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Chuck Frye was a bright young man of 17, academically gifted and highly motivated. After graduating near the top of his class in high school, he went on to college, where he continued to excel in his studies. Upon completion of his B.S. degree, he applied for admittance to several medical schools. The competition for acceptance was, and is, fierce. At the time, I was a professor at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, where only 106 students were admitted each year out of 6,000 applicants. That was typical of accredited medical programs in that era. Despite these long odds, Chuck was accepted at the University of Arizona School of Medicine and began his formal training in September.

During that first term, Chuck was thinking about the call of God on his life. He began to feel that he should forgo high-tech medicine in some lucrative setting in favor of service on a foreign field. This eventually became his definite plan for the future. Toward the end of that first year of training, however, Chuck was not feeling well. He began experiencing a strange and persistent fatigue. He made an appointment for an examination in May and was soon diagnosed with acute leukemia. Chuck Frye was dead by November.

How could Chuck's heartsick parents then, and how can we now, make sense of this incomprehensible act

of God? This young man loved Jesus Christ with all his heart and sought only to do His will. Why was he taken in his prime despite many agonized prayers for his healing by godly family members and faithful friends? The Lord clearly said no to them all. But why?

Thousands of young doctors complete their education every year and enter the medical profession, some for less than admirable reasons. A tiny minority plan to spend their professional lives with the down and outers of the world. But here was a marvelous exception. If permitted to live, Chuck could have treated thousands of poor and needy people who would otherwise suffer and die in utter hopelessness. Not only could he have ministered to their physical needs, but his ultimate desire was to share the gospel with those who had never heard this greatest of stories. Thus, his death simply made no sense. Visualize with me the many desperately ill people Dr. Chuck Frye might have touched in his lifetime, some with cancer, some with tuberculosis, some with congenital disorders, and some too young to even understand their pain. Why would Divine Providence deny them his dedicated service?

There is another dimension to the Frye story that completes the picture. Chuck became engaged to be married in March of that first year in medical school. His fiancée was named Karen Ernst, and she was also a committed believer in Jesus Christ. She learned of Chuck's terminal illness six weeks after their engagement, but she chose to go through with their wedding plans. They became husband and wife in July, less than

four months before his tragic death. Karen then enrolled in medical school at the University of Arizona, and after graduation she became a medical missionary in Swaziland in southern Africa. Dr. Frye served there in a church-sponsored hospital until 1992. I'm sure she wonders—amidst so much suffering—why her brilliant young husband was not allowed to fulfill his mission as her medical colleague. And, yes, I wonder too.

The great theologians of the world can contemplate the dilemma posed by Chuck Frye's death for the next 50 years, but they are not likely to produce a satisfying explanation. God's purpose in this young man's demise is a mystery, and there it must remain. Why, after much prayer, was Chuck granted admittance to medical school if he could not live to complete his training? From whence came the missions call to which he responded? Why was so much talent invested in a young man who would not be able to use it? And why was life abbreviated in such a mature and promising student, whereas many drug addicts, winos, and evil-doers survive into old age as burdens on society? These troubling questions are much easier to pose than to answer. And there are many others.

The Lord has not yet revealed His reasons for permitting the plane crash that took the lives of my four friends back in 1987. They were among the finest Christian gentlemen I have ever known. Hugo Schoellkopf was an entrepreneur and an extremely able member of the board of directors for Focus on the Family. George Clark was a bank president and a giant

of a man. Dr. Trevor Mabrey was a gifted surgeon who performed nearly half of his operations at no charge to his patients. He was a soft touch for anyone with a financial need. And Creath Davis was a minister and author who was loved by thousands. They were close friends who met regularly to study the Word and assure mutual accountability for what they were learning. I loved these four men. I had been with them the night before that last flight, when their twin-engine plane went down in the Absaroka mountain range in Wyoming. There were no survivors. Now their precious wives and children are left to struggle on alone. Why? What purpose was served by their tragic loss? Why are Hugo and Gail's two sons, who are the youngest among the four families, deprived of the influence of their wise and compassionate father during their formative years? I don't know, although the Lord has given Gail sufficient wisdom and strength to carry on alone.

