

THE
NORTH FACE
of GOD

Hope for the times when God seems indifferent



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The North Face of God

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CHAPTER ONE

ASCENDING
WITH OUR
INITIAL
QUESTIONS

*How long, O Lord, will you look on
and do nothing?*

PSALM 35:17

MOUNT EVEREST sits enthroned in the Himalayan mountain range, an alpine uplift formed eons ago by the collision of two continents. At 29,035 feet, its summit is the highest spot on earth, and still rising. As a mountain, it is in its adolescence, adding a quarter of an inch every year as the tectonic plates beneath it continue to push upward.

Its pyramid-like formation separates the northern border of India from China, and if you fell to the right from one of its ridges, it is possible that you would drop eight thousand feet into Chinese-controlled Tibet; if you fell to the left, you would fall six thousand feet into Nepal. Known to those who live in its shadow as Chomolungma, "Goddess Mother of the World," the mountain was renamed after Sir George Everest, British director of the nineteenth-century Great Trigonometrical Survey of India.

Over the years a number of statistics have been compiled of Everest expeditions. Two records are most notable: those who have reached the summit and those who have died trying.

Some have died from medical conditions: dehydration, hypoxia, hypothermia, and pulmonary and cerebral edema. Some climbers simply fell asleep and never woke up. A number have died in avalanches, others from a disorienting temporary blindness that stranded them without hope of rescue. Still others died from sudden storms with winds up to ninety miles an hour. Most, however, lost their footing and fell to their deaths.



Tibetan peasants living at the base of the mountain offer prayers so that climbers won't lose their footing and fall. They do this by burning juniper twigs and putting out prayer flags—brightly colored squares of fabric on which prayers are printed—strung together like laundry hung out to dry. These Tibetan Buddhists believe that the flags hold the prayers of the climbers, which, when blown by the wind, ascend to the goddess of the mountain, bringing blessing on the expedition.

Often, our own prayers, especially those we pray when we're young, are similarly simple: seeking God's blessings. Or they are prayers of gratitude, thanking God for the dew-dropped wonder of the world we live in—a world full of sunshine, or at least rainbows amid the rain.

But then one day something happens. Clouds rush in, riding on gale-force winds that threaten to blow you off the mountain. You learn that you have cancer or that your spouse is having an affair or your child has been arrested or your best friend betrays you. Suddenly, the world in all its wonder doesn't seem so wonderful anymore. The clouds cluster low and unbroken, unrelenting. The fury of the tempest seems so personal, and it's all you can do to hunker down and hang on.

God, we are told, mercifully causes the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust. Most of us can understand that, even children. When it comes to floods, though—or tsunamis—it's a little more difficult to understand. When the harsh realities of life sweep over the serenity of our relationship with God, the aftermath of that torrential downpour can be devastating. Like the devastation that came to a friend of mine named Lee. Hear his prayer as he wrestled with God's silence during a painful period of unemployment:

God help me, please!

Please don't humiliate me again,

not before my friends

not before my wife



not before my children

not before my parents. . . .

*Father, what's helping find me a job compared to the power it takes
You to run this world for even one day?*

Nothing!

*If a sparrow doesn't fall without You noticing, why aren't You
noticing me? Why are You tending millions of beautiful flowers that
bloom today and are gone tomorrow but You won't tend to me, Your
child? One nod, one word from You and a door would open. Why
are You humiliating me? . . .*

*Jesus, I don't know any more words. I have no more words. Does
Your silence mean, No, You won't help? Does it mean, wait?*

How long?

I'm listening, Lord. Straining to hear.

*I'm calling, Lord, with all my heart. Please, let me laugh again, help
me find my reason for getting up in the mornings, take away this
humiliation that slaps me in the face all day, every day.*

During Lee's time of unemployment, I also prayed. His disappointment with God became mine. It hurt so much to see him hurt. I could offer him a lot of things—my friendship, my encouragement, my prayers—but I couldn't offer him the one thing he needed. And it wasn't a job. It was a connection with God, a God he felt no longer cared enough to listen, let alone to speak or to help.

