

WHEN  
GOD'S WAYS  
MAKE  
NO SENSE

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DR. LARRY CRABB



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As we grow older together,  
I even more deeply value the love of my wife.  
She pays a higher price than anyone  
for me to do what I do.  
I therefore dedicate this latest effort  
to Rachael, my wife of more than fifty years.

What Jonah heard from God made no sense to him.  
So Jonah resisted and ran.

What Saul heard from God (before he became Paul) made no  
sense to him.  
So Saul distorted and denied.

What Habakkuk heard from God made no sense to him.  
But Habakkuk trembled and trusted.

# Contents

Acknowledgments 11

Foreword by Jamie Rasmussen 13

Introduction: *God's Way of Thinking Doesn't Easily Fit  
into Our Minds* 17

## **Part 1: When God's Ways Make No Sense, What Then? *Three Stories, Three Answers* 29**

1. A Christian's Response to an Incomprehensible God:  
*Three Options* 33
2. Resist and Run (When Doing Wrong Feels Right): *The  
Story of Jonah* 39
3. Distort and Deny (The Counterfeit Gospel): *Then and  
Now: The Story of Saul* 53
4. Tremble and Trust (The Response of a Discerning Soul):  
*The Story of Habakkuk* 65

## **Part 2: When God's Ways Make No Sense, Tremble! *Why? What? How?* 81**

5. Why Must We Tremble in Order to Trust? 83
6. Trembling: *The Gateway to Trust* 89

Contents

7. A Hands-Off God? 97
  8. Hands-Off but Present (And Still in Control)? 107
  9. Counterfeit Christianity for Christians: *Claiming a Promise God Never Made* 115
  10. A Long Journey toward an Elusive Goal 125
- Part 3: When God's Ways Make No Sense: *Trust in God's Unthwarted Sovereignty* 135**
11. The High Calling to Trust: *Is It Too High?* 137
  12. In God We Trust: *For the Good He Gives or the Good We Want?* 147
  13. The Consolable Longing: *God's Provision for the Good Life That Every Christian Most Wants* 159
  14. Would We Prefer to Trust a Heavenly Grandfather? (*Is That What We're Doing?*) 171
  15. Enjoying Our Sovereign God: *"The Whole of History Is Nothing More Than the Story of God's Activity"* 183
  16. What Does It Mean to Say God Is Sovereign? *Three Views (What View Best Frees Us to Enjoy Our Sovereign God?)* 193
- Part 4: When God's Ways Make No Sense: *Three Parables* 207**
17. A Modern-Day Jonah: *"I Know Better"* 209
  18. A Modern-Day Saul: *"I Can Make It Better"* 215
  19. A Modern-Day Habakkuk: *"There's Nothing Better"* 221
- Final Comments: *Unsettled Trust* 227
- Notes 231

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And Rachael, the real center of our “little team” at NewWay Ministries: she is with me as no one else.

## Foreword

I first met Larry Crabb in the spring of 2003. His groundbreaking book, *Inside Out*, had made a huge impact on me when I was in seminary in the late 1980s. I couldn't wait to meet this man whose writings had helped me get through some difficult times over the years. One of his sons was attending the church I pastored at that time, and had arranged for us to play a round of golf together. He even paired me in the same cart with the highly respected "Dr. Crabb." I was nervous on two levels. First, I was nervous about the prospect of four and a half hours of discussion with Larry Crabb. I hoped I could keep up with him. His books (most of which I have read) are all biblically rich, thought-provoking, and probe the heart at a level many people find unnerving. I felt like a high school freshman who had been asked to attend the varsity practice only to be paired with the best athlete: excitement and apprehension bundled together. This led to my second level of nervousness: I wanted to play golf well that day. Men are men, and most men warm up to each other through shared hobbies and interests. Cars, sports, microbreweries, action movies, even golf. I knew Larry loved golf, and I wanted to make a good first impression.

