"I'll Never Get Over It"— Help for the Aggrieved

by DAVID POWLISON

How can you help people come to terms with experiences of grievous suffering? A person who has been grievously wronged is forever marked. This is the Bible's graphic image for Israel's experience with her warring neighbors, "They plowed my back and made their furrows long" (Ps 129:3). In other words, "They shoved me face-down to the ground. They walked on me. They gouged up and down my back." That is not a picture of scars from the past or old wounds now healed. That harrowing word picture describes things that are still alive in the present: searing pain, bleeding gashes, unhealed wounds, feeling the wrongs done by powerful people.

How can you help people come to terms with sufferings that last, that remain fresh even over a lifetime? Again, taking graphic words from Psalm 129, "From my youth, they have greatly afflicted me. Let Israel say it again: From my youth, they have greatly afflicted me" (Ps 129:1–2). In other words, "From childhood on, they torment me. I'll say it again: From childhood on, they torment me." This describes more than a one-off trauma that is now over and done with. It describes a lifetime of continual and cumulative anguish. What was past continues into the present and seems likely to carry forward into the anticipated future.

Harrowing images from Psalm 129 were apt for Israel's experience. They also evoke the abiding experience for a person who has been abused verbally, physically, sexually. They evoke the everyday experience of people living under the many varieties of bigotry. They evoke the unending sorrow of the parent who loses a child. They evoke the ongoing, intrusive remembering that besets the soldier who

David Powlison (MDiv, PhD) is the executive director of CCEF and edits the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

somehow survives horrifying carnage. They evoke Christian experience in times and places where the beloved Son and his beloved church are steadily mocked.

How can you help people come to terms with things that are long and hard and don't go away? How can you yourself come to terms with such afflictions? My article addresses this fundamental question for life and ministry.

You won't get over it, but you do not need to be forever defined by what happened.

Let me say a few words about the voice I will adopt in what follows. I will write directly *to* strugglers and would-be helpers: to you. I won't simply write *about* the topic "Facing grievous difficulties" or "Helping others face grievous difficulties." I hope that what and how I write will help you. I have been repeatedly struck by how Scripture communicates God's messages directly, concretely, and personally. It seems that God and those who speak for him eschew the academic mode of impersonal topical discourse! It is customary that an academic speaker or writer adopt a posture of neutral objectivity, and there is no attempt to directly address presumed audiences and no expectation that readers or listeners might actually be talking back. The discourse remains serene, at arm's length from the messy give and take of how life unfolds. By contrast, in Scripture, the prophets and Messiah and apostles always talk with and to the people who immediately surround them. And those people often talk back. The message calls for a response.

I will do my best to hold you in mind and talk with you. And I want you to interact, to react, to act. I hope to help change how you live and how you minister. I hope that we will help each other, dear reader, as we seek to help God's people. Here's what will follow. First, I will set the stage for thinking through how to face and process difficult experiences. Then I will put on the table two descriptions of how to do so. Finally, I will offer a series of questions to help orient and guide you as you work through your experiences.

"I'll never get over it."

Like fine china that doesn't get brought out for everyday use, the hardest things in life are often kept in the cabinet. Many people carry unspeakable things inside, things that make it hard to talk, make it hard to go forward. Things like this,

> I'll never get over it. What happened to me was so wrong. It was too wrong, too confusing, too overwhelming. It hurt too much—and it still does. The pointlessness, the cruelty, the be-

> trayal, the loss, the complete disappointment…. I don't want to go there. I wish I didn't have to go there. At times I still find it hard to believe that this really happened. At times the distress and pain seem unbearable, and like it will never end. At times anger is a holocaust inside me. At times despair feels dark and cold as death. At times flashbacks are so real that it's all happening again right now—not just "in my head," but viscerally, in all of me. At times—and this treadmill goes nowhere but is so hard to get off—I blame myself. I get wasted with "What if?" and "If only." At all times there's this lurking anxiety, a kind of restless uneasiness inside me. And sometimes anxiety is not subtle at all, but bludgeons me with outright fear or panic. At times something will happen, even something so minor or innocent, and it will trigger a reaction in me that is totally out of proportion with reality. A resonance or reverb kicks in, and it rocks me deeper than I can even go. And all this turmoil seems as permanent, as destructive, and as insoluble as what happened that was so bad.

