

FOREWORD BY DR. LARRY CRABB



TRUE NORTH



CHOOSING GOD IN THE
FRUSTRATIONS OF LIFE

GARY HEIM & LISA HEIM

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True North

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WILL YOU GO NORTH OR SOUTH?

GARY

My soul finds rest in God alone.

Psalm 62:1

Tired, cold, and soaking wet, we kept hiking through the winding trails of West Virginia wilderness. I was leading eight junior high students on their first backpacking trip. The rain kept falling. Hope kept us moving; the church bus, just two hours away, would take us to base camp where dry clothes, a hot meal, and steaming showers waited.

Somewhere along the trail, Ellie, our senior high leader, came to me with a question. “Should we be going north or south?” she asked.

“North,” I said confidently, not noticing the concern in her voice.

Pointing to her compass, she said, “We’re going south.”

Her words took my breath away. Nightfall wasn’t far off. I panicked at the thought of being lost in the wilderness. The shame of failure flooded my soul. Condemning words haunted me: *I’m such a pathetic leader*. Fighting back the noise of shame and self-contempt, I tried to pray and think of what to do.

“Paul,” I said to one of the students, “run ahead for a hundred yards and see if the trail makes a turn north. Look for any trail marker. Look for anything. Go!”

Desperately I waited for good news. Minutes later Paul came running back. “The trail keeps going straight. I didn’t see any trail marker.”

This can't be happening! I said to myself, trying hard to conceal my inner struggles. *We've been hiking for nearly seven hours. We followed the map. We've been so careful! How could we be lost?*

I stood in the rain with eight wet, cold, exhausted junior high students. They stared at me, waiting for my decision. Which way should we go? In the tension-filled silence, a student named Biz spoke from the group. "Why don't we pray?"

Throughout our trip, I'd been teaching the kids a life lesson: when you're in trouble, humble yourself and pray. I called it turning north to God instead of going south into unbelief, anger, and worry. Now my words were coming back to me. When you're in trouble, humble yourself and pray.

But doubts rushed through my mind. *What good can prayer do? How can God possibly show us which way to go in the middle of the wilderness? There are no trail markers. We haven't seen a person for two days. How can God make the way clear? It seems impossible.*

Ignoring my doubts, I clung to the truth that God can help us, even when it seems impossible. I thanked Biz for her faith and said, "That's a good idea. Let's get in a circle and pray." Holding hands in the middle of the trail, we asked our heavenly Father for help. One by one we offered our prayers of faith and hope.

"Dear God, we need help. We're lost and don't know what to do."

"Please help Mr. Heim know what to do, God."

"Dear Jesus, we don't deserve your help. But if you would be willing, would you please show us which way we should go?"

"We don't know how you could do this, God, but would you please give us certainty about which way we should go on the trail?"

"Thank you, Jesus, for helping us. Amen."

The last student had barely said, "Amen," when one of my kids said, "Look!"

Down the trail, we saw a middle-aged backpacker striding toward us. He held a walking stick and had his golden retriever alongside him. Overcome with joy, I literally ran to the guy.

"Can you tell me the name of the trail we're on?" I asked, hoping my voice didn't reveal my desperation. "We're kind of lost and in need of some help."

"I know," he said. "I saw you praying. I can do more than tell you the name of this trail. I can show you exactly where you are and which direction you need to go." With quiet confidence, he pulled out his GPS and half-a-dozen waterproof maps, then pointed to a map and spoke. "Here's where we're

standing. You're *exactly* where you need to be. Just keep going in the direction you were headed, and you'll be at your bus in about an hour."

Shouts of joy and praise to Jesus rang out from my fellowship of junior high adventurers. We thanked our rescuer and set out down the trail.

WE REACT TO LIFE'S FRUSTRATIONS

Life is often like my wilderness experience in West Virginia. Your day's going well, and then something or someone frustrates your plans. One minute I was confident we were on the trail that would lead us home. The next minute I thought we were lost in the middle of nowhere. It seemed like life was designed to frustrate me. And then God graciously rescued me from going south into despair by inviting me to turn to him through the humble request of a young teenage girl.