First hole. First tee box. I was last to hit. I addressed the ball and went through my usual self-talk. *Head down, left arm straight,*

*nice easy swing.* To this day I have no idea what happened. But the ball didn't go more than three feet. It was one of the worst first shots I have ever hit. I looked at Larry and the other two men and said, "I actually prayed to the Lord this morning that this wouldn't happen!" They responded with a compassionate, if not awkward, laugh. As I got in the cart with Larry I thought, *So much for first impressions.*

Larry told me later, years later, that he loved what happened on that first tee. He loved the failure. He loved the comment about unanswered prayer. He loved the authenticity of coming clean with my desires and fears. He even loved the slight mortification I felt when my ball went only a few feet. Larry loves these things. He loves them not because he takes joy in other people's difficulties but because he sees God most clearly in other people's brokenness. He experiences God most acutely in his own brokenness.

This book is about what you and I do with God in the midst of our brokenness—when God doesn't make sense. How should we view Him? How should we approach Him? There are a number of options before us. We can turn on spiritual autopilot, coast awhile, and effectively place God on the back burner. Many well-meaning people do this today. Another option is that we can alter our view of God to better fit our messed-up lives. We can try to force-fit God into a paradigm that will help us make sense of our pain. This, too, is a common pathway taken by many good-hearted followers of God. It's an important question to wrestle with: What do we do with God when He seems to make no sense?

Larry has an answer: tremble and trust. These are not words I usually associate together. In my understanding, I either tremble *or* trust. I either have fear or faith. I either get bogged down in life's difficulties or I rise up and believe. I don't usually tremble *and* trust. However, this is precisely what Larry asserts. We must learn to apply soul-quaking humility with heart-abandoning faith if we are ever going to experience God as we long to.

*Foreword*

The path this book will take us on will not be an easy one. Asking difficult, risky questions about God that many of us avoid, while simultaneously plumbing biblical depths that will challenge us to see God in a new and different light—this journey is not for the fainthearted. It’s for those who join the original goldminers of the 1800s in yelling, “There’s gold in them thar hills!” As those miners charged the hills, they knew the journey would not be easy. In pursuit of possible gold, however, charge on they did. This book is the gold worth pursuing in the hills.

I have personally experienced profound life change as the result of learning from Larry Crabb. I have been able to experience God in the midst of my brokenness. I’m still a pretty bad golfer, but I’m a much better man of God, husband, father, friend, and pastor.

Jamie Rasmussen  
Scottsdale, Arizona

# Introduction

## *God's Way of Thinking Doesn't Easily Fit into Our Minds*

The gospel changes everything. But most of us don't quite believe it yet. It's too radical. For some it's too radical to even think it might be true. For others, it's so offensive to the deep-seated pride lodged in everyone's heart that they find it hard to accept.

We have yet to fully see gospel beauty, the beauty of pure love seen perfectly only in God, a beauty that can neither be recognized nor properly valued until our self-centered, confused minds are sufficiently humbled and opened to think like God and to trust His ways.

**L**ife isn't going according to plan. Our story is off-script. A stack of unexpected bills, new health concerns, a for-sale house that won't sell, troubling marital tensions, an uncontrollable sexual urge that brings hidden shame, a level of listlessness bordering on depression: it's always something. Nothing is ever exactly as we want it to be, at least not for long.

Advice columnists tell us to deal with it as responsibly as we can and move on with life. Perhaps schedule time with a counselor or life coach. Don't focus on what's wrong. Be grateful for whatever is right. Give yourself a break; do something you enjoy. You'll feel better.

Christians understand that we need to manage whatever can be managed as best we can, with whatever help we need. But we believe in a good and loving and powerful God. So we turn to Him. We pray over whatever is troubling us. When the concerns are deeply disturbing, we get serious about prayer. We drop to our knees and pray fervently and faithfully, and we make our prayer requests known to friends, sometimes communicating with them through a prayer chain.

Nothing happens. Nothing changes. We hear no clear word from God. We see no evidence of divine intervention on our behalf. Past prayers sometimes have been answered. Why not now?

