THE BIG QUESTIONS

THINKING CLEARLY, LISTENING WELL  DR. ANDY BANNISTER

GLORIOUS RUIN  HOW SUFFERING CAN SET US FREE

WHAT’S IN A NAME?  MARK MAXWELL

A GLIMPSE OF GRACE  STEVE PORR
What’s in a name?

Amir was in a quandary. A wonderful dream was about to come true as he prepared to leave his Asian home to study at a Canadian Bible college.

His student visa had been granted but now he faced the hurdle of Immigration. If officials were not pleased with his answers, the longed-for dream could crumble very quickly into nothing. Suspicious eyes stared at him from across the counter and the questions came thick and fast. Where was he going and why? Replying that he was on his way to Canada to take studies in Bible and theology could definitely interfere with his plans. What should he do? Amir wanted to be truthful, but at the same time, if he told the official he was going to study at “Prairie Bible Institute” there were sure to be problems, maybe even an end to his dream. The solution? Amir shortened the name of his school to “Prairie College.”

The story is not a new one. Our name has long been a challenge to overseas students wanting to study here as well as to our graduates hoping to take their expertise into “difficult access” countries. They are ready to fulfill Prairie’s mission of going to the far corners of the earth with the gospel and our name should not stand in their way. A change is needed.

There are other reasons as well. Over recent years PBI has evolved into three related but separate schools: Prairie Bible College, Prairie College of Applied Arts & Technology and Prairie School of Mission Aviation. It is time to bring those three small schools under one umbrella. Also, very capable graduates find the doors closed to opportunities because of our name. After considering several variations, the Board has determined, as Amir did, that the most functional and appropriate title is Prairie College. This simplified name will:

1. serve as an umbrella for all of our programs, whether Bible, ministry, vocational or other,
2. allow Prairie grads greater acceptance into professional opportunities and further education, and
3. make it easier for foreign students to study at Prairie while allowing our students easier access to countries that would deny a visa to someone from a “Bible” college.

Amir knew his longed-for dream could crumble into nothing. What should he do?

“A rose,” declared Shakespeare, “by any other name would smell as sweet.” What really IS in a name? Greater strength, we trust, and unity as a school, and most of all—open doors, both in and out. The name should serve our mission of bringing students from around the globe to Prairie for training and sending them out unhindered to fulfill the task we believe God has given to us.

Will you support us in our goal and help us spread the news?

Mark Maxwell is president of Prairie. He welcomes your comments. Send them to mark.maxwell@prairie.edu
I enjoyed reading the interview with Lisa and Francis Chan. This is a very important subject, but I was quite amazed that they didn’t mention what happens before the wedding. I have seen so many marriages that have gotten off on the wrong foot—Christians marrying non-Christians. In our “love is all that matters” world, it seems that too often this is not taken into consideration before they get married. We are even seeing many “good Christians” moving in before the wedding! I know that many pastors raise this question during pre-marital counseling, but in my experience, that isn’t taken too seriously in many cases.

J. David Wood, Rockford, IL

Servant Issue 95 notes: “70% of all decisions for Christ are made between the ages of four and fourteen, and yet just 3% of the church’s resources are focused on this age group.” That troubled me and I checked my own church’s budget: 1.5% of it for children’s curriculum, music and supplies! When pro-rating staff time, advertising, building maintenance and utilities over that age group, the percentage rose into the teens…More disconcerting is that the numbers are even lower for the post-confirmation group (ages 15 – 25) and many of them leave the church—and they would be Prairie’s target group.

Kenneth Kepler, Kimball, MI

It often seems that life has more questions than answers. In this issue of Servant Dr. Andy Bannister of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries encourages us to take a deeper look at the spiritual issues that affect our lives and to develop the habit of listening from the heart. Few of us remain untouched by sorrow during our lifetime and Tullian Tchividjian shares how, instead of imprisoning us, suffering can set us free as we discover the One who walks with us in our pain instead of standing at a distance.

You’ll find an expanded center section with a more detailed presentation of Prairie’s mission and needs as a school. See that section as well to order the products featured in this issue. We appreciate your feedback and trust that Servant will encourage your heart in meaningful ways.

Pat Massey Editor
pat.massey@prairie.edu
and universities to TV and radio, Andy regularly addresses audiences on issues with profound implications for life. In the DVD series entitled *Burning Questions* he addresses the things that matter to Christians, people of other faiths and those with no faith at all. Dr. Bannister shared with *SERVANT* his thoughts on how skeptics, seekers and believers alike can learn to listen well, think deeply and follow the evidence where it leads.