Below is the prayer of a woman who feels just as helpless in regard to a friend of hers. The prayer is by Patricia Hooper and first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine.

*Lord, I call to you—
there is someone
I want you to follow home.*



*The night is cold.
 The wet leaves hide the edges
 of the dark path. He
 is lost. I would
 go with him if I could,
 put my arms around him,
 share my coat. He is
 three hundred miles
 away. No one else
 sees him. Do you
 see him, his step hurried
 through the black rain?
 Or are you
 still busy, as you were when,
 before he harmed himself
 the last time, he was the one
 who called?*

Can you hear the slosh of the lonely footsteps? Can you feel the numbness of the face blotched with cold? Can you sense the desperation of the man who once called to God but calls to him no longer?

Are you still busy?

There is an indictment in the question—subtle but unmistakable. The indictment is stronger in the following prayer, pressing its litigious finger against the chest of a God who seems to be hiding behind his Fifth Amendment rights.

The prayer is from a journal entry in *Lament for a Son*, a father's attempt to reach a summit of understanding about the death of his son. The son's name was Eric. The father is Nicholas Wolterstorff. If anyone should have been equipped with the right questions for such a climb, it would be Wolterstorff, a professor of philosophical theology at Yale Divinity School. Yet neither an institution as pedigreed as Yale, nor a career as prestigious as teaching, nor a field as profound as theology, was able to give this grieving father the answers he was searching for.

Eric was bright, and his future was full of promise. He entered



college as a National Merit Scholar, excelling in math, science, and computer programming and majoring in art history. He was an accomplished artist and musician who traveled extensively and lived life to the fullest. Mountains were his passion. He loved the beauty, the solitude. He loved the challenge of the climb and the exhilaration of the heights. He loved it all, to the very end.

Eric was twenty-five when one misstep on an Austrian mountain-side cost him his life. His death devastated the family, especially his father, who worked through his grief one slippery step at a time, hacking away at the ice with his questions in an attempt to gain a foothold of comprehension. He first asked himself the questions, then he asked his family, his friends, and finally God.

How is faith to endure, O God, when you allow all this scraping and tearing on us? You have allowed rivers of blood to flow, mountains of suffering to pile up, sobs to become humanity's song—all without lifting a finger that we could see. You have allowed bonds of love beyond number to be painfully snapped. If you have not abandoned us, explain yourself.

Every time I watch the nightly news, it seems that somewhere in the world a new river of blood begins to flow. Some sudden upthrust of suffering unsettles the landscape. Some newly saddened refrain reaches for heaven, but its trembling hands go begging, the way they did one night while I was working on this book.

The evening news included a story about a kidnapping in a small town in North Dakota. A woman had been abducted as she was walking to her car in the parking lot of the shopping mall where she worked. Her name was Dru Sjodin. She was twenty-two.

At the time, two of my daughters were twenty-one and twenty-four. They also worked at a mall, also walked to their cars in the parking lot. *Thank God they are safe*, I remember thinking. "Keep them safe, God, please," I remember praying.

I prayed for the woman who'd been kidnapped. I prayed for her every day, several times a day. Who knows how many others prayed? Thousands, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions. I prayed for



Dru until I heard that her blood had been found in a sex offender's car, along with a knife in the trunk that also had her blood on it. My heart sank along with my hope. Five months later, as I was writing these pages, I heard that her body had been found.

I cried. I got angry. I got depressed.

Suddenly God seemed less sovereign, the world less certain, our lives less safe. And a family was left shattered—forever. Life for them will never be the same. A part of them will always be wounded, always be sad, always empty. That moment of tragedy will forever leech color from every other moment in their lives—not just the moments that lie ahead of them but also all that lie behind, for the happiness they once felt is forever altered by the sadness of all that was lost, all that was cut short, all that will never be.

If God is everywhere present, he saw what happened in that car. If God is all powerful, he could have stopped it. That he saw it and did nothing to stop it is the darkest and most unsettling mystery in the universe.