We're not deists. We believe in a caring, present God. But we wonder. Is God listening? Have we offended Him? Must we clean up our lives before He'll answer? But God is gracious. He's a patient, forgiving God. Isn't He supposed to do something? Isn't that what love does?

Difficulties continue. New ones develop. I just read an email from a friend: breast cancer. Big problems. Little problems. But always problems. We're Christians, God's loved children. We can trust Him. *To do what?*

Consider these brief vignettes of real people talking to themselves.

*God wouldn't want me to put up with my husband. The man doesn't even know I exist. I feel like a nobody. God loves me too much to ever want me to hurt like this. So, with His blessing, I intend to make whatever arrangements I must to feel better about myself and to have a satisfying relationship with another man, not the one I'm stuck with now.*

*Our mission desperately needs funds to repair our falling-apart facility for burned-out missionaries to come and rest for a while.*

*If we don't receive what we need, we'll have to close down our ministry. We know we're doing God's work. We're doing what He called us to do. Surely He'll supply the necessary money. I've been living as a single woman for decades. It really hurts that no man has pursued me. But I'm trusting God to help me get on with my life. Even though I'm still single, with no prospects for marriage in sight, I've rededicated myself to follow Jesus however, wherever, and whenever He leads. But I've just felt a lump in my breast. I just can't believe that a loving God would not answer my prayer that it be benign so I can get on with following Him on these new paths.*

*Every ministry door I've knocked on has remained shut. I've been to seminary. I won the preaching award my senior year. And my professors told me I had a pastor's heart. I've applied to a dozen churches that had an advertised spot for a lead or associate pastor. Nothing opened up. I'm discouraged. But I know God loves me. I'm confident I'll get the chance to pastor and preach. Would a loving God provide less?*

What was the prophet Isaiah saying to us when, speaking for God, he wrote: “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the LORD. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine” (Isa. 55:8)? And then, to emphasize the point he doesn't want us to miss, Isaiah adds, “For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (v. 9).

Here's Isaiah's point: our thoughts and ways about how life should unfold for Jesus-followers are so much lower in wisdom than God's thoughts and ways that we sometimes cannot understand how God is going about telling His love story. So much goes wrong in so many of our lives, and it all happens on God's watch. Listen to the heart attitude of so many Christians today:

---

*I'm doing my best to follow God's principles for living,  
to keep troubles at bay and to bring good things close,  
but it's not happening. Am I really as far off-base in my  
understanding of how God works as Isaiah seems to think?*

---

Paul echoes Isaiah with these words: “How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways! For who can know the LORD’s thoughts?” (Rom. 11:33–34).

There are questions we cannot easily answer.

Why doesn’t God always honor the prayers of an abused wife by straightening out her husband?

Why doesn’t God reliably come through with donations needed to keep a good ministry going?

Why doesn’t God display His love for every single woman who wants to be married by introducing her to a good man who wants her, and if not that, then at least bless each one with opportunities for a fulfilling life and the good health needed to seize them?

Why doesn’t God advance kingdom purposes through a godly, gifted pastor-in-waiting by arranging for a church to make him their pastor? God opens the door for lots of seminary and Bible college grads to become pastors. Why not open that door for every qualified grad who feels called to the ministry?

Isaiah speaks again: “Who could ever have told God what to do or taught him his business?” (Isa. 40:12 MSG).

When God’s thoughts and ways make no sense to us, we Christians are confronted with three options.

### 1. *Resist and Run*

Determine to follow God when we like the direction He leads.  
But when we don’t, when His thoughts and ways seem to be

taking us away from the life we want for ourselves, then we feel justified in resisting His input and running off to do whatever better fits our ideas of a good way to live. *Like Jonah*. This option is illustrated in the life of a prophet who was enraged at God's plan.