At the first mention of the "awesome why," I think also of our respected friends, Jerry and Mary White. Dr. White is president of the Navigators, a worldwide organization dedicated to knowing Christ and making Him known. The Whites are wonderful people who love the Lord and live by the dictates of Scripture. But they have already had their share of suffering. Their son, Steve, drove a taxi for several months while seeking a career in broadcasting. But he would never achieve his dream. Steve was murdered late one night by a deranged passenger in the usually quiet city of Colorado Springs. The killer was a known felon and

drug abuser who had a long history of criminal activity. When he was apprehended, the police learned that he had called for the cab with the intent of shooting whoever arrived to pick him up. Any number of drivers might have responded. Steve White took the call. It was random brutality, beyond any rhyme or reason. And it occurred within a family that had honored and served God for years in full-time Christian service.

I'm reminded of a church in Dallas, Texas, which was destroyed by a tornado some years ago. The twister suddenly dropped from the boiling sky and "selected" this one structure for demolition. Then it lifted again, damaging almost none of the surrounding territory. How would you interpret this "act of God" if you were a member of that congregation? Perhaps the Lord was displeased by something going on in the church, but I doubt if this was His way of showing it. If that is how God deals with disobedience, then sooner or later every sanctuary will be in jeopardy. So how do we explain the selective destruction of the twister? I wouldn't try. There are simply times when things go awry for reasons that may never be understood!

Further examples of inexplicable sorrows and difficulties could fill the shelves of the world's largest library, and every person on earth could contribute illustrations of his or her own. Wars, famines, diseases, natural disasters, and untimely deaths are never easy to rationalize. But large-scale miseries of this nature are sometimes less troubling to the individual than the circumstances that confront each of us personally.

Cancer, kidney failure, heart disease, sudden infant death syndrome, cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, divorce, rape, loneliness, rejection, failure, infertility, widowhood! These and a million other sources of human suffering produce inevitable questions that trouble the soul. "Why would God permit this to happen to *me*?" It is a question all believers—and many pagans—have struggled to answer. And contrary to Christian teachings in some circles, the Lord typically does not rush in to explain what He is doing.

If you believe God is obligated to explain Himself to us, you ought to examine the following Scriptures. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 25:2, "It is the glory of God to conceal a matter." Isaiah 45:15 states, "Truly you are a God who hides himself." Deuteronomy 29:29 reads, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God." Ecclesiastes 11:5 proclaims, "As you do not know the path of the wind, or how the body is formed in a mother's womb, so you cannot understand the work of God, the Maker of all things." Isaiah 55:8-9 teaches, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'"

Clearly, the Scripture tells us that we lack the capacity to grasp God's infinite mind or the way He intervenes in our lives. How arrogant of us to think otherwise! Trying to analyze His omnipotence is like an amoeba attempting to comprehend the behavior of man. Romans 11:33 (KJV) indicates that God's judg-

ments are “unsearchable” and his ways “past finding out.” Similar language is found in 1 Corinthians 2:16: “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” Clearly, unless the Lord chooses to explain Himself to us, which often He does not, His motivation and purposes are beyond the reach of mortal man. What this means in practical terms is that many of our questions—especially those that begin with the word *why*—will have to remain unanswered for the time being.

The Apostle Paul referred to the problem of unanswered questions when he wrote, “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul was explaining that we will not have the total picture until we meet in eternity. By implication, we must learn to accept that partial understanding.

Unfortunately, many young believers—and some older ones too—do not know that there will be times in every person’s life when circumstances don’t add up—when God doesn’t appear to make sense. This aspect of the Christian faith is not well advertised. We tend to teach new Christians the portions of our theology that are attractive to a secular mind. For example, Campus Crusade for Christ (an evangelistic ministry I respect highly) has distributed millions of booklets called “The Four Spiritual Laws.” The first of those scriptural principles states, “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life.” That statement is cer-

tainly true. However, it implies that a believer will always comprehend the “wonderful plan” and that he will approve of it. That may not be true.

For some people, such as Joni Eareckson Tada, the “wonderful plan” means life in a wheelchair as a quadriplegic. For others it means early death, poverty, or the scorn of society. For the prophet Jeremiah, it meant being cast into a dark dungeon. For other Bible characters it meant execution. Even in the most terrible of circumstances, however, God’s plan is wonderful because anything in harmony with His will ultimately “works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Still, it is not difficult to understand how confusion can develop at this point, especially for the young. During the springtime of their years, when health is good and the hardships, failures, and sorrows have not yet blown through their tranquil little world, it is relatively easy to fit the pieces in place. One can honestly believe, with good evidence, that it will always be so. Such a person is extremely vulnerable to spiritual confusion if trouble strikes at that point.