**SERVANT:** IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE QUESTIONS THAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY ASKING AND WHAT CHRISTIANS BELIEVE THEY’RE ASKING?

**ANDY:** Sometimes, yes. Christians do have a tendency to assume we know the questions people are asking rather than really listening to them. The same goes for the culture: sometimes we think we understand it without actually listening to what’s being said, discussed or broadcast. Among the most common concerns that rise to the top are issues like the meaning of life, whether there’s more to life than the material, or where true, lasting peace can be found. Perhaps one might sum those up in the bigger question: “What does it mean to be human?” You can’t properly address that question without asking the “God question,” but if we jump straight to the latter, we’ll talk past people.

**WHY DID YOU CREATE “BURNING QUESTIONS” AND HOW DO YOU ENVISION IT BEING USED?**

We wanted to explore six big questions in an interesting, engaging way, ensuring that we listen as we go to those who don’t share our Christian convictions. That’s why we talk to atheists, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists: to make sure that when somebody of that worldview sits down and watches *Burning Questions*, they will feel we have been fair in how they’ve been represented. I hope the series will be used in two ways. First, that believers will invite their unchurched friends to watch it and that it will generate great discussions that lead naturally to Jesus and the gospel. That’s why the presentation is structured the way it is, beginning quite broadly and then zeroing in on Jesus as the series progresses. Second, I’d hope this would be watched by Christians keen to learn how to better “give a reason for their hope.” It’s perfect for use either on your own or in church small groups, for example.

**OF THE SIX QUESTIONS YOU’VE ADDRESSED, WHICH ONE DID YOU FIND THE MOST DIFFICULT TO ANSWER?**

Probably the problem of evil and suffering in Episode 3. This issue hits many people at the level of the heart as well as the head, meaning an answer often needs to contain a strong pastoral component—and that’s hard to do well in a TV or video presentation. At the same time, I think the problem of evil and suffering is a profound gateway to the gospel. Only the Christian worldview actually enables you to diagnose the problem (unlike atheism, for instance, for which “good” and “evil” don’t actually exist but are just personal preferences) as well as describe what God has done about it (unlike a religion like Islam, in which God makes moral pronouncements from a distance but never actually provides a remedy).
ONE OF YOUR TOPICS IS “HAS SCIENCE BURIED GOD?” HOW DO YOU RECONCILE WHAT SOCIETY LIKES TO KEEP AT OPPOSING ENDS?

A great starting point is to observe that there is a huge range of questions that science cannot address. Science is a wonderful tool, but only applicable to a narrow range of topics. Try answering the question “What is a human life worth?” using science alone and see how far you get. Furthermore, the fact that the cradle of modern science was Christian Europe, that the first scientists were often people of deep faith, and that many scientists today profess a belief in God tells you that attempts to play science and faith off against each other are naïve.

YOUR MISSION IS HELPING THE BELIEVER THINK AND THE THINKER BELIEVE. WHAT DOES THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICAL TERMS FOR OUR CHURCHES AND COMMUNITIES?

Often it begins by reminding Christians that Jesus commanded us to “love the Lord your God with your heart, soul and mind.” Sometimes we have a tendency to focus on the first two and ignore the latter, but we do so at our peril. One of the things we love to do at RZIM is to encourage people to rediscover the Christian mind and to leap with both feet into culture, academia, politics or media and promote what the gospel is. We’ve too often reduced its message to moralism, legalism, politics or pet theologies. If we don’t know what the gospel is, how can we preach it? And second, fear. Because many of us have grown up in churches where we haven’t been taught why we believe what we believe, we’re afraid to tell people about Jesus in case they ask us a tough question. Maybe a third challenge would be that many Christians doubt that evangelism works. Deep down we’re not sure that it’s possible to preach Jesus and see people come to faith. Yet I find that when I explain the gospel in a way people can understand, listen to their questions, gently address them and then challenge them to consider Jesus, many respond. I’ve just come back from a week-long university mission and I was blown away by the response among students.

WHAT ARE THE HAZARDS OF CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS AND HOW CAN WE AVOID THEM?

Pride and intellectual arrogance. If you begin thinking you can argue people into accepting Jesus, you’ve gone very, very wrong. I love this prayer of C.S. Lewis:

From all my lame defeats and oh! Much more From all the victories that I seemed to score; From cleverness shot forth on Thy behalf At which, while angels weep, the audience laugh; From all my proofs of Thy divinity, Thou, who wouldst give no sign, deliver me. Thoughts are but coins. Let me not trust, instead Of Thee, their thin-worn image of Thy head. From all my thoughts, Even from my thoughts of Thee, O thou fair Silence, fall, and set me free. Lord of the narrow gate and the needle’s eye, Take from me all my trumpery lest I die.¹

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE GREATEST CHALLENGE FOR CHRISTIANS WHEN IT COMES TO SHARING WHAT THEY BELIEVE?