You are right. You will never get over it.

Does my answer surprise you? Perhaps you find it curiously liberating to say, "I'll never get over it.… That is right.… Of course. How freeing to admit that truth about such a terrible wrong. I'm not supposed to just move on and hope it simply washes away. So I don't have to chase an impossibility. I don't have to ruin my life with attempts at anesthesia. I don't have to feel like a failure because I'm not happy and smiley all the time." If you aren't expecting to find some magic that will leave you unmarked, then you can get down to facing the pain of wrong. You can get down to wrestling out whether there actually is a way to walk through fire and flood (as Isaiah 43:2 puts it).

But perhaps it makes you feel hopeless to admit that some experiences will never go away. Hear me rightly. I don't mean that the poison and darkness of the experience will always haunt you. You won't get over it, but you do not need to be forever defined by what happened. You won't forget what happened, but there is a way out of the raptor's claws. I hope to walk with you part of the way out of despair and offer you realistic hope. It won't erase what happened—that would be to live a falsehood. But realistic hope runs deeper than any hurt. It can take the same experience and offer a different script, a different outcome, a different meaning. Deep hurt so easily gets infected—by mistrust, or fear, or rage, or cal-

lousness, or avoidance, or addiction, or…. Hurt even gets infected by just trying to keep yourself busy and distracted. It turns inward. It turns self-destructive. But hurt and loss can become transmuted into a deeper good—still fierce, still sorrowing, but now clean. Not only clean, but hopeful. Not only hopeful, but fruitful. Not only fruitful, but wise. Not only wise, but even loving.

You won't forget. But you do not need to endlessly revisit what happened. You do not need to be imprisoned in the complexities and dead ends of your instinctive reactions. There's a reason why that long, indented paragraph—"I'll never get over it"— wanders all over the spectrum of human emotions. We are complex creatures, wired to respond to wrongs in complex ways. Emotions and reactions are not discrete data points unrelated to each other. Yes, each emotion has its own typical coloration, but the whole palette is readily available, and the colors easily mix it up. Here is a sample palette.

- "When something seems wrong, I get angry. Anger impels me to bristle, and to go on the attack."
- "When something seems dangerous, I feel fear. Fear urges me to go on high alert, to take defensive measures, to withdraw, to flee."
- "When something feels too painful, I turn inward and feel how unbearable it is. The desire for relief invites me to chase any feel-good to escape the bad feelings."
- "When it seems like there's nothing I can do, I feel overwhelmed and in despair. I feel paralysed and passive."
- "When it seems I can't control something, I feel anxious. I fret and flounder—and I get angry, avoidant, desperate, self-soothing, or paralyzed, or all of the above all at once!"

Our reactions to grievous wrongs are muddy, not tidy. Reactions rarely appear like primary colors, sharply separated from each other. They come in hues, shades, mixtures, and combinations. Sometimes you might get a "pure" color—for a moment. But most often, you will live out some mishmash of "all of the above."

It is extremely significant that the Bible, and Jesus, and the mercies of God directly engage all of the above. The lovingkindnesses of God are exactly keyed to what is grievously wrong. When life goes easy, Christian faith either seems irrelevant or it just adds a nice frosting of spirituality and community to round out the personal resumé. But when life goes very hard (and life always ends up very hard), the true God sparkles. But making the connection isn't always easy. How on earth does "You are with me" (Ps 23:4) *connect* with "Right now I am walking through a dark valley. I feel vulnerable. Shadows of death threaten me. I

am besieged with evils." How does "You are with me" get traction, so that I am changed and become unafraid?

Making the connection and going forward is never an easy process. But God does meet us in our need. He enters our plight in person. He shares in our troubles. Suffering is the crucible in which Christ shows himself. Suffering is the crucible where faith awakens. Suffering is the crucible where love becomes wise. We learn faith and love when life goes wrong.