Dr. Richard Selzer is a surgeon and a favorite author of mine. He writes the most beautiful and compassionate descriptions of his patients and the human dramas they confront. In his book *Letters to a Young Doctor*, he said that most of us seem to be protected for a time by an imaginary membrane that shields us from horror. We walk in and through it every day but are hardly aware of its presence. As the immune system protects the

human body from the unseen threat of harmful bacteria, so this mythical membrane guards us from life-threatening situations. Not every young person has this protection, of course, because children do die of cancer, congenital heart problems, and other disorders. But most of them are shielded—and don't realize it. Then, as the years roll by, one day it happens. Without warning, the membrane tears and horror seeps into a person's life or into that of a loved one. It is at this moment that an unexpected theological crisis presents itself.

So what am I suggesting—that our heavenly Father is uncaring or unconcerned about His vulnerable sons and daughters, that He taunts us mere mortals as some sort of cruel, cosmic joke? It is almost blasphemous to write such nonsense. Every description given to us in Scripture depicts God as infinitely loving and kind, tenderly watching over His earthly children and guiding the steps of the faithful. He speaks of us as “the people of his pasture, the flock under his care” (Psalm 95:7). This great love led Him to send His only begotten Son as a sacrifice for our sin, that we might escape the punishment we deserve. He did this because He “so loved” the world (John 3:16).

The Apostle Paul expressed it this way: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39).

Isaiah conveyed this message to us directly from the heart of the Father: “So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (Isaiah 41:10). No, the problem here is not with the love and mercy of God. Nevertheless, the questions persist.

My chief concern at this point, and the reason I have chosen to write this book, is for my fellow believers who are struggling with circumstances that don't make sense. In my work with families who are going through various hardships, from sickness and death to marital conflict and adolescent rebellion, I have found it common for those in crisis to feel great frustration with God. This is particularly true when things happen that seem illogical and inconsistent with what had been taught or understood. Then if the Lord does not rescue them from the circumstances in which they are embroiled, their frustration quickly deteriorates into anger and a sense of abandonment. Finally, disillusionment sets in and the spirit begins to wither.

This can even occur in very young children who are vulnerable to feelings of rejection from God. I'm reminded of a boy named Chris, whose face had been burned in a fire. He sent this note to his psychotherapist:

*Dear Dr. Gardner. Some big person, it was a boy about 13, he called me a turtle. And I know he said this because of my plastic surgery. And I think God*

*bates me because of my lip. And when I die, he'll probably send me to hell. Love, Chris.*

Chris naturally concluded that his deformity was evidence of God's rejection. It is a logical deduction in the eyes of a child: "If God is all-powerful and He knows everything, then why would He let such a terrible thing happen to me? He must hate me."

Unfortunately, Chris is not alone. Many others come to believe the same satanic lie. In fact, the majority of us will someday feel a similar alienation from God. Why? Because those who live long enough will eventually be confronted by happenings they will not understand. That is the human condition. Let me say it again: It is an incorrect view of Scripture to say that we will always comprehend what God is doing and how our suffering and disappointment fit into His plan. Sooner or later, most of us will come to a point where it appears that God has lost control—or interest—in the affairs of people. It is only an illusion, but one with dangerous implications for spiritual and mental health. Interestingly enough, pain and suffering do not cause the greatest damage. *Confusion* is the factor that shreds one's faith.

The human spirit is capable of withstanding enormous discomfort, including the prospect of death, *if the circumstances make sense*. Many martyrs, political prisoners, and war heroes have gone to their graves willingly and confidently. They understood the sacrifice they were making and accepted its meaning in their

lives. One is reminded of Nathan Hale moments before he was hanged. He said to his English executioners, "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country." Soldiers in battle often die valiantly, even throwing their bodies on live hand grenades to protect their comrades. Others charge deadly machine gun emplacements in order to achieve military objectives. Their attitude appears to be, "The cause for which I'm risking my life is more than justified."