There are two things. First, not knowing what the gospel is. We’ve too often reduced its message to moralism, legalism, politics or pet theologies. If we don’t know what the gospel is, how can we preach it? And second, fear. Because many of us have grown up in churches where we haven’t been taught why we believe what we believe, we’re afraid to tell people about Jesus in case they ask us a tough question. Maybe a third challenge would be that many Christians doubt that evangelism works. Deep down we’re not sure that it’s possible to preach Jesus and see people come to faith. Yet I find that when I explain the gospel in a way people can understand, listen to their questions, gently address them and then challenge them to consider Jesus, many respond. I’ve just come back from a week-long university mission and I was blown away by the response among students.

WHAT ENCOURAGEMENT WOULD YOU GIVE TO A DISCUSSION GROUP LEADER OR NEIGHBOR WHO IS STRUGGLING TO SEE FRUIT THROUGH EVANGELISM?

Hang in there, keep praying, keep witnessing and keep asking good questions. Remember that it often takes multiple contact points before a person encounters Jesus. Don’t think that just because it wasn’t you who led someone to Christ, you’re an evangelical disaster. Indeed, one of the most nefarious lies the enemy likes to whisper in our ears is that we are personally responsible for dragging people into the Kingdom of Heaven. But making Christians is God’s job. Try to bear that burden and it will break you. Instead, be a faithful witness, explain the gospel as best you can (keep learning!) and trust God with the results.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU’D LIKE TO ADD?

Much of the church in Canada desperately needs to rediscover its evangelistic zeal. Apologetics is a powerful tool to that end, but remember: it is a tool to an end. The goal is not to be clever, or to answer every question, or to have read more books than the average person, but to share Christ with clarity, conviction and compassion. I truly believe the fields are not just white, but are getting whiter as more and more young people are now post-post-Christian. They’re not rejecting the gospel; they just don’t know what it is. What an opportunity, but we need to rise to the challenge, tool up and get out there. §

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF APOLOGETICS TODAY?

The best apologetics help to remove obstacles so people can see Jesus clearly. It’s not about trying to argue unbelievers into faith, but about removing stumbling blocks and showing them that Christianity is credible intellectually, emotionally and culturally.

HOW SHOULD BELIEVERS APPROACH SKEPTICS AND ATHEISTS?

With generosity, friendliness and compassion. But at the same time, don’t be afraid to ask good questions; don’t feel you’re the one who needs to defend everything. Press your atheist friend a bit on what they believe. For example, you might ask: “The word ‘atheist’ tells me what you don’t believe, but what do you believe?” Books like The Reason for God by Tim Keller or my forthcoming book The Atheist Who Didn’t Exist are great resources to help you engage atheist friends.

TRENDS

Canadian marriage trends
According to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada, census data shows that married couples declined as a proportion of all census families between 2006 and 2011 while other family forms have been increasing. These include common-law unions and lone-parent families. Despite this transition, however, marriage remains the predominant family structure (two-thirds of all family groups) and most children live with married parents.

The teenage brain
Over the last decade neuroscience has uncovered information on the development of the adolescent brain, with positive implications for families, education, health care, social policy and the legal system. Internationally respected neurologist Dr. Frances E. Jensen presents these new findings in The Teenage Brain: A Neuroscientist’s Survival Guide to Raising Adolescents and Young Adults.* Since the last area of the brain to mature is the frontal lobe where risks are evaluated, insight developed and decisions made, it is no surprise that teenagers show immaturity in judgment. Jensen’s book explores adolescent brain functioning and development, including learning and memory, and investigates the impact of influences such as drugs, multitasking, sleep and stress.

*NOT available through Prairie.

Religion in Australia
The number of people reporting no religion in Australia has increased substantially over the past hundred years, from one in 250 people to one in five. In 1911 there were 10,000 people (0.4%) who chose the option “No religion” on their census form; in 2011 there were just under 4.8 million (22% of Australians)

OPPOSITE AND SAME-SEX COUPLES AS A PERCENT OF ALL COUPLES

FROM THE INSIDE

How Libya’s martyrs are witnessing to Egypt
Egyptians were shocked by a horrific video showing the beheadings of twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Christians in Libya in February. The men, simple laborers who had crossed the border to escape poverty and unemployment at home, were captured and executed by ISIS for being “People of the Cross.” If the act was intended to create strife in Egypt between Christians and Muslims, however, the provocation failed when the tragedy united the two as never before. Declaring seven days of mourning, Egypt’s president visited the Orthodox Pope and travelled to a small village where most of the men came from, sitting on the floor with their poor relatives to express his concern.