2. *Distort and Deny*

Arrange our understanding both of how God thinks about our lives and of how He lovingly moves into them so that it matches our perception of how a loving God should think and move. Deny Scripture that contradicts what we want to believe about God. Revise our theology of God's good news into principles for living that make obedience to God comfortable—comfortable obedience that we assume will bring satisfying blessings into our lives. *Like Saul*. Before Saul became Paul, he distorted the Old Testament's message into what he wanted it to say and denied the value of passages that contradicted his distortion.

3. *Tremble and Trust*

Sit under the Bible. Hear whatever God is saying. When we realize that God's way of running the world and guiding our lives makes no sense, *tremble*. Tremble before a God whose thoughts and ways are far above our thoughts and ways about what the truly good life is and how to live it. Feel our confusion. Own our doubts. Embrace our fears. Face our disappointment. Experience our anguish.

Then *trust*. Trust the Judge of the earth to do right, to always advance purposes we will one day gladly agree were good. Accept that no one can fully unravel the mystery of prayer. Choose to live by faith in God's goodness, to deny authority to what our dim eyes can see. With the eyes of faith, gaze on the unfolding story of God that with the eyes of sight we may not recognize as a story of love. Humble ourselves. Confess our pride. We think we know more than we do.

Tremble before the incomprehensible God and trust that He is good. Trust that His love is committed to our growing awareness of the deepest and happiest well-being that's available to us now, that His love will lead us into an eternity where we will know every delight we were created to enjoy. Gaze on the cross. Remember Christ's death. Nowhere is the love of the incomprehensible God more fully and clearly displayed.

But always remember: tastes now, the full banquet later. Tremble before what our eyes can see and our hearts can feel. Trust in what our faith can believe, that the longed-for satisfaction of our deepest thirst lies ahead. *Like Habakkuk*. Habakkuk's story illustrates what it looks like to respond well when God's ways make no sense.

We know Jonah was wrong. The youngest Christian intuitively knows it's never right to resist God, even when His thoughts about what makes life good and His ways of arranging for life to be good make no sense to us. Jonah's resistance was flagrant. When God's instructions enraged him, Jonah wouldn't even speak to God. He refused to accept God's plan for his life.

Our ways of resisting tend to be a bit more subtle. Fervent prayers that go unanswered seem to justify a righteous-feeling sulk. "I prayed my wife's cancer would be healed. And now she's dead."

But perhaps the most insidious form of resistance among today's Christians is to selectively ignore biblical data in order to embrace a comfortable and convenient understanding of how God thinks and works. A well-known Christian leader was once asked to share his secret of parenting. All three of his then-adult children were leading exemplary lives: successful, moral, and godly. "From the day we knew we were pregnant, my wife and I were on our knees every night, holding hands and praying for God's blessing on each child," he said.

With his wife, a good friend has prayed fervently and continuously for his four children. One is a Christian. Three are not. Two have

spent time in jail. Perhaps they didn't pray together on their knees. Is that the formula for answered prayer? Shaping God into who we want Him to be, believing in a God of love whose divine power can be managed, is a common way to resist the God of sovereign, holy love whose thoughts and ways are not subject to our control.

In whatever form, resisting God often leads to running away from Him. But not always. Moses was not excited about God's call for him to return to Egypt to lead His people out of bondage. Jeremiah shrunk back from God's summons to deliver a difficult message to Judah. But their resistance had more to do with fearful hesitation than proud defiance. Neither man ran away from God. Jonah did, as far away as a ship could take him.



However motivated, our version of running away from God too often allows us to believe we're still tracking with Him. While declaring our allegiance to Jesus, we betray His authority over us by reshaping God's way of leading us into directions we can easily follow. Saul, who later became the apostle Paul, illustrates that pattern. We'll see that pattern in chapter 3. The Golden Calf Syndrome is still with us today, reducing God to a deity whose thoughts and ways our flesh can enjoy.