But I am getting ahead of myself. To transmute a very deep furnace of pain and unhappy reactions into something fruitful will be a hard process. And to go right back to where this article started, it is refreshing to admit, "Of course suffering will mark me. I will never just get over it. I will never just move on. Even a new sense of my life's purpose will bear the marks of what happened." You would be false to your humanity if you simply got over it. A significant experience *must* mark you for life. But pain and hatred and despair do not need to remain as running sores. Your life does not need to become a poisoned well of bitterness.

Does anyone who was raped, molested, beaten, mocked, or bereaved ever just get over it? Never. You do get over the misery of a bad head cold, or flunking a pop quiz in geometry, or a teenage infatuation with a movie star. (At least you ought to get over these things!) But you don't *get over* something important. Your sufferings count. The goal is to find a way to *go through* it that comes out in a good place.

Perhaps you already have a taste for how this works?

You may have heard of Candy Lightner. She never did get over the death of her thirteen-year-old daughter who was run over by a drunk driver. But this irreversible suffering was somehow transmuted into a constructive mission. She founded Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) in 1980. The shape that her grievous suffering took has spared innumerable parents from the same grief.

Did Martin Luther King ever get over a lifetime of facing racial prejudice? Such experiences are a crucible within which many people become sour, suspicious, and embittered. For MLK, it led to "I have a dream" of what race relations can become. The wrongs he suffered gave shape to a life purpose worth living for and worth dying for. His life was unmistakably marked by the ugliness of racism. He never forgot. In fact he made it his life work to continually face what he found grievous. He was not disfigured by the encounter, but dignified.

Could Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn have gotten over his tortures in Joseph Stalin's gulags? No. Should he have tried to move on with a "normal" life? No. His degradation in the camps became the seedbed of his life work. Read Solzhenit-

syn's *Gulag Archipelago*. You will witness a rare example of a man who did not become self-righteous and self-pitying as he catalogued evils. The power of what he wrote arose from something that happened inside him: a moral reckoning, a hard look in the mirror. He rebukes any readers who expect his book to be a self-righteous political exposé comparing all those bad people to all us innocent people:

> If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being….
>
> Confronted by the pit into which we are about to toss those who have done us harm, we halt, stricken dumb: it is after all only because of the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't.
>
> From good to evil is one quaver, says the proverb.
>
> And correspondingly, from evil to good.[1]

As Solzhenitsyn takes a hard look at his own soul in the mirror, he made the turn from evil to good. He comes out in the image of God, with his sense of justice and his sense of mercy equally strong. A person who faces grievous evil must do a hard reckoning to come out wise and not corrupt. Solzhenitsyn faced cruelty and wrong, and his own actions and responses seemed justifiable. And yet… he identified within himself the same capacity for wrong. He found that it is the easiest thing in the world to return evil for evil. At such times, it is the hardest thing in the world to find one's way to what is good, to find one's own need for the mercies of God.

Each of these people is only a pointer. Each provides us with a flawed example. Their various good insights and resolutions mix with remaining contradictions. They are mixed cases. They are people like you. They are people like me. But each case shows something good emerging from the encounter with great evil. Each example demonstrates how God's grace works good in a world of evils. Each of these people points wittingly or unwittingly to how Christ faces, engages, and walks through grievous evils. He did it first and best. He did it for us. He promises to do it with us and in us. He does what he promises. He helps the aggrieved.

[1] Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, 1918–1956, translated by Thomas Whitney and Harry Willetts, abridged by Edward Ericson (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 75.

Two Stories

In this section, I will work through two stories. These are deep matters, and we will take the time to notice so we might take to heart. And then, in the next section, I will ask you to make it personal by thinking through your own life experience.

An Aggrieved Father

The first story is Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country.* It is one of the great novels of the twentieth century.[2] Read it (or reread it) as a fine story. Along the way, notice that it is a case study in great wrongs and great suffering. It is a case study in anger and fear, hurt and loss, guilt and grace—real life can't be carved into discrete pieces. The teacher in me would gladly assign Paton's book as a companion to this article. His story does a better job than any analysis in giving you a *feel* for how struggles with hard things work out either for good or for evil. It's show (not tell) for how the struggle with overwhelming evils can be transmuted into good.