What has not received attention is how the country itself responded to the killings. Less than 36 hours after the video was released, the Bible Society of Egypt had prepared a Scripture tract to distribute to the nation. The tract contains biblical quotations about the promise of blessing amid suffering alongside a poignant poem in colloquial Arabic and is designed to comfort the mourning and demonstrate a Christian response to the tragedy. Within a week, 1.65 million copies had been distributed in the Society’s largest campaign ever to Muslims and Christians and both evangelical and Orthodox churches. The tract has now been translated into English, French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Turkish and Chinese. The Society believes that outside of the Bible, it is the most widely distributed piece of Christian literature in Egypt’s history.

An in-country observer noted that in spite of their shock and grief, many Christians were proud of the men who died without denying their faith and the incident seemed to have emboldened believers throughout the country to stand more strongly for Christ. “Somehow they are holding their heads up with more confidence than before,” he said. “Dying as a martyr is something to be proud of.”

A brother of two of the martyrs even thanked the Islamic State for including their declaration of faith in the videos before killing them. “They didn’t edit out the part where the men declared their faith and called upon Jesus Christ,” he said. “ISIS helped us strengthen our faith.”

Icons made by Freepik from www.flaticon.com
When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business—and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It’s similar with sinners outside the church.

So Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behavior. They are, rather, places where human misbehavior is brought out in the open, faced and dealt with.

David Bentley Hart
philosopher and theologian

“'We are free not merely because we can choose, but only when we have chosen well. For to choose poorly, through folly or malice, in a way that thwarts our nature and distorts our proper form, is to enslave ourselves to the transitory, the irrational, the purposeless.'”

Gerhard Forde
Lutheran theologian
1927 – 2005

“'When the righteous cannot connect the realities of their experience with the truths of God, then God is calling them to trust him that there is more to it than they can see. As with Job, there is a battle being fought in the heavenlies. Trust in God, not explanations from God, is the pathway through suffering.'”

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Meditation

Eugene Peterson
in his introduction to the book of James in The Message

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NOW YOU KNOW

46 million: the number of people who received Starbucks gift cards during the Christmas holidays, about one in seven Americans.
TIME, January 2015

Advertisers in this year’s Super Bowl broadcast (2015) paid the highest price in history for a 30-second ad: $4.5 million.
Variety

May 15, 2015, will mark the 75th anniversary of the opening of the first McDonald’s restaurant in San Francisco, CA. There are now more than 35,000 locations worldwide.
TIME, December 2014

More skyscrapers will open in China in 2015 than in any other nation.
TIME, December 2014

The Ebola outbreak in West Africa has sickened close to 25,000 people and killed over 10,000.
TIME, December 2014

Estimated value of a copy of the Magna Carta from the year 1300 found in a scrapbook in Kent, England: $15.2 million.
TIME, March, 2015
A 1983 grad, professional photographer Ron Nickel recently returned to Prairie to join the Digital Media program. To senior student Paul Sankar from Chennai, India, he’s been “more than a teacher. He’s also someone who’s encouraged me and been available to help outside of the classroom.”

In addition to mentoring the next generation of digital media professionals, Ron maintains an active international photography schedule that has taken him literally around the world. Freshman Sheena Meija feels that the strength of the program comes from those experiences.

“Ron sets a high standard,” she says, “and provides honest and constructive feedback that really helps us improve. On the first day he showed us his portfolio and inspired us that we might also do this as a career and ministry one day.”

These up-and-coming photographers, filmmakers and designers are in good hands as they prepare to use digital media for good around the world.

Discover more about Prairie’s Digital Media program at www.prairie.edu/dm

Becky Berdahl, RN, has taught in Prairie’s Practical Nursing program since 2007 and has led the International Practicum five times. Second-year students Jennifer Pronk and Breanne Gerber believe that she’s a role model for future Christian nurses.

“Becky encourages us to think about how we will bring our faith into the workplace,” says Jennifer. “It’s obvious that her life is rooted in her faith and she challenges us to research difficult questions for ourselves and turn to the Bible for answers.”

Breanne concurs: “She’s so passion-
It seems that my story thus far has been one of searching for identity and learning the impact of influence.

As a young teen I began to realize that I could no longer live under the persona of my parents and friends, but needed to follow my own trail of discovery. That threw me into confusion. Who was I after all? If I didn’t know myself, how could I know what brings fulfillment?

