Jesus said, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). In essence Jesus was saying, “*I am your picture of God.*” Many people construct their picture of God from various philosophical premises or their own life experience. But while philosophical thinking can be helpful and life experiences cannot be ignored, Jesus tells us that our understanding of God should be centered on *him*. This is why the Bible calls him the





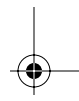
“Word,” the “image” and the “exact imprint” of God (Jn 1:1; 2 Cor 3:17—4:6; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3).

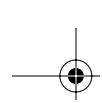
The foundation for this book—and I believe for Christianity as a whole—is the claim that *God looks like Jesus*. As we will see, Jesus spent his ministry freeing people from evil and misery. *This is what God seeks to do*. Jesus wars against spiritual forces that oppress people and resist God’s good purposes. *This is what God does*. Jesus loved people others rejected—even people who rejected him. *This is how God loves*. Jesus had nothing but compassion for people who were afflicted by sin, disease and tragedy. *This is how God feels*. And Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, suffering in the place of sinful humanity, defeating sin and the devil, because he passionately loves people and wants to reconcile them to God. *This is how God saves*.

This Christ-centered picture of God is very different than the one Melanie was encouraged to believe. This God grieves with Melanie, seeks to free her from her pain and endeavors to help her move beyond this tragedy by embracing a future full of passionate living. If we keep our focus on Jesus, we have no reason to assume God put Melanie and her husband through this tragic ordeal. Rather, we have every reason to assume God was and is at work to *deliver* Melanie and her husband from their ordeal.

People who become fully convinced that God looks like Jesus begin to love and are empowered to live for God with a passion they never dreamed possible before—regardless of their life experiences. And when they think this through consistently, they find that this revelation frees them to let go of *why* questions. These questions are almost always unanswerable. But they are not unanswerable because God is so mysterious—his character and purposes are unambiguously revealed in Jesus Christ—rather, they are unanswerable because creation is incomprehensibly complex.

My prayer is that you will (1) discover a passionate relationship with this beautiful God and (2) learn to live effectively in an ambiguous world where *why* questions can rarely if ever be adequately answered.





### AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

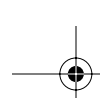
To become convinced that God looks like Jesus, however, we need to do more than be told to think about God as we would Jesus. We need to address certain questions that arise from this picture of God. Most important, if God didn't put Melanie through her ordeal, who did? If God is all-powerful and was seeking to deliver Melanie from her tragic state, why wasn't she delivered? Indeed, if God is all-powerful, why is his creation filled with the kind of suffering Melanie experienced in the first place? It's all well and good to say that God's *character* is revealed in Jesus Christ, but how do we reconcile this with the biblical understanding of God's *power*? How can God be all-powerful and not always get his way? And how do we reconcile the picture of God as Jesus Christ with the picture other passages seem to paint, especially in the Old Testament?

We first need to examine more fully the biblical basis for the claim that God looks like Jesus. Hence, in chapter one I examine what Scripture says about Jesus and what this implies for our understanding of God. I argue that everything we think we know about God—whether from the Bible, creation, experience or philosophy—must be consistent with the truth that is revealed in Christ.

Next, we'll explore the pervasive Christian assumption that there is a specific divine reason for *everything* that happens. I call this view the "blueprint worldview," for it assumes that *everything* is part of God's great plan, a meticulous divine blueprint. In chapter two I show how this view came about, how it makes it impossible to make sense out of radical suffering in the world, and how it contradicts the view of God we are given in Jesus Christ.

In chapter three I begin to outline an alternative way of understanding God and his relationship to the world, one that is consistent with the revelation of God in Christ. I call this the "warfare worldview." Rather than holding to a meticulous divine blueprint, this view holds that God is at war with forces that oppose his will. Jesus' ministry was all about spiritual conflict. If he is our key to understanding what God is like, we





must conclude there is a war zone between what God wills and what sinful people and opposing spiritual forces will. Once we understand this, we can more consistently affirm God's love and compassion in the midst of his warfare against evil.

Understanding why God made free beings goes a long way in answering why evil *in general* is allowed to take place. But it doesn't address the mystery of why *particular* evils happen to *particular* people. It doesn't answer the age old question, "Why me?" Nor does it answer why God seems to miraculously answer prayer sometimes but not at other times. Why does everything in life, including God's interaction with us, seem so arbitrary?

I begin to address this issue by examining the book of Job in chapter four. This profound book doesn't answer these questions, but it does give us perspective: life seems so arbitrary because the cosmos and the war that now engulfs it is so unfathomably complex. We can't possibly understand all the influences that converge to bring every particular event about. In other words, the mystery of evil is more a mystery about fallen creation than about God's character or plan.

In chapters five and six I attempt to show that a creation which includes free agents capable of love cannot be one in which God can guarantee his will is always done. Chapter five explores two aspects that God takes into account in determining what he will do, while chapter six outlines a number of variables that affect what prayer accomplishes in the world.

Having addressed the theoretical question of why evil occurs, in chapter seven we look at the practical issue of how we are to live in its midst. Because our understanding of God is centered on Jesus, we are inspired to resist evil and most forms of suffering as ultimately coming from forces that oppose God. What is more, the Bible offers us hope, peace and confidence as we work with God to accomplish his will.

The final two chapters address objections that can be raised against this Christ-centered warfare worldview. Every theological perspective





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finds some Scriptures more difficult to integrate than others. Hence, in chapter eight I discuss Romans 9, which is perhaps the strongest and certainly the most frequently cited passage that seems to stand in tension with the view I am advocating in this book. I continue this line of defense in chapter nine as I respond to nine other sets of passages that are frequently used to support the blueprint worldview.

My hope is that this book will help people like Melanie gain a more beautiful, Christ-centered picture of God by helping them understand that God is against, not behind, all the evil in the world. For people not sure about the Christian faith, my hope is that this book will present a picture of God that is more attractive and more believable than other pictures they have been exposed to. It avoids what has for many people been the central objection to accepting the Christian God, namely, the idea that every atrocious event in world history is somehow a result of his plan—his divine blueprint.