The story is set in South Africa during the 1940s (just before apartheid became policy). Stephen Kumalo is a black South African, and an Anglican pastor in a small, impoverished village. His son had left home for Johannesburg, and he drifted into a life of petty crime. Kumalo goes to the city, seeking to rescue his son. But he finds him too late. The son has just been arrested for a murder committed in panic when the homeowner walked in on a burglary.

The various dark responses to suffering appear in many different ways, in many different characters, for many different reasons. We might be tempted to think of "pain" as a reaction to an uncomfortable stimulus. We might be tempted to think of "anger" as a flare up arising from a specific provocation. We might be tempted to think of "fear" as apprehension in the face of a particular threat. But in *Cry, the Beloved Country* the stimuli, provocations, and threats spread as wide and deep as life itself. The very conditions of existence are systematically humiliating. Kumalo and others in the story live within unfairness, injustice, extreme poverty, systematic racism, powerlessness, the wrecked lives of loved ones who had bad options and made bad choices. When evil is all-encompassing, no one particular incident is decisive for causing pain, provoking you to anger, arousing fear. Any one of a thousand daily incidents simply delivers one more slap to the face of a man who has been repeatedly beaten. How could anyone ever get over this? How can hurt, outrage, anxiety, and despair not become all-consuming?

[2] Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country* (New York: Scribner, 1948; 1987 edition).

How can sin not be the automatic response to temptation?[3]

Kumalo struggles with his own sins. He sometimes loses it. But he does not get lost in it. Several things prove significant as he comes through evils without becoming immolated and enslaved by his sins and sorrows. I will mention three factors.

First, he is befriended by a man named Msimangu, a fellow Anglican pastor. Msimangu acts with great kindness, generosity, and tact. But when Kumalo responded, "You are kind," his friend answered, "I am not kind. I am a selfish and sinful man, but God put his hands on me, that is all" (p. 55). His is an unusual kindness. It is born of hard reckoning with his all-consuming instinct for selfishness. It is born of being grasped by the love of God in person. Msimangu's kindness was able to be wonderfully blunt with Kumalo as appropriate. It went far deeper than being a "nice person." He was an honest man who reckoned with his sinfulness, weakness, and selfishness—and God's mercy made him different.

Msimangu's hard-won goodness gives him the authority to voice a great moral challenge to any human being who has faced grave suffering. Black South African? Survivor of domestic violence? Shi'a Muslim in a Sunni city—or vise versa? Bereaved parent? You? Msimangu puts it this way, "I have one great fear in my heart, that one day when they are turned to loving, they will find that we are turned to hating" (p. 71). He did not mean that he was waiting for those in power to change or expected those who did wrong to suddenly do right. But he was performing a hard and necessary moral calculus for the sake of victims everywhere. He was reckoning up one difficult fact: reactive hate is just as much hate as the act of hate that provoked it. He was reckoning with how self-pity and self-justification are narcotics that destroy moral reasoning. We point the finger at those who do gross wrong and in so doing justify our own wrongs—lesser in degree perhaps, lesser in impact, but significant perversions of the image of God and of true humanness. The same dynamics that operate in petty bickering operate when vile evils are present. Because Msimangu knew the inworking power of God's mercy, he could be frank with Kumalo's anger and fear. Will you who are wronged, go wrong? Will you find yourself turned to hating, or will you find the strong mercy that turns you to loving?