Missions-minded individuals and incredible teachers at my Christian high school seemed to find joy in serving others, so I began to do the same. It turned out, though, that just doing good things did not bring peace. Moving into the job market after graduation, I found that working hard brought me positive feedback and a kind of fulfillment. I also saw the extent to which I was being scrutinized by my coworkers and the influence that came with that, even at the age of eighteen. The older men would challenge me with questions but when they saw that my actions and my words lined up, there was a new tone of growing respect. The same thing happened on a different jobsite.

Eventually, however, the weight of feeling the need to be “perfect” became oppressive and I switched my search from fulfillment to freedom and peace. Seeking my value through the opinions of others was an impossible life, so I found that being a little tipsy helped me stop caring. The more I drank, the more removed I felt from my problems.

All this running didn’t take me far enough so I headed for the oil rigs in Alberta and Saskatchewan in an effort to get away from everyone who knew me. Not wanting to risk my life to substance abuse, I made the choice to abstain from alcohol completely as long as I was on a rig. Once again, the men there watched my actions and continually questioned my motives. Determined to do things on my own, I didn’t seek out anyone to care for or encourage me and it left me emotionally and spiritually drained. A personal trauma finally broke me and I returned home after a year to spend the next few months doing nothing and keeping to myself—not the best idea.

I began to think about a career, perhaps as a pilot. It didn’t take long to enroll in Prairie’s flight program and hopefully there I could just live my own life and not worry about anyone else. After all, it was a small Bible college on the wide-open prairies. That was my plan but it didn’t seem to be working. Even as I fought the responsibility, it was obvious that how I lived had an influence on the Body of Christ, just as it had on the men on the oil rigs. When my Impact leader asked if he could train me to take on a group of my own the following year, I knew it was the beginning of a journey of submission to God.

That fall I met my group: EMT students who were preparing to enter an environment where they would be exposed to sin and sadness on a daily basis. To my surprise, they related well to me because of my background in a tough industry and my personal experiences, both good and bad. If I’m the only person who learns from my mistakes, their value is limited so it’s been gratifying to see how that comes into play with my guys. When I am willing to be used, God shapes even my regrets to help others.

Philippians 4: 6,7 speaks to me when I struggle to do things on my own instead of giving them up to God: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (NIV). As teachers and friends here at school pour into my life, that motivates me to do the same for others, but not because I “have to.” I am learning that peace doesn’t come by striving to be who I think I need to be. It comes from resting in who I am in Christ.
Glorious

TULLIAN
TCHIVIDJIAN
We were on I-95, heading south. After two years of living in Knoxville, Tennessee, my family and I were returning home to southern Florida to plant a church, and we were excited. It was not going to be easy, but it was going to be a lot easier there than it would be anywhere else.

You see, in my hometown I was more than an anonymous pastor. I was a Tchividjian. My parents were well-established in the community; my mother as a nationally renowned speaker and author, the daughter of Billy Graham; my father a sophisticated European psychologist whose practice helped countless people. My pedigree would be a huge boost. So when I heard my father's voice on the line, telling me that he and my mother were separating after forty-one years of marriage, I didn't know what to say. Little did I know that it was just the beginning of a painful journey that would turn my life and faith upside down.

My parents' divorce is simply one particularly poignant example. In fact, I have experienced God using painful events to wake me up and free me of unbelief and idolatry more times than I would care to admit. In the case of my parents, I had told myself that as long as I was their son, I was someone. So when they announced their separation, I began to question everything: who I was, what I'd been taught, even the validity of their faith. I had to go back and reinterpret my entire life through the lens of recent events. It was painful. Indeed, it is always painful when our idols crumble and fall apart, as they inevitably do.

One of my idols at that point in my life was my family's reputation and the stability of my parents' marriage and faith. The grief brought me to my knees and put me in touch with my need for God in a way that nothing else could have at that moment. Yet prayer and repentance were not my immediate response. Stubborn sinner that I am, it took a little while to get there.

Whenever what we've depended on for meaning—and it's usually one of God's good gifts—is stripped away, our first reaction tends to be one of anger, self-pity, blame and entitlement. But idolatry feeds on itself, robbing us of joy until we have no other choice but to cry out for God. Fortunately, God's office is at the end of our rope and he intends to free us from more than our idolatry; he intends to free us from ourselves. He even wants to liberate us from our need to find a silver lining in suffering.

We look for ways to manage pain. We medicate; we minimize; we moralize. We rage and we run. We develop theories to explain what is happening to us. While they may temporarily help us categorize and compartmentalize our thoughts and feelings, when true suffering comes, all our speculations fall flat. The Whys of suffering keep us shrouded in a seemingly bottomless void of abstraction where God is reduced to a finite ethical agent, a limited psychological personality, whose purposes measure on the same scale as ours. But we worship a God who is in the business of freeing captives and creating trust where there was none before. In fact, the cross tells us that he does so through suffering, not despite it.