God sent his angel that day to lead us out of the wilderness. But honestly, God doesn't often rescue me from my struggles in such clear and dramatic ways. In fact, God would have had good purposes for us had he allowed us to wander, lost, late into the night. But here's the point: if we don't take time to think about how we react to daily frustrations and difficulties, we'll typically go south when we encounter struggles. We easily and habitually default to despair, worry, anger, or bitterness.

Lisa and I moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, nearly twenty years ago. Our first home was a fixer-upper. Many things needed work. Painting the garage was first on the list. I spent three weekends scraping old paint off and putting new paint on. Lisa had hung a decorative flowerpot by the garage door. One day as I was painting, I took the pot off the hook and set it on the ground near me. Lisa happened to look out the kitchen window that day and noticed I was splashing paint on her flowers. She responded by coming out of the house and saying, "You're getting paint on my flowers! Why don't you *ever* pay attention to what you're doing!"

Now if you're following my thinking, you can see this was a north-south moment in my life—a moment when I needed to be intentional about turning to God for my desire to feel loved and respected instead of going into an angry, self-centered reaction. And here's what poured out of my mouth in that snapshot in time: "I can't believe it! I spend three stinking weekends working in this hot, boiling sun, painting this garage, and I *never* hear *one* word of

encouragement! But as soon as I make one mistake, you're out here telling me about it!"

Lisa was stunned and wounded by my rage. Because she's such a good lady, she chose to humble herself instead of pouring gas on the fire by reacting in kind. She asked me to help her understand what made me so upset. Facing her open and nondefensive spirit, my anger subsided. We sat on our screened-in porch and talked. We both came to see and admit how wrongly we had treated each other.

Our typical default mode is to go south when we experience offense and frustration. And when we keep going south day after day, we get discouraged with life, God, and ourselves. We hurt and even come to hate the people we love. Worst of all, we fail to reveal the goodness and greatness of God because of our demanding and self-centered reactions.

When trouble comes, we're always faced with a decision: Will we choose to turn north to God or go south and react in self-centered ways? "In times of frustration," wrote Larry Crabb, "our High Priest sometimes seems more callous to our needs than sympathetic. We pray, asking God to hear our cry, pleading with Him to let nothing else go wrong. I wonder if sometimes the passion in our prayers reflects more of a *demand* than a *petition*. Frustration is excellent soil for growing a demanding spirit. It is therefore important that we handle difficulties well, allowing them to mature us rather than to push us toward demandingness."¹



Learning how to turn to God and surrender to him in times of groaning is never easy. It can feel like death. But it's the pathway to life and spiritual transformation. It's a narrow road (Matt. 7:13–14), but it's possible to find it, and it's the only way to know and treasure Jesus.

SATAN HAS A PURPOSE FOR OUR PAIN

When life is pleasant, it's easy to believe God is good. When life is unpleasant, people often say, "We're under attack from Satan." Satan is the Enemy of our souls, yet God is always preeminent. Satan can do nothing without God's consent (Job 1; Luke 22:31–32). Therefore, our focus and faith should be more on God and his good purposes for our pain than on Satan. But with that said, it's important to understand that every day we wake up to a world at war. We are opposed. We have an Enemy who hates and hunts us. What is his purpose for our suffering?

Jesus said the thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy; but Jesus has come that we might "have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). God is always working in every detail of our lives to help us turn our hearts toward him. The life we've always wanted is found in Jesus. Satan is always working to get us to doubt that life is in God. His destructive purposes are best served when we go south in response to the chaos and problems of life.

Satan has a very low opinion of us. He's convinced that we love Jesus only for the blessings we get from him—personal peace, good kids, good health, affluent lifestyle, reliable income, good friends, and meaningful job or ministry. Satan's purpose for bringing pain into our lives is to get us to curse God when we suffer. Listen in on his conversation with God:

Then the LORD asked Satan, "Have you noticed my servant Job? He is the finest man in all the earth. He is blameless—a man of complete integrity. He fears God and stays away from evil."