Second, while in Johannesburg, Kumalo rented a room in the house of an elderly widow, Mrs. Lithebe. She was poor, and knew her own troubles. But on a number of occasions, when his troubles were too great to bear, too great to

[3] People usually conceive of temptation as allure—the draw of some illicit or destructive pleasure. But most temptations are painful, not alluring. Amid physical pain, we are easily tempted to irritability. When treated wrongly, we are easily tempted to react in kind. When bereaved, we are easily tempted to grieve as those who have no hope.

solve, she showed him some simple generosity. When he thanked her, she replied, "Why else do we live? For what else are we born?" (pp. 151, 227). If you have faced a great suffering—racism, disability, rape, betrayal, bereavement—there is no immediate solution by which you or any other human being can make it all better. But small, practical kindnesses count. Kumalo received such from Mrs. Lithebe, and he gave the same to others. In the end, he did not become embittered. He became simple in showing small kindnesses. The more insoluble and heartbreaking a problem, the smaller the action that is called for in any particular moment. We are slow to grasp this. Great suffering produces great anger, great fear and great despair, in part because no great solution is possible. But the small remediations matter a great deal. Mrs. Lithebe grasped something that victims need to receive and must learn to give. Small goods amid great evils are part of becoming free from the waste of our wraths and sorrows.

Third, Kumalo returns home to his village when there are no more avenues of appeal for his son. On the night before his son is to be hanged for murder, Kumalo says to his wife, "I am going up into the mountain" (p. 305). He gets away, taking time to reckon honestly with himself and God. At first, the memory of all that had happened and all that was about to happen overwhelmed him. But then he consciously "turned aside from such fruitless remembering" (p. 308). "Fruitless remembering." That is a good way to describe one place it is easy to get stuck when you've been done deep wrong. Kumalo had learned that there is a different road that can (and must) be taken.

He uses an interesting phrase for the alternative: "He set himself to the order of his vigil" (p. 308). Kumalo takes himself in hand. He does not wallow in regret, self-torture, recrimination, accusation. He consciously heads in a different direction according to a different purpose. The order of his vigil on the mountain unfolds in this manner. He sifts his conscience, and confesses his specific sins of anger and lying. Then he probes his memory for all the people who had showed him kindness, and gives specific thanks for them. Finally he cries out for mercy, mercy for his son, for himself, for his people, for his country. The last chapter of *Cry, the Beloved Country* ends with this cry. In the midst of irremediable suffering, when tempted to fruitless remembering, in the midst of his powerlessness to make better all that is so wrong, a man asks God for mercies. On his mountain, Kumalo seizes hold of the one hope deeper than the deepest wreckage of hopes. He brings his cares to the One who cares for him. He lives out the rhythms of Christian faith: self-knowing before God, frank confession, honest gratitude, pointed intercession… going forth to live in the way of obedience.

This is a life and death matter. When something is so wrong that you will never get over it, your reaction will either make you wise or will poison you. Great suffering puts a fork in the road. You will choose. You will of necessity choose. It is no accident that *kyrie eleison*—"Lord, have mercy"—is the essential prayer of the man or woman who faces facts honestly. It is no accident that "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is the first and foundational beatitude (Matt 5:3). A deep inner sense of need for help from outside yourself is the essential step of sanity. It is this faith—"I am poor and needy. Help me."—that Jesus commends so often. Faith

When something is so wrong that you will never get over it, your reaction will either make you wise or will poison you. Great suffering puts a fork in the road. You will choose.

is not a leap into darkness and unreason, despite the cold hard facts. Faith is the honest reckoning with your need for help, and then the reasonable step in the direction of the person who can help you, given all the facts. Because Kumalo's faith is reasonable and honest, he reaches for promised mercies and help.

Perhaps these last pages seem odd to you. Our culture usually portrays suffering or anger or despair or anxiety as things with "How to" solutions. But the things that cause the deepest angers, fears, and despairs are betrayals at a depth that calls for a different way of thinking about solutions. You must learn to live honestly in the face of evils that don't necessarily go away. You must learn to honestly face down your own evil in the light of bigger mercies: "I am a selfish and sinful man, but God put his hands on me, that is all." When someone else did you wrong by acts of hate, will you find that you are turned to hating? When some tragic accident bereaved you, will you find you are turned to fearing? When your own dying approaches, will you find you are turned to denial or to despairing?

When hopes are crushed and dismembered, you must learn the one hope that can never be destroyed: "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Those words are not intended for "religious" people in "religious" contexts. They are words for the actual troubles we all must face, for the actual failings we all have, for all the things that prompt the Son's self-sacrificing love.