Everyone is suffering in some way, today, right now. Perhaps your situation is dire: a death in the family, a painful heartbreak, the loss of a job, a wayward teenager. Maybe your situation is relatively innocuous: a harshly worded email, a few extra pounds that won't go away, or an unexpected car-maintenance bill. The individual factors may be trifling, but the suffering is all too real. When we resist classifying it as suffering, we embrace the misconception that God is interested only in the more tragic situations of our lives. Yet so often the little things are the big things.

There may be something noble about keeping things in proper perspective, but soon we are dictating to God what he should or shouldn't care about. And it is a slippery slope! If the only things that qualify as suffering in your life are natural disasters or global warfare, you will soon find yourself plastering a smile on your face and nodding over-enthusiastically whenever someone asks you how you are doing.

Grief is not something that operates according to a specific time frame. Yet when we do not grasp that God is present in pain,
we eventually insist on victory or, worse, blame the sufferer for not “getting over it” fast enough. This is more than a failure to extend compassion; it’s an exercise in cruelty.

When an admission of suffering or weakness is interpreted as a lack of faith, honesty soon falls by the wayside, leaving the sufferer lonelier than before. There must be a Good Friday before there can be an Easter, and if our suffering is hedged in language intended to shield God from culpability, we never get beyond the life-support stage. Instead of a hospital for sufferers, church becomes a glorified costume party where lonely men and women tirelessly police each other’s façade of holiness.

Suffering is not imaginary. Pain and suffering do not surprise God; we do not need to deny them. Christianity is in no way a stoic faith. It fundamentally rejects the “stiff upper lip” school of thought. Unfortunately, some Christians are guilty of throwing out an equivalent sentiment when they play the “God is sovereign” card as a way to trump every evil that comes your way. The less traditional version of this religious stoicism is known as the prosperity gospel that essentially makes the experience of brokenness and pain the fault of the sufferer because of the inability to muster enough personal faith.

This is not a biblically faithful way to respond to suffering and neither does God treat it that way. According to Romans 8, the fallenness of humankind has cosmic ramifications. We live amid devastating brokenness, and the cure for this is nothing less than Jesus dying on the cross for sinners like you and me.

God is not interested in what you think you should be or feel. He is interested in you. And he meets you where you are. Jesus is not the man at the top of the stairs; he is the man at the bottom, the friend of sinners, the savior of those in need of one. Which is all of us, all of the time.

God does not get things done in the world by merely adding a new coat of paint; he brings the house down to the foundation so he can build something new. He does not argue with us so that we take our medicine and get well. He raises us from the dead! God doesn’t give us advice about how to overcome; in the gospel, Jesus has already overcome! Amid our glorious ruin, Jesus is strong, so we’re free to be weak; Jesus won, so we’re free to lose; Jesus was a somebody, so we can be a nobody; Jesus was extraordinary, so we are free to be ordinary; and Jesus succeeded for us, so we are free to fail!

Rather than run from the inevitability of life’s tragedies, we are invited to face them, head-on, with hope. We can even begin to call things what they are rather than what we wish them to be. To the hurting, sin-sick sufferer, the cross is a beacon of hope and rest like no other. Scratch that—the man hanging on the cross is a beacon of hope and rest like no other.

Our hope does not ultimately lie in our present liberation. There is no guarantee that we will experience relief from pain. I wish I could say there was. But the good news of the gospel is not an admonition to hang on to God with all your strength and will power and you’ll be ok. The good news of the gospel is not some gnostic encouragement to view your suffering in the right way. The good news is that God is hanging on to you. He’s not waiting for you to save yourself or mature into someone who no longer needs him. He will not let you go, come what may.

We have enough books tackling the Why and How of suffering. How it can transform our lives, how we can leverage pain and tragedy to make us better people. Results, results, results! Underneath this hopeful veneer, such philosophies tend to fall flat when things don’t go according to plan, when we find out that our power, especially in the face of suffering, is a lot more limited than we thought. Pain would not be pain if we could harness it for personal gain, though the tendency to attempt to do so is a universal one. This is not to say that How and Why are not honest questions. But they can also be a prison that leaves us cold and confused. Information is seldom enough to heal a wounded heart. The only question that will ultimately point us toward the truth is the Who amid our suffering. Which is fortunate, since it is the only question that God has seen fit to answer, concretely, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

We may not ever fully understand why God allows the suffering that devastates our lives. We may not ever find the right answers to how we’ll dig ourselves out. There may not be any silver lining, especially not in the ways we would like. But we don’t need answers as much as we need God’s presence in and through the suffering itself. For the believer, one thing is beautifully and abundantly true: God’s chief concern in your suffering is to be with you and be himself for you.