Jim Elliot, one of five missionaries who were speared to death by Auca (now Waorani) people in Ecuador, best described this ultimate investment. He is quoted in Elisabeth Elliot's book *Through Gates of Splendor*: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." That biblically based understanding turns martyrdom into a glorious victory.

By contrast, Christians who become confused and disillusioned with God have no such consolation. It is the *absence of meaning* that makes their situation so intolerable. As such, their depression over a sudden illness or the tragic death of a loved one can actually be more severe than that experienced by the nonbeliever who expected and received nothing. It is not uncommon to hear a confused Christian express great agitation, anger, or even blasphemy. This confused individual is like a little girl being told by her divorced father that he will come to see her. When Daddy fails to show up, she suffers far more than if he had never offered to come.

The key word here is *expectations*. They set us up for disillusionment. There is no greater distress in

human experience than to build one's entire way of life on a certain theological understanding, and then have it collapse at a time of unusual stress and pain. A person in this situation faces the crisis that rattled his foundation. Then, like little Chris, he must also deal with the anguish of rejection. The God whom he has loved, worshiped, and served turns out to appear silent, distant, and uncaring in the moment of greatest need. Do such times come even to the faithful? Yes, they do, although we are seldom willing to admit it within the Christian community.

Wasn't that precisely what happened to Job? This God-fearing man of antiquity had done no wrong, yet he suffered a series of staggering losses in a matter of hours. I have heard many sermons based on the life of this remarkable Old Testament character, but the source of Job's most intense frustration (his inability to find God) has often been overlooked. That is a vital point in the story. Job lost everything—his children, his wealth, his servants, his reputation, and his friends. But those tragedies, as terrible as they were, did not create the greatest agitation for him. Instead, Job fell to the ground in worship and said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised" (Job 1:20-21).

Then God permitted Satan to afflict Job physically. He was stricken "with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head" (Job 2:7). His wife became irritated and goaded her husband to curse God

and die. Job replied, “You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?” The Scripture then says, “In all this, Job did not sin in what he said” (2:10). What an incredible man of faith! Not even death could shake his confidence, as he proclaimed, “Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him” (13:15).

Eventually, however, Job reached a point of despair. This man of towering strength who had coped with sickness, death, and catastrophic loss soon faced a circumstance that threatened to overwhelm him. It emanated, strangely enough, from his inability to find God. He went through a time when the presence of the Almighty was hidden from view. More important, God wouldn’t talk to him. Job expressed his great anguish this way:

*My complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy in spite of my groaning. If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling! I would state my case before him and fill my mouth with arguments. I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say. Would he oppose me with great power? No, he would not press charges against me. There an upright man could present his case before him, and I would be delivered forever from my judge. But if I go to the east, he is not there; if I go to the west, I do not find him. When he is at work in the north, I do not see him; when he turns to the south, I catch no glimpse of him. (Job 23:2-9)*

Are we to assume that this inability to find and communicate with God in certain times of personal crisis was unique to Job? No, I believe it occurs in many other cases, perhaps to the majority of us at some point in life. Scripture tells us that “no temptation has seized you except what is common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13). We all go through similar experiences. King David must have felt like Job when he asked the Lord with great passion, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). Then in Psalm 77, David again expressed the anguish of his soul: “Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever?” (vv. 7-8). We’re told in 2 Chronicles 32:31 that “God left [Hezekiah] to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.” Even Jesus asked why he had been abandoned by God in His final hours on the cross, which ultimately illustrates the experience I am describing.

I am convinced that these and other biblical examples were provided to help us understand a critically important spiritual phenomenon. Apparently, most believers are permitted to go through emotional and spiritual valleys that are designed to test their faith in the crucible of fire. Why? Because faith ranks at the top of God’s system of priorities. Without it, He said, it is impossible to please Him (Hebrews 11:6). And what is faith? It is “the substance of things *hoped for*, *the evidence of things not seen*” (Hebrews 11:1, KJV). This determination to believe when the proof is not provided and when the

questions are not answered is central to our relationship with the Lord. He will never do anything to destroy the need for faith. In fact, He guides us through times of testing specifically to cultivate that belief and dependence on Him (Hebrews 11:6-7).