From that black hole in our otherwise orderly system of theology comes a densely packed array of questions. Why, God? Why was this young woman's life cut short? And why was it cut short in such a tragic way? Why didn't you intervene? Why do you allow such horrendous evil in the world? Why don't you put your foot down and put a stop to it? Why don't you *make* your will be done here on earth as it is in heaven?

Why, God? Why?



When questions like that go unanswered, it feels as if God has abandoned us. And if he hasn't abandoned us, we feel he at least owes us an explanation for his silence. That is the heart of Jesus' prayer on the cross: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" How painful a question for the Son of that God to ask.

He doesn't ask, "Why are the soldiers treating me like this?"

He knows why: They know not what they are doing.



He doesn't ask, "Why did Peter deny me?"

He knows why: Satan had demanded to sift him like wheat.

He doesn't ask, "Why am I being crucified?"

He knows why: It is for this reason that he came to this world.

Jesus could bear the pain of the nails, the thorns, the beatings. He could bear the public humiliation, the personal ridicule. He could bear the betrayal, the desertion, the denial of his friends. But the abandonment of God he could not bear.

We are told that before Jesus raised that anguished question, he was shrouded in three hours of darkness. Who knows all that he endured during those hours. Who knows how much physical pain he endured, how much psychological pain, how much spiritual pain. Who knows what access the forces of darkness had to him, to his mind, his emotions, even to his dreams as he drifted in and out of consciousness. All we know is that at the end of those three hours he "called out with a loud voice" (Matthew 27:46).

The words he called out are from the first verse of Psalm 22, a psalm of lament voiced by David a thousand years earlier:

*My God, my God, why have you
abandoned me?
Why are you so far away?*

I think of that last question, and a bumper sticker comes to mind. You've seen it, I'm sure: *If God seems distant, guess who moved?*

How would you like to follow *that* car to church?

How would you like to be in a small group with the driver?

Or share a table at Starbucks?

How do you feel when the pain of your struggle is reduced to a slogan? Worse still, a sarcastic slogan. When we are hurting, we need



sensitivity, not sarcasm; a listening ear, not a lecture; a place where we can lay down our burdens, not a platitude to add onto them.

If God seems distant, guess who moved?

Had David moved?

Read his next words in Psalm 22 and decide for yourself:

Every day I call to you, my God, but you do not answer.

Every night you hear my voice, but I find no relief.

From the context of the psalm, we know that David's life hung in the balance (vv. 20-21). His circumstances were never more desperate, yet his God never more distant. Had David moved? It doesn't sound like it. It sounds as if he sought God day and night.

Had Nicholas Wolterstorff moved when he questioned God about the death of his son? Had Patricia Hooper moved when she questioned God's care for her friend? Had Lee Hough moved?

Had Jesus?

Had you, when during the most agonizing time of your life you called out to God, and he was silent?

So how do you reconcile a God who cares with a God who doesn't speak, doesn't seem to act, doesn't seem to lift even a finger in the face of such desperate circumstances? The feeding of a family that is starving for some crust of hope. The protection of a suicidal friend. The saving of a son who has fallen down a mountain.

What makes it more difficult to reconcile is that he is not only our God, but also our Father. And Jesus not only told us to pray to him (Matthew 6:9-13), he told us what to expect from him: "You parents—if your children ask for a loaf of bread, do you give them a stone instead? Or if they ask for a fish, do you give them a snake? Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask him" (Matthew 7:9-11).

What should a child do when he asks his father for something to eat, and the father hands him a snake? Can we blame him for jumping back with an astonished look on his face? It is only right for the



child to raise a question, calling out in a loud voice, “Why? Why would you do such a thing? You’re my father. I thought you loved me. I thought you cared for me. I thought I could come to you for anything.”

The only way a child can gain understanding of such a circumstance is if he asks honest and heartfelt questions.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches its adherents to avoid the stress that strong emotions bring—to avoid the disappointment, the anger, and the despair that loss may bring. Yet it seems that by denying these emotions we are denying our humanity.

How can one be human and *not* have strong emotions in the face of heart-wrenching losses? And how can those emotions not raise questions?