When the Israelites got impatient with Moses for remaining so long on Mount Sinai, Aaron yielded to their grumbling by gathering their gold and making a "golden calf" (Exod. 32:4 ESV). When the God of Moses failed to serve the people as they wanted, they came up with a more cooperative god to serve.

None of us is safe from worshiping this golden calf, our designer god. We confess that it would be wrong to run away from God when the path He wants us to take seems to be leading toward hard times. But perhaps we've misunderstood His directions. Better to come up with a set of biblical principles, what we can think of as moral choices, that, if followed, will move God to give us what we want.

And what we want are legitimate goods that we assume God wants for us as well: good family, good friends, good job, good income, good ministry, and good health. When God grants these blessings, and sometimes He does, of course we should gratefully enjoy them. To do otherwise would be wrong.

But recognize the problem. We've distorted God's story into a system, a formula for satisfying us, with little thought given to what would glorify God, to how we could love and relate in ways that would reveal His nature of suffering love to others. In G. K. Chesterton's way of putting it, we've become chess players, not poets.<sup>1</sup> We make the right moves on the chess board of life, and God responds by letting us win the match. Pray on your knees every day, and God will work (sovereignly?) to provide the kids we want. Get it right and life will work. That's today's gospel, for now, in this life. And when we die, heaven forever. Could there be better news?

Preaching the false gospel can build churches. Writing about it can sell books. But this message is a modern version of the "other" gospel Paul warned us about:

I am shocked that you are turning away so soon from God. . . . You are following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who deliberately twist the truth concerning Christ. (Gal. 1:6–7)

Today's twisted version of a false gospel perverts the truth that God is love into the lie that God is cooperative. I wonder: If we sincerely prayed David's prayer—"Search me, O God, and know my heart. . . . Point out anything in me that offends you" (Ps. 139:23–24)—would more of us realize that we've actually bought into this lie? God's love compels Him to cooperate with the plan He's come up with. In our thinking, that plan is obvious, simple, and fair. *If I do well, He'll see to it that my life goes well.* That's the lie. That's not God's plan. When we believe it, and life does go well, we feel

proud, justly rewarded for our good behavior. If life does not go well, even though we've lived well, we become disillusioned and disappointed with God.

Growing up in a Christian home in the late forties and fifties, I sang hymns and choruses in church and youth conferences that primed me to embrace a false gospel. Here's one example: "Count your many blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord hath done."<sup>2</sup> No one can count blessings that God has not provided, so as a child I assumed that the God who loves me would pour out blessings for me to excitedly count. Call that the Scrooge McDuck Syndrome. Remember the cartoon character who sat in his treasure room counting and recounting all his money? The author of that hymn may have had *spiritual* blessings in *heavenly* places in mind for me to count, but each time I sang those words I felt gratefully justified in trusting God to always surprise me with more blessings of the *earthly* variety.

Another familiar old hymn comes to mind: "'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus, and to take him at his word."<sup>3</sup> *Sweet* wasn't a commonly used word in a cool teenage boy's vocabulary, but I knew what it meant. In my thinking, this hymn was encouraging me to trust Jesus for the blessings that would make me happy. And if I was to take Him at His word, I could of course assume that Jesus had promised to make my life a sweet adventure: minimum troubles, maximum blessings. The promise I thought God had made had little to do with the happy privilege, undeserved but guaranteed, of *relating* with God; I imagined it had everything to do with the assumed right, deserved and guaranteed, to *use* God, to expect the good things in life I badly wanted, things that a loving God would generously provide. Shouldn't He?

One more chorus (there are plenty of others): "Every day with Jesus is sweeter than the day before."<sup>4</sup> Believe the false gospel, and you'll expect pleasant days ahead. But for some life may soon teach you to sing, "Every day with Jesus is harder than the day before."

During my growing-up years, the “truth” of that chorus—would my church’s leaders ever let us sing untrue choruses?—prompted me to assume that if life were going well today, I could only imagine the good things tomorrow would bring. And if somehow a bad day interfered with my expectations, I could trust Jesus for a better day tomorrow.