Still, a theological answer of that nature doesn't take away the pain and frustration we experience when we journey through spiritual no-man's-land. And most of us don't handle our difficulties as well as Job or David. When the heat is on and confusion mounts, some believers go through a horrendous spiritual crisis. They "lose God." Doubt rises up to obscure His presence and disillusionment settles into despair. The greatest frustration is knowing that He created the entire universe by simply speaking it into existence, and He has all power and all understanding. He could rescue. He could heal. He could save. But why won't He do it? This sense of abandonment is a terrible experience for someone whose entire being is rooted in the Christian ethic. Satan then drops by for a little visit and whispers, "He is not there! You are alone!"

What does such a person do when God makes no sense? To whom does he confess his troubling—even heretical—thoughts? From whom does he seek counsel? What does he tell his family when his faith is severely shaken? Where does he go to find a new set of values and beliefs? While searching for something more reliable in which to believe, he discovers that there *is* no other name—no other god—to whom he can turn. James 1:8 refers to that individual as a "double

mindful man [who] is unstable in all his ways" (KJV). He, of all people, is most miserable and confused!

Such a person reminds me of a vine that grew behind the house Shirley and I owned in southern California. It was an ambitious plant that had a secret plan to conquer the world! In its path was a gorgeous, 150-year-old oak tree that I was most anxious to protect. Every few months, I would look out the back window and notice that the vine had again attacked the tree. There it was, winding its way up the trunk and around the upper branches. If allowed to continue, the oak tree would eventually succumb to the invasion of the killer vine!

The solution was really quite simple. Instead of jerking the plant off the tree, which would have damaged the bark, I made one quick cut near the bottom of the vine. Then I walked away. Though nothing appeared to have changed, the green monster had suffered a mortal blow. The next day, its leaves looked a little dull. Two or three days later they were slightly discolored around the edges. Soon they began turning brown with cancerous-looking black spots near the center. Then they started falling off, eventually leaving just a dry stick extending up the trunk. Finally, the stick fell away and the tree stood alone. So much for blind ambition.

Is the analogy clear? Christians who lose God during a period of spiritual confusion are like the vine that has been cut off from its source. They are deprived of nurture and strength. They seem to cope at first, but the concealed wound is mortal. They begin to wither in the

heat of the sun. They usually drop out of church and quit reading the Bible and praying. Some go off the deep end and begin doing things they would never have contemplated before. But there is no peace within. Indeed, some of the most bitter, unhappy people on earth are those who have become estranged from the God they no longer understand or trust.

Jesus spoke of this relationship in John 15:5-6 when He said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

If you are among those people who have been separated from the Vine because of disillusionment or confusion, I have written with you in mind. I know you are hurting. I understand the pain that engulfed you when your child died or your husband betrayed you or your beloved wife went to be with Jesus. You could not explain the devastating earthquake, or the fire, or the terrible tornado, or the unseasonable rainstorm that ruined your crops. The insurance company said it was an "act of God." Yes. That's what hurt the most. The examples are endless. I'm thinking of a young man I know who was convinced the Lord would let him have the girl he desperately loved. He thought he could not live without her. The day she married another man, his faith was shaken to its foundation.

I'm reminded also of the woman who called in 1991

to tell me that her 28-year-old son had been killed in the Persian Gulf War. He was in a helicopter that was shot down somewhere in Iraq. He was her only son and was a born-again Christian. Only a handful of the 600,000 United Nations troops in that war failed to come home alive, yet this God-fearing man was one of them. My heart aches for his grieving mother.

The great danger for people who have experienced this kind of tragedy is that Satan will use their pain to make them feel victimized by God. What a deadly trap that is! When a person begins to conclude that he or she is disliked or hated by the Almighty, demoralization is not far behind.

For the heartsick, bleeding soul out there today who is desperate for a word of encouragement, let me assure you that you *can* trust this Lord of heaven and earth. There is security and rest in the wisdom of the eternal Scriptures. We will discuss those comforting passages in subsequent chapters, and I believe you will see that the Lord can be trusted—even when He can't be tracked. Of this you can be certain: Jehovah, King of kings and Lord of lords, is not pacing the corridors of heaven in confusion over the problems in your life! He hung the worlds in space. He can handle the burdens that have weighed you down, and he cares about you deeply. For a point of beginning He says, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10).