In other words, our ruin may not ultimately spell our undoing. It may in fact spell the beginning of faith. And in the end, that is enough. Gloriously so.
School was out in our small prairie town and there were boundless activities to occupy a young boy and his raucous band of friends. All of us had daily chores to do, mowing the lawn, pulling weeds in the garden or shelling peas from the previous day’s pickings. Then we’d be off to the swimming pool, or down to the barbershop on Main Street where the owner would let us play snooker on the old slate tables in the dimly lit backroom – a quarter a game, paid on the honor system. When all else failed, we could be found out in the trees laboring to build rickety forts connected by secret underground tunnels and inventing all kinds of innocent mischief in the process.

One of our school teachers and his family lived on our street and had just embarked on an extended vacation. We had grown accustomed to seeing peculiar activities in their home, for they were not the typical family of our conservative community. These were the effervescently turbulent days of the early 70’s and two of our teacher’s older sons had recently returned home from travels abroad to unfamiliar lands, bringing back the culture and trappings of those inimitable times.

Their curious clothing, odd mannerisms and long, shaggy hair spoke to our young and fertile imaginations of strange and mysterious customs and shadowy activities. Ever-vigilant neighbourhood parents discussed all of this in whispered conversations, falling silent whenever any of us approached. We had our secret suspicions, and under such perilous circumstances we had learned that the safest bet was to assume the worst possible scenario and in so doing, justify the need for a rigorous response.

Our experience was by no means unique. Across the country families lived in a suspended state of foreboding, generational pillars creaking and tilting, distant muffled drumbeats of change resonating on the horizon of their consciousness. Those transitions and challenges were often ignored or misunderstood, for it was an era when the greatest cross-cultural adaptations many would face would be within their own culture, their own communities, their own flesh and blood.

It was in this inequitable setting that Jim and his family suddenly appeared. They had volunteered to be house-sitters for our vacationing teacher and his family and we soon discovered that Jim was an exceptionally talented carver, a craftsman of the highest calibre. Years later his hand-made duck calls would bring national recognition and fame, but this was long before that. He did not at all seem to mind the presence of our small band and we would occasionally stop by his porch to watch him whittle away at a block of hardwood with his pocketknife.

Slowly, the formless wood began to take the shape of a splendid gunstock, one that would be the prize of any collection. The luster of the translucent grain rippled out of the softly glowing body, coaxed to life by its creator. We all admired this display of diligent craftsmanship with profound interest, indeed, even beginning to feel that somehow, perhaps due only to our frequent presence, we had all become part of this magnificent task.
One day, as he often did, Jim left the gunstock on the porch when he went inside for lunch. Shortly afterward, we reconvened at the teacher’s house and were shocked to discover that the prized work was missing. No small hue and cry was immediately raised by our indignant band, and we sprang into action like a baying pack of raw-boned hounds, spurred on by this disgraceful insult to our esteemed visitor. Soon enough the guilty party was apprehended, just down the street. He was a younger boy from the corner home, the house with the tattered asphalt siding and the run-down station wagon parked on the side lawn.

We surrounded the culprit in a loud and relentless display of unmitigated dismay and snatched the stock from him, our outrage growing by the minute. Then, while a few of us held him captive, the carving was solemnly returned to its owner with heartfelt murmurs of sympathy.

It was evident that Jim was upset, and with good reason. His flawless work was now indelibly marred, small dirty handprints smeared across his masterpiece, stains etched into the faultless hardwood. He accompanied us to where the boy was being held in the middle of the gravel street and stood silently over him, his shadow falling across the small sinner trapped in the pitiless heat of the mid-day sun. The carver watched with a frown as our voices rose in a shrill anticipated portrayal of redemption. I am still amazed by the work that he is doing in my soul: a nudge here, a whittle there, a profound task yet in progress as the imperfections slowly give way to beauty.

But little could have prepared us for what happened next. Suddenly bending down, Jim picked up the boy and, without a word, carried him back to the porch where he sat down and went quietly back to work on the gunstock with the child on his lap as if nothing had happened... a nudge here, a whittle there, all the while speaking softly to the attentive boy, a quiet conversation shared only by the two of them. This was neither expected nor understood by any one of us and we slunk away quietly, perplexed and perhaps even a little disappointed at this unusual turn of events.