No one needs to know those songs to arrive at the notion that if there really is a loving God, we can depend on Him to give good things to good people, like us.

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*We’ve all come up with an understanding of how God thinks  
and acts that fits comfortably with our understanding  
of how a loving God should think and act.*

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The older I get, the more it seems, though not by design, that my books become autobiographical. Now in my seventies, I find myself trembling, more than ever, before a God I cannot understand. I’m aware of new levels of confusion that won’t yield to clarity, of repeated failures I can’t seem to control, of a more intense thirst that longs for gulps of living water when all that seems to be available are sips.

Few days pass without my realizing that I’m yet again at a familiar crossroads. One of three paths must be chosen. One, I resist God, taking a path I believe will offer satisfaction that won’t be mine to enjoy if I follow God. Two, I distort what I hear from God into thoughts about what makes life good and into ways of arranging for the good life I want, proudly assuming that my distortions are God-honoring interpretations of Scripture justified by thinking God’s love is more indulgent than demanding. Or three, I tremble in the presence of mystery and trust that God is advancing the plot of an unimaginably good love story.

*Introduction*

The choice, a daily choice, is mine to make. I'm hoping that what I have to say in this book will encourage both reader and author to know that the right choice, the only choice that leads to the joy that every human soul most wants, is to tremble and trust. Then together we'll be able to count the blessings that lead us to life as God defines it. We'll know it actually is sweet to follow Jesus, and that every day can draw us closer into relationship with Him and form us to relate more like He relates. Then we'll increasingly put divine love on display in all our relationships. And doing so will surprise us with joy—with a different, better kind of happiness that earthbound blessings can never provide.

## PART 1



# When God's Ways Make No Sense, What Then?

*Three Stories, Three Answers*

**M**ore often now than earlier in my Christian life, I find myself asking three rather weighty questions, questions that fifty years of counseling have convinced me that many others are asking as well. Perhaps not out loud. The questions might be heard as evidence of little faith, maybe as questions that really shouldn't be asked by Christians who trust Jesus to guide them through their lives.

But these are three questions that life will at some point nudge every honest Christian to ask.

**Question 1: *Why Must Suffering Play Such a Big Role in the Christian Life?***

Shouldn't a loving God protect us better than He does? Why does He disappoint us so often by doing nothing in response to some pretty important prayer requests? Life hurts, and God allows the source of our pain to remain. Why? We know suffering has its good purposes. Nothing else so effectively can expose a demanding spirit ("I'm entitled to better treatment!") and prompt much-needed repentance. And the suffering of prolonged uncertainty over health issues and financial difficulties encourages deepened dependence on the God who is in control of tomorrow.

But can't a serious Christian mature just as well in good times? Couldn't whatever suffering that may be necessary for our spiritual formation be less severe and more quickly ended? Must so many go through so much? *It doesn't make sense.*

**Question 2: *Why Must Failure Be Such an Ongoing Part of the Christian Life?***

Paul saw himself as a wretched man, not before he was miraculously converted but afterward, when he was a seasoned, unusually mature follower of Jesus. In Romans 7:24, the Greek word Paul chose that we translate "wretched" (ESV) clearly implies that the great apostle continued to bear the weight of the enduring misery of human weakness. In his words, "I want to do what is right, but I can't" (v. 18). So much for a sugarcoated understanding of a changed life. Paul was never free from sin—from sin's penalty, yes, but not from sinning. Like all Christians today, Paul was not a slave to sin. The sin nature is no longer a master that Christians involuntarily obey. Until heaven, though, Christians struggle with sin's appeal and too often yield.

Earlier in that same chapter, Paul told us that thanks to the gospel we can now live in the “new way of living in the Spirit” (v. 6). Does that mean it is possible for a Christian to harness the Spirit’s power so that recurring sin will no longer be a problem in life? As an old man, the apostle John looked back on his life and warned everyone that “If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth” (1 John 1:8). It seems God leads us *through* failure toward maturity, rather than doing whatever is needed for us to *move past* ongoing failure. What does gospel power mean in a Christian’s life? Shouldn’t it mean that when we want to do right, we reliably can? Apparently not! But why not? *It doesn’t make sense.*

The two questions require a third.