Our prayers are not something we string out to flap in the wind, hoping a sudden gust lifts our words to some benevolent deity. They are so much more substantial. They are full of wonder and gratitude, curiosity and concern, joy and sorrow.

And questions.

From the Edenic innocence of our childhood prayers to the east-of-Eden prayers of our adulthood, we raise ourselves to God by the questions we ask. That was the opinion of Moshe, the religious mentor of Elie Wiesel, a young Jewish boy who grew up in Moshe’s neighborhood and became a prolific author, a celebrated academic, and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize.

“Man raises himself toward God by the questions he asks Him,” he was fond of repeating. “That is the true dialogue. Man questions God and God answers. But we don’t understand His answers. We can’t understand them. Because they come from the depths of the soul, and stay there until death. . . .”

“And why do you pray, Moshe?” I asked him.

“I pray . . . that He will give me the strength to ask Him the right questions.”

A PRAYER FOR UNDERSTANDING

Lord,

I know that an overwhelming majority of people pray. Even atheists pray some of the time. And when the fate of a loved one is at stake, everyone prays.

Yet in spite of our prayers, not all of our loved ones make it off the mountain. Some fall to their deaths. Some fall sick and die. Some fall prey to freezing weather.

So what makes the difference?

Good equipment? Good balance? Or is it just good luck?

And how does prayer fit into it all?

People pray and live. People pray and die.

Is it some formula that makes the difference? Some special wording? What?

I know you care about what happens here in this world. You created it. You sustain it. You sent your Son to die for it.

So why don't you intervene more often? Why don't you respond more quickly—especially when the prayers are so urgent?

*I sometimes feel like a child in a world that has lost its wonder,
in a world that has turned scary with shadows,
and I can't find my way home.*

*Please be patient with all my questions,
especially with the ones that seem so childish.*

*And grant that in my faltering prayers
I might stumble across a question
that leads me closer to you.*

base camp



Altitude: 17,700 Feet

For the choir director: A psalm of David.

O LORD, how long will you forget me?

Forever?

How long will you look the other way?

*How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
with sorrow in my heart every day?*

How long will my enemy have the upper hand?

Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!

*Restore the sparkle to my eyes,
or I will die.*

*Don't let my enemies gloat, saying, "We have
defeated him!"*

Don't let them rejoice at my downfall.

But I trust in your unfailing love.

I will rejoice because you have rescued me.

*I will sing to the LORD
because he is good to me.*

PSALM 13

In climbing Mount Everest by the route taken by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the first climbers to successfully reach the summit, everyone starts at the same place.

Base Camp.

Base Camp is located at the bottom of the Khumbu Glacier. There the climbing team assembles to take inventory of its supplies, check the equipment for a final time, discuss strategy, and be examined by the expedition's doctor to make sure everyone is physically ready for the ascent. The ascent from Base Camp to the summit takes a couple of months, so several camps are necessary along the



way for the climbing teams to rest, rehydrate, and acclimatize before they ascend to the next level.

In the course of this book, I would like to take a similar approach, pausing at some strategic places to allow you time to rest and reflect before we go on to the next chapter. The 1953 route taken by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay had a total of nine camps, and that will be the same number we will use in our own ascent.

Because climbers are sometimes snowed in for days at a time, they often bring a book to read. On the historic 1924 expedition of George Mallory and Andrew Irvine, for example, when they were in their tent at the various camps, they read poetry to each other from Robert Bridge's anthology, *The Spirit of Man*, and talked about its meaning.

Instead of selections of poetry, I would like us to read selections from the Psalms. And I would like us to talk about them, particularly how they relate to us when God seems an Everest of indifference.



Psalms 13, quoted at the beginning of this section, is the first psalm we will consider. The superscription tells us it was written by David. I don't know what circumstances prompted his prayer, but from the context, he is at an impasse in his relationship with God, struggling for a foothold. His enemies are overwhelming him, and that is part of what he is struggling with, but that struggle is not nearly as great as the enigma of God's seeming indifference. "How long?" becomes the refrain of his lament, which he repeats four times:

*O LORD, how long will you forget me?
 . . . How long will you look the other way?
 How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul,
 with sorrow in my heart every day?
 How long will my enemy have the upper hand?
 (vv. 1-2)*



With these questions he chips away at the ice, trying to cut a step or secure a piton* that will take him closer to a summit of understanding. It appears, though, that he is suffering from spiritual snow blindness and is in danger of falling headlong down the mountain.