When this holds you, as this takes root inside you, you learn how to live well

up against all that is wrong: "Beloved, if God loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). You can be thankful. You can consider others. You can do small things gladly. Why else do we live? For what else are we born? You learn that you can make some difference. You can be merely helpful—not salvific. You will never think that you are better than any other human being. You will never think your efforts can right all wrongs. Beloved, you learn not to hate or fear or despair. You learn not to numb yourself. You learn to care.

I hope that these last few pages are freeing for you. Modern American society does not often tell us these things. What we mostly hear are the voices of self-assertion, self-confidence, self-esteem, self-protection, self-justification, and self-management. We live in a culture of can-do. Just believe in yourself. Follow your dream. Fix the problem. Say whatever you happen to feel or think. We don't often hear the voices of honest suffering from people who are learning to be wise and caring.

Make no mistake, there are things to be done. I appreciate pragmatism of the right sort—and Kumalo, Msimangu, and Mrs. Lithebe are utterly practical people. They roll up their sleeves and do something. At the end of this article, I will ask you to get practical. I will offer a road map, a series of questions for helping you understand and address unruly emotions and reactions. We will roll up our sleeves to get street-level practical.

There is something deeply refreshing in being able to say that what is broken *can't* be fixed up good as new. The pain from what hurts so badly *can't* be taken all away. But you *can* do the good, hard, true reckoning with what happened, with yourself, and with our God. You *can* learn reasons to live that are better by far.

Martina

The second story is about a woman I had the privilege of getting to know many years ago. Martina had suffered more terrible things than anyone I've ever known. She was married and in her mid-30s when she and her husband sought counsel for conflicts they were having about how to raise their children. We addressed those, but as her larger story also emerged, she made a profound impression on me. She had been sexually abused from childhood until she was rescued by the Department of Youth & Family Services (DYFS) in her teens. She had been used as a sexual receptacle by her father and older brothers. Her entire life, from age 4 to 15, was an Auschwitz of sexualized violence. It was all she ever knew.

DYFS placed Martina with a foster family who loved her. They were safe. They provided for her. They protected her. They set clear guidelines for what was

right and wrong regarding how to treat others with respect. They modeled and taught her about the words you use, the way you deal with problems, the ways sexuality is meant to be expressed, respect for personal property. There was no instant presto, everything's fine. When Martina came to live with her new family, she was prone to violent rages, spoke abusively, was crudely sexual, stole whatever she could get her hands on, trusted no one, obeyed no one, lied freely, was lazy, existed in a maelstrom of impulsive cravings and terrifying fears. In other words, she incarnated all that is not love, all that is destructive and self-destructive, all that needs effective mercy and help.

Jesus' story shows how incalculable wrong is transmuted into unfathomable good.

Out of the maelstrom of these sufferings and her own chaos, and in the context of her foster parents' love, Martina came to know Jesus when she was nineteen years old. Jesus is not just a pointer, like a Solzhenitsyn or a Mrs. Lithebe. He is the one to whom the pointers point. Jesus' story shows how incalculable wrong is transmuted into unfathomable good. He was not above it all. He entered our grievous plight. A man of sorrows, intimately acquainted with grief, enters into the hard places and comes under the afflictions. Jesus himself has never gotten over his experience of evil. He never got over it. It gives shape to his love, his courage, and his purposefulness. Jesus' friends recognized him when he invited them to "See my hands and my feet" (Luke 24:39–41). They saw the marks of the nails. But Jesus was not deformed by what he suffered. Unlike Martina, he did not explode with darkness when he was trapped by darkness. Jesus was not defined by pain, but he does not forget what it is like. He did not return evil for evil, but he is merciful to those who do. He gets us. He gave Martina a new life.