Satan replied to the LORD, "Yes, but Job has good reason to fear God. You have always put a wall of protection around him and his home and his property. You have made him prosper in everything he does. Look how rich he is! But reach out and take away everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face!" (Job 1:8–11 NLT)

Here's what I hear Satan saying about Job, you, and me: "Let me rough them up, bring pain into their lives, and they'll go south! No one loves you, God, for you alone. They're all in it for your blessings. They just want a pleasant life. Let me bring trouble into their lives, and they'll curse you."

While we may not curse God with our mouths when we face daily problems, Satan is happy if we curse God in our hearts by doubting his goodness. The next step is to slowly harden our hearts toward Jesus and then live with greater passion for something, anything, other than him alone. In fact, Satan is pleased if he can get us to worship and serve God's gifts instead of the Giver. John Piper says:

The greatest enemy of hunger for God is not poison but apple pie. It is not the banquet of the wicked that dulls our appetite for heaven, but endless nibbling at the table of the world. It is not the X-rated video, but the prime-time dribble of triviality we drink in every night. For all the ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of his love, it is a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife (Luke 14:18–20). The greatest adversary to God is not his enemies but his gifts. And the most deadly appetites are not for the poison of evil, but for the simple pleasures of earth. For when these replace an appetite for God himself, the idolatry is scarcely recognizable, and almost incurable.²

GOD HAS A GOOD PURPOSE FOR OUR PAIN

When God called Israel to be his chosen people, he miraculously delivered them from the bondage of Egypt and led them through the Red Sea. God's people burst into songs of gratitude. But following the miracles, God led his dearly loved children into a desert for forty years. When things went badly, they grumbled; when events went well, they were grateful. Up and down the story goes (Exod. 15–17; Num. 11–14).

Things haven't changed much over the last three thousand years. Most of us know what it's like to be in the wilderness, when our dearest dreams smash or almost smash, when all seems lost. We've been there: alone, afraid, confused, wondering if God even hears our cries. And if we live long, we'll be there again. More often than I want to admit, I've been a lot like Israel in

those days of wilderness testing. I can be so happy when life goes well, singing God's praise, and then quickly revert south into unbelief, anger, and rage when things go badly, doubting that God even notices me, let alone loves me.

Why does God take us, his dearly loved children, into the desert? In Deuteronomy, Moses looks back over those forty years and reflects on God's good purposes for Israel and for you and me. *Remember* is the first thing we're commanded to do:

Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deut. 8:2–3)

In the desert, Israel was to remember how they had faced troubles and frustrations of all kinds. At times they had no food or water. They feared death. Just like them, in the wilderness of West Virginia I had to decide if I would remember. Remember what? Remember God and trust in his faithfulness lest I forget him, panic, and try to seize control.

Would God's chosen people choose to turn to him in humble, grateful trust, or would they turn away from him and go south into unbelief, fear, and grumbling? The events they faced in the desert were not pointless, random acts. Neither are the events we face in daily life. We're to remember that God himself led them all the way in the desert in order to see what they would do in those difficult moments. Each experience in the desert presented them with an opportunity to turn north to God and make him the treasure and center of their lives, or with the temptation to forget him and go south into unbelief and anger. It's amazing that every moment of every day God gives us the choice to either remember, love, and trust him, or to forget him.

We really don't know where we're at with God until we face difficulty. Trouble and hardship, big or small, will expose what is truly in our hearts. We think we're pretty mature in Christ. Then someone suddenly criticizes us, and we quickly go south into depression or anger and slander. C. S. Lewis puts it this way:

Surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am.³

Those events and provocations are being used by God to bring to the surface the lies we believe. They are God's agents of change. And in facing the lies, we can come to believe the truth. The truth sets us free.

It's important to remember that there is always purpose to our pain. God allowed me to get paint on Lisa's flowers. He allowed Lisa to criticize me. God allowed us to think we were lost that day in the wilderness. Will we turn to him and trust him in those moments, or forget him? Do we believe *God is enough* to sustain and lead us in those painful moments of life no matter what happens, or will we give way to unbelief and demand our own way? No matter how many times we fail, God patiently works—perhaps encouraging us one moment, then frustrating our plans through difficult circumstances the next—to help us learn how to surrender to him so he can become our unshakable security. While God doesn't cause people to sin against us, he does use everything that comes into our lives for our good. Nothing touches us that hasn't been filtered through the sovereign greatness and loving goodness of God's heart.