*Turn and answer me, O LORD my God!
Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die. (v. 3)*

Some kind of downfall appears imminent, but before he loses his footing, he looks at the rope around his waist, which grows taut and holds him. That rope is one of the great characteristics of God.

*But I trust in your unfailing love.
(v. 5, emphasis mine)*

The phrase “unfailing love” comes from a single Hebrew word: *chesed*. It is a word particularly used in contexts of God’s love for his people. The love is not only initiated by him but also sustained by him. It emphasizes the faithfulness of God’s love over generations in spite of how wayward the object of his love is in any given generation.

David’s own waywardness is a case in point, as seen in Psalm 25:6-7:

*Remember, O LORD, your compassion and unfailing love,
which you have shown from long ages past.
Do not remember the rebellious sins of my youth.
Remember me in the light of your unfailing love,
for you are merciful, O LORD.*

Later in David’s life, when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged to have her husband killed, he again appealed to God. But not on the basis of his position as king; or of his personal merit;

*For definitions of mountain-climbing terms see the glossary at the end of the book.



or of his past accomplishments, such as his slaying of Goliath. Notice the appeal in Psalm 51:

*Have mercy on me, O God,
because of your unfailing love. (v. 1, emphasis mine)*

So confident was David in this characteristic of God that it was also the basis of his hope for the future.

*Surely your goodness and unfailing love
will pursue me all the days of my life,
and I will live in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23:6)*

I don't know where you are on the mountain or what put you there. I don't know how wearied you are by the climb or how weathered you are by the elements. I don't know how alone or abandoned you feel. I don't know how disoriented you are or how despondent. But wherever you are and however you feel, I want you to curl up in your tent . . . close your eyes . . . and remember.

Remember your own history with God, the way David remembered his. Think back on the times when God expressed his love for you. Remember those times? Remember the words he spoke? Remember the way he answered your prayers? Remember the gifts he gave you? the many kindnesses he showed you? the forgiveness? the protection? Remember the love you felt for him, the joy, the tears? Remember how he touched you, embraced you, and led you?

He hasn't changed. Neither has his love for you. It may not *seem* to be there, the way a rope around your waist doesn't seem to be there when it's slack. But it *is* there. Paul told us that nothing—*nothing*—would ever be able separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39).

God's love for us, not ours for him, is the rope around our waist.

It's a rope that doesn't fray, no matter how much it is stretched.

It doesn't freeze, no matter how cold it gets.

It doesn't fail, no matter how far we fall . . . or how often.

A PRAYER OF GRATITUDE

Dear God,

Thank you for the base camps you have placed in my life.

Thank you for the time to rest and recuperate from the rigors of the climb.

Thank you for the opportunity to get rehydrated from your Word.

Thank you for allowing me whatever time I need to adjust to the altitude.

How monotonous it must seem to you—all the “How longs?” that I have prayed.

But, Lord, how I want the snow to stop and the poor visibility that goes with it.

How I want the wind to stop and the cold that goes with it.

*How I want the burning in my lungs to stop,
the soreness in my legs,
the dizziness in my head.*

Hold on to me, Lord.

*Hold on to me with the rope of your unfailing love,
for the slope ahead seems so steep,
the steps so slippery,
and the summit so far away.*

*Help me to trust not the strength of my legs in making the climb,
but the strength of your arms holding the other end of the rope.*

*Keep my eyes, not on how slack that rope may seem at the moment,
but simply on the next step that lies ahead of me.*

What is that next step, Lord?

*One step, that's all I ask. Just show me that one step.
And once it is clear, give me the courage to take it.*

*With each step I will trust in your unfailing love
to hold me, to guide me, and to keep me safe.*