**Question 3: *How Are We to Respond to Seemingly Random Suffering with No Obvious Purpose and to Repeated Failure That We Try Hard to Resist but Sometimes Can’t?***

I might have preferred to respond to the first two questions with easy-to-follow counsel. I could have written a book suggesting how Christians can routinely experience the presence of God with an intensity that reduces suffering into a short-lived anomaly in an otherwise happily blessed life. Perhaps the faithful practice of spiritual disciplines and contemplative prayer, both important ingredients in a Christian’s journey, would deliver pain-eclipsing joy into our lives. But a Christian journey is one that follows Christ, the man of sorrows who knew joy *in the middle of pain*.

Or I could highlight the requirement of obedience to Christ’s commands, and speak of the Spirit’s power that enables us to live without significant failure. But Scripture insists, and experience confirms, that we will suffer and sin. Hardship and failure (the latter more easily denied) are part of every Christian’s life. In line with the apostle John’s teaching about “fooling ourselves” and his own

experience, Martin Luther wrote in his first thesis, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said ‘Repent,’ he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.”<sup>1</sup>

This third question must be asked by every Christian who wrestles with the first two, and it deserves a thoughtfully biblical response. That necessity prompted me to write this book.

# 1

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## A Christian's Response to an Incomprehensible God

### *Three Options*

Am I following the Lord? Or am I asking Him to follow me? Maybe I'm in danger of becoming a modern-day Jonah, feeling so disappointed and angry over God's way of directing my life that I drop any pretense of being a God-follower.

**F**ifty years ago I began my doctoral program in clinical psychology. Before arriving on campus at the University of Illinois, I made a private decision to abandon Christianity. God wasn't doing in me what I knew needed to be done. I had rededicated my life to Christ a dozen times during my teenage years and was still struggling with unabated lust, insecurity, jealousy, and personal ambition that had more to do with my dreams than God's plan. Christianity as I knew it, and I was an orthodox evangelical, had failed me. I decided to give psychology a chance to help me figure out what was wrong and change me.

The adventure didn't work out so well. Five years later I wore doctoral robes that were draped over a still lustful, insecure, jealous, and personally ambitious young man. I moved back to Christianity, convinced there was hope nowhere else. Five decades later I'm still wondering why God allows so much struggle in people's lives and why He doesn't arrange for failure to be a distant memory in the lives of His followers.

It's hard to dismiss the thought: There must be a way—more fervent prayer? increased passion for ministry? faithful practice of spiritual disciplines?—to arrange for my senior years to be golden, with less struggle and more victory. Am I trying to maneuver God to bless me in ways I imagine a loving God would want to bless a man who has been following Him for more than sixty years now? Could I be worshipping a golden calf in my “Christian” efforts to arrange for golden years?

What are God's thoughts on the matter? Does He see things differently? What are His ways of loving me that I can count on? Am I open to hearing Him tell me what His thoughts and ways actually are? And the big question: *How will I respond if I do hear from God?* Am I in danger of responding like Saul?

When Jonah heard from God, he resisted and ran. (I tell his story in the next chapter.) Before he became Paul, Saul heard God speak through a serious study of the Old Testament. But he distorted what he heard to fit what better suited his understanding of religion. And he denied the meaning of every passage that led him to a different way of thinking. The Messiah a slaughtered lamb? Jews and Gentiles becoming one family of God? Unthinkable! (We'll look at Saul's story in chapter 3.)

Remember Habakkuk? (I review his story in chapter 4.) He heard something from God that he really did not like. Evil Babylon would punish less evil Judah? That made no sense. But Habakkuk did not resist and run. He did not distort what he heard from God into a more pleasing message; he did not deny the unpleasant truth that

God told him. Instead, he trembled in confusion and fear, then trusted God to always be telling a good story, even when the story ran into some really hard chapters. Habakkuk is a model for Christians today.