GOD IS IN THE BIG AND SMALL

Many people suffer in ways we might call “big,” such as hearing the biopsy is cancerous or losing a job. Through major victories, failures, and hardships, David came to understand where life was found:

My soul finds rest in *God alone*;
 my salvation comes from him.
He alone is my rock and my salvation;
 he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.
 (Ps. 62:1–2, emphasis added)

As David wrote those words, he had lost his kingdom; Absalom, his son, was trying to kill him. David was fleeing into the desert for his life.

Not everyone experiences the crushing weight of tragic events like being diagnosed with cancer or the death of a child. Such groaning deserves our deepest compassion. But everyone groans under the weight of daily problems, frustrations, and disappointments—a flat tire when you’re late for work, a backed-up septic tank just as guests arrive, sleepless nights with screaming babies, marital and financial tension, or harsh and stinging words from a friend. Trouble comes in all shapes and sizes. But more often than not, it’s the many little things of everyday life that pile up and get to us over time.

I’m ashamed to admit this: I’ve had a pet peeve. I can get ticked when people drive slowly in front of me. I’ve been known to grumble under my breath things like, “The speed limit’s forty-five, not thirty-five. Being safe is one thing, being *stupid* is another!”

It’s easy to assume those small events are just random occurrences without purpose. But I’ve learned and am still learning to see how God is lovingly pursuing me through even the smallest, daily, frustrating events. There is always a good purpose to our pain. God assures us, his dearly loved children, that he disciplines us as a father disciplines his son (Heb. 12:5–11). Discipline means training. God keeps working to grow us up so that “in the end it might go well with you” (Deut. 8:16).

As a result of God’s discipline, a new song is growing in my heart. It’s the song of knowing and treasuring Jesus in the midst of the daily grind. And this new song is translating into the ability to be kind and patient with others, even when they’re frustrating or disappointing.

Fifteen years ago, I had a full-time, private practice as a Christian counselor. Each week I talked with many people who faced deep struggles. At a particular time in my counseling ministry, I was not doing well for several reasons. A former client was suing me. Two people I was working with were suicidal, and this weighed on me. In addition, after I had spent many hours working with and caring for a client, he told me he was going to see a different counselor. Last of all, I had several openings in my counseling schedule. I was concerned I wouldn’t be able to pay the bills if the phone didn’t start ringing.

One night as Lisa and I sat at the dinner table, she asked me how I was doing. Feeling overwhelmed with a sense of failure, I broke down and began

to share honestly about my fears and discouragements. While I was talking, Lisa quietly stood up from the table, picked up her dinner plate, and walked to the sink a few feet away. My first inner reaction was to go south into anger. The self-talk that fueled my anger went like this: “Lisa doesn’t care about me or what I’m going through.” In my anger I wanted to tell her off by saying something like, “Do you realize how insensitive it feels to me when you just get up and leave when I’m sharing my heart with you?”

But this time I caught myself; this time I knew I was angry. I was coming to see that unrighteous anger was a signal, telling me I was going south by demanding love and respect from Lisa instead of turning north to Jesus alone for the longings of my heart. Therefore, I chose to hold my comments. I sat quietly at the table and prayed silently. *Father, right now I’m furious. I admit that I want to tell Lisa off. I acknowledge my anger to you alone and admit that I believe a lie. I believe I need Lisa to show care for me. But I repent. While I do legitimately desire a certain response from Lisa, I confess that I do not need anything from her. I turn to you alone, Jesus, for the hunger and thirst in my heart. It doesn’t feel like you alone are enough to meet these needs, but I choose to believe the truth no matter what I feel. Right now I confess that you, Lord Jesus, are with me. I acknowledge in my heart that you are for me and you are gloriously enough to sustain me right now. You are my refuge and strength. I love you, Jesus.*

I sat there for another moment and embraced the truth of the greatness and goodness of God’s grace and love for me. My anger began to subside. I didn’t feel joyful, but by faith I sincerely thanked God for being with me in this moment of loneliness. Then, and only then, was I able to shift my focus from my needs to Lisa’s needs. Instead of resenting Lisa for leaving the table, I began to honestly and sincerely wonder *why* she left. As I continued to focus my heart on Jesus as the center of my security, I tried to reach out to Lisa by asking some questions.