I should have known better, but that knowledge was yet to come, still unforeseen. My work and travels in later years would take me across North America and beyond. Many friends were made and some tragically and suddenly lost, casualties of despair on the twelve-lane interstate to self-realization. Misled, and at times misleading, fleeing myself, carried in the erratic updraft of euphoria on frail and failing wings, I wandered to the frenetic edge of darkness and back again, wearied and shaken.

In time I would personally become acquainted with another friend who also worked with wood. Someone who knew more than a little about holding back judgment from those who deserved it most. Someone who cared for me far more than I had cared for myself. He has been known by many names, this carpenter of Nazareth, but the one that captivated me was the one given him by his most vitriolic accusers when they labelled him “the friend of sinners.” It was a label I could identify with, a name I understood quite readily.

I saw the gunstock only once after that day so long ago and even now I can still recall my astonishment. Where dirty hands had left dark blotches, there was now the striking relief of a hunting dog on point, poised above gently waving grass against a backdrop of pine trees. He stood ready with nose lifted into the breeze and one leg cocked in expectation. There was no sign of the unsightly stains, and in truth, it appeared as if the carving had been part of the design all along.

Over the years I’ve thought often of that day, each time comforted by that powerful and poignant picture of grace foreshadowed in the actions and creation of the carver. Too often mine has been the part of the frightened child, the guilty party, encircled by a crowd of accusers. But it was “the friend of sinners” who provided me the grace to carry on when I needed it most—rearranging the puzzle pieces of my life into an unanticipated portrayal of redemption. I am still amazed by the work that he is doing in my soul: a nudge here, a whittle there, a profound task yet in progress as the imperfections slowly give way to beauty.

Steve Porr is an alumnus of Prairie High School and Prairie Bible College. He works as an electrical technician and is presently involved with the design of an offshore platform off the coast of Newfoundland.
When our kids were smaller and messier, I bought my wife a fridge magnet: “Super Mom. More powerful than any tantrum. Able to read the thoughts of sneaky children.”

Ramona laughed, but not as heartily as I had hoped. This surprised me. She is normally upbeat in a non-television evangelist wife sort of way. But I noticed that the perk was waning. She didn’t kick the dog or scramble eggs on my head at the breakfast table, but the laugh was gone. “What’s wrong?” I asked, thinking she would say, “You haven’t fixed the dripping tap.”

Instead, she reminded me of the dinner out we enjoyed a few nights earlier. Couples we admire were comparing stress and jobs and hours worked and one of the ladies asked Ramona, “What do you do?” Now, our kids were younger then and the truth was simple: she did the bookkeeping for our business, chauffeured young children around, was part-time fashion and homework consultant, chef, economist, and orderer of my private world. But what came from her mouth was this: “I’m just a mom.”

There was an awkward pause until one of the guys filled it. “After the kids are gone, I won’t have a high-paying job. Sometimes I wonder if I made a wise choice.”

So I sat down, came up with a list, and pasted it to the fridge. Here it is. This is what she makes:

• I make 1,000 meals a year, give or take a few hundred. Five thousand if you count each person I feed.
• I make the kids do dishes. Then shut the TV off and go outside so they’ll learn something useful.
• I make threats but never idle ones.
• I make our house a home. I make good on my promises.
• I make mistakes, and ask forgiveness.
• I make the kids apologize and hope they mean it.
• I make a home they want to bring their friends to, a place of peace, a place they’re safe.
• I make them go to church so that one day they’ll want to go all by themselves.
• I make their friends put their cell-phones in another room when they eat with us. If they don’t, I make them put their phones in the blender.
• I make my kids respect their elders by showing respect myself.
• I make them question easy answers, clichés, and wrong thoughts about Heaven.
• I make them read books, pull weeds, and bath the dog.
• I make them play real sports rather than virtual ones.
• Sometimes I make pies from scratch. Sometimes I make excuses. And sometimes I make a bee-line for the bathroom where I lock the door and read a book.
• I make mistakes. And receive forgiveness.
• I make time for owies, scrapbooks, and tea with friends.
• I make grass stains and boredom disappear.
• Most of the time I make myself very clear when disagreeing with my husband.
• I make Thanksgiving leftovers edible. I make vacations fantastic.
• I make our children see that hard work is good, and money is useful, but relationships make life rich—especially a relationship with the One who made it all.
• I may not make much money, but I make my husband feel like a million bucks.
• I make time each day to sit in the rocker and read God’s Word and pray. It’s slowly giving him the opportunity to show me that I’m valuable not because of what I make, but because of who made me. The God who loves me has made me a daughter of the King.
• I even make myself laugh when my husband tells me: “If a guy says he’ll fix something, he’ll fix it. There is no need to remind him every six months.”
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