It's often very hard for people who have been vilely abused to put together the relationship between their sufferings and their sins. The victim's reactive sins seem small, understandable, predictable, excusable, even justifiable given the circumstances. Compared to what was done *to* her, what she did doesn't seem half bad. She is a woman "more sinned against than sinning" (*King Lear*, III:2). But Martina did her moral calculus in a clearer light than King Lear, a more searching light, a more beckoning and hopeful light. She thought through her version of Msimangu's question: "Will I be turned to hating?" She came to a profound realization. Yes, her juvenile delinquency, her bitterness at evildoers, her wild fear

of being hurt, these are petty next to the brutal criminality of her family. But she weighed her sins as against God. Here's what Martina saw. The actions that got her in trouble were the surface turmoil of her core motives. She had erased God from his universe—the primal moral folly. As with all of us, her expunging of God was instinctive, obsessive, and all-embracing—the universal obsessional neurosis of humankind. She had filled the cosmic vacuum with herself, with her fears and cravings, with herself as the lead actress on center stage of the universe (the narcissist in us all). Her pride justified all her opinions and desires as intrinsically right. It made allowance for vindictive bitterness, for self-pity, for rage, and for using other people. She was merciless to others, because she knew no mercy for herself. Reckoning on a human-to-human comparison, she was not 1/100th of what her torturers were. But before God, she reckoned with herself: "and God put his hands on me, that is all."

Without having heard the phrase, or knowing what it might mean, Martina began to embody that essential wisdom that says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." To see oneself as before the eyes of the King of creation, to see one's need for the mercies of the Savior of sinful and suffering humankind, is the dawning light of all true sanity. Martina became sane, and began to unwind a deep, dark tangle. She began to grow, and to grow up, and to love.

And without knowing fully what it meant, she took to heart, "Do not return evil for evil." That sentence does the moral calculus for a victim in a realistic, clean manner. "What others did to me was evil. What I'm doing back is evil. I don't have to try to stack them up next to each other quantitatively. I don't have to say, 'Your evil is worse, so I'm OK.' I don't have to say, 'You started it, so it doesn't matter what I do.' I don't have to say, 'I might do wrong, but it's all because of you.'" Martina had the worst start in life of anyone I've ever known. But it was a deep pleasure and privilege for me to witness the courage and clarity of faith to which she had come.

It's perhaps most surprising that Martina did not end up a drug addict or a suicide. But given that she found the mercies of Christ that give a reason to change, it is perhaps not so surprising that she eventually became a social worker, with a particular affinity for abused children. Just as the victim of racism works for racial justice; just as the mother whose child is run over works to eliminate drunk driving; so Martina works to help kids who've been done staggering wrong. Why else do we live? For what else are we born? It is perhaps surprising that Martina eventually got married, and has two children of her own. That didn't come easy, and is another of those paradoxical hard-won gifts of grace.

Did she "get over" her first fifteen years of life. No. Will she ever get over it? Not in this lifetime. Not ever—in the best sense. It will mark her for all eternity because *this* is where the love of God met her. Her gratitude and joy will always stand out against that backdrop. Her hard-won, grace-given strengths show the fingerprints of her sufferings. Her love is a particular kind of love, forged from the furnace of a particular kind of hate. And her remaining sins still take a shape that reflects the damaging marks of her life experience. She tends to fearfulness—"I just want to disappear off the scene, Poof!, and not have to face hard things." She can tend toward irritability—"Don't come near me. Leave me alone." An irrational suspiciousness and panic can get triggered, especially around assertive men, even when they pose no real threat—"What will he do to me?!" In her marriage, there has been a long, slow process of disentangling sex from being a dreadful evil and remaking it as a simple good. She's come a ways; she's got a ways to go. Her husband is a tender man (with his faults, of course), and she's learned more trust even while he's learned more patience.

"I'll never get over it. But it does not determine me. Or, better, my instinctive reactions do not determine me. God breaks in, and everything appears in a different light." What does Martina teach us? Many things. But I'll mention three things about her life that made a particular impression on me.

First, we can cry out to God, "Where are you? Why is this happening to me? Why did it happen? Why am I still struggling? How long until you free me from this trouble? It hurts so much. I don't want to be angry. Have mercy on me. You have promised me good, and what good can come of something so hard?" It makes all the difference in the world that such things are said with a grief that needs God, that believes he is good, that loves him. Some people say things almost like this as bitter accusations against God. But angry reasons not to trust are the opposite of anguished trust. Martina had not only read