I remember as a thirty-year-old enjoying lunch with eighty-year-old Dr. William Hendriksen, a renowned New Testament scholar. I had just read his commentary on Galatians and was eager to hear his take on the “other” gospel Paul was warning us to reject. For more than an hour that seemed like twenty minutes, I listened to this brilliant professor answer what to him must have been simple questions.

But then he surprised me. As our time drew to a close, Dr. Hendriksen reached across the table, rested his age-marked hand on my arm, and with moist eyes said, “Oh, Brother Larry, I think I’m just beginning to understand the gospel.”

At the very real risk of including myself in company where I don’t belong, now in my early seventies I’m thinking that perhaps I’m just beginning to understand the gospel. It’s so much more but never less than forgiveness of sin, restored relationship with God, and the promise of heaven forever. It’s a call to radical discipleship, to a life of perseverance through unpredictable suffering and of joy in knowing there is no condemnation for ongoing failure. It is not an easy life. It wasn’t meant to be.

Think of it this way:

- If I hear from God and feel no urge to resist and run, thinking that He’s asking too much, I haven’t heard from God. My view of the gospel is shallow.
- If I hear from God and am not tempted to distort what I hear into a call to a comfortable life, and if I’m not inclined to deny any real attention to passages that say otherwise, I haven’t heard from God. I’m believing another gospel.
- If I hear from God and see no reason to tremble at the cost required to trust God no matter what struggles come my way

and what ongoing sin continues, I have not heard from God. I've heard a cheap gospel.

When Christians, properly settled on the plan of salvation in Christ, hear the call of God on their lives, something deep in their souls is disrupted. When Christians hear God's call, not simply to a specific ministry or to a moral lifestyle or to theological study but to become a certain kind of person no one can ever fully become this side of heaven, a battle begins. The journey finds its way onto a narrow road.

It is then we quietly expect God to make the journey easier by doing at least two things: one, to bless us with enough good things and fulfilling opportunities to make the journey appealing; and two, to supply the power needed for us to overcome both our addictive sins and our relational sins and to overwhelm our weakness with the Spirit's strength so that sinful failure becomes only an occasional concern.

God does neither, not routinely. But why not? God loves us; He is good and He is powerful. The Father is in control over all that happens. The Son is praying for us as a faithful high priest. And the Spirit has moved into our souls, stirring the divine energy now alive in our new hearts. Suffering should diminish. Things should more often go our way. Prayers should be answered. And sin should become less of a problem, perhaps only an occasional slip now and then. Victory in Christ, victory over former temptations, a victorious Christian life—it all should be ours to celebrate and enjoy. That's how many of us think.

When difficulties intrude and failure continues, *we meet the incomprehensible God*. Who is He? What is He up to? We hear the gospel plan for our lives, a plan that includes trouble, hard times, failure, and ongoing sin, and it's not what we had in mind. *It doesn't make sense*. What then?

Three options present themselves. I listed them in the introduction. In more concise form, let me describe them again. It will prove helpful to keep these three options in mind as you keep reading.

- Option 1:** Resist God's call to a life of difficulty and ongoing failure and run from Him toward a way of living that seems better. Live for prosperity and healing, or at least for relief. You'll feel better.
- Option 2:** Stick with God but distort His message to better line up with your thoughts about what life should be and with your ways of understanding how God should lead you. In the process, convince yourself you're still following God.
- Option 3:** Hear the gospel story that will lead you through suffering and failure to hope only in Christ, never in yourself. Tremble before the God whose thoughts and ways, so far above yours, will at times make no sense to you. But trust that the God who died for you when you deserved eternal judgment is up to something good. He is always telling a good story. He can never do less.

The story of Jonah illustrates option 1. As we look at his story in the next chapter, we might see a little bit of Jonah in ourselves.