“Honey, what caused you to leave the table as I was talking? What were you feeling?”

After a moment of reflection, Lisa said, “I think I was feeling afraid.”

“What were you afraid of, honey?”

She said, “I don’t think you would do this to me and the kids (long pause and trembling voice), but I can’t help but think about your dad . . . how when

he was discouraged and depressed about his struggles at work, he tried to kill himself.”

Lisa began to cry. My heart melted with compassion for her. I got up from the table, walked over to her, and put my arms around her. I thanked God for enabling me to stop my southward spiral into anger. I was so grateful that he helped me turn north to Jesus and listen to him so I could be a shelter for my dear wife instead of being her storm (Isa. 32:1–2).

Whether the daily problems I’m facing are big or small, I’m learning to stop and prayerfully ask myself questions like these: Do I believe God is sovereign and in control in this painful moment? Do I believe he is good right *now*, that his love is enough to sustain me no matter what happens? Do I believe God has a good purpose for allowing that car to go slow in front of me, for allowing Lisa to get up from the table and leave? Will I remember God, surrender and submit to him right now, and stop grumbling? Will I stop going south into anger and unbelief and pray for help to go north to Jesus so I can love God and love people from my heart?

Many times I’ve struggled to believe the truth about God’s goodness and greatness in the middle of my problems. And I’m sure this will continue to be a battle for me. But as I’m growing in my understanding of God’s character and unfailing love, I must conclude he’s ordained that moment and that he has a good purpose for me. God uses *everything* for my good (Ps. 37:23 NLT; Rom. 8:28). I believe God means it when he says *everything*. He’s not just in the big things. He’s in the smallest, daily things too. And what is the “good” that God is working in me? He’s always working to help me treasure him as he treasures me and to conform me into the very likeness of Jesus. He’s working to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). Therefore God says, “Endure hardship as discipline. . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12:7, 11). God is always working in every detail of every day of my life—pleasant and unpleasant—to help me see and savor Jesus Christ so he becomes the love of my life. Then I can deeply and confidently say, “My soul finds rest in God alone” (Ps. 62:1).

Since God is so involved with even the most “insignificant” details of life (Matt. 10:29–30), we can be certain he’s involved when the dishwasher breaks,

an unexpected bill arrives, or a health issue comes into our lives. We tend to think God is working when things go well, but we rarely stop to consider that he's working when problems come and life is falling apart.

So I must be intentional about viewing daily life with the wide-angle lens of God's bigger purposes. Will I choose to fight against God and go south, making my family endure my anger? Or will I choose to acknowledge God in that moment and submit to his goodness and greatness as I prayerfully reflect on what his good purpose may be? God may not show me his good purpose in the moment of crisis or frustration, but the question remains: Will I remember him, talk to him, and trust that he alone is enough to sustain me in that moment? *That* is the good he's working in me. Choosing to trust God can enable me to respond to frustrating people with gentleness rather than impatience. Through the coming chapters, you'll see how God uses daily problems and frustrations in your life to draw you into a soul-stirring relationship with him so you can live out the double-love command: loving God and loving others (Matt. 22:37–40).

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-EXAMINATION AND DISCUSSION

1. What are some common tensions, frustrations, and disappointments you face in daily life? Can you name some you are currently facing?
2. Our suffering in life often seems random and without purpose, especially the little, daily things. Do you agree or disagree with that statement? Why or why not?
3. How would you handle daily frustrations differently if you believed God had good purposes behind them?
4. Describe a time you went north as you faced difficulty. What helped you choose to turn to God?
5. Describe a time you went south. Why do you think you chose to go there?
6. Would you say you typically go north or south when you face hardship and frustration in life? Why do you think that is true?
7. How would you like to grow and be different as a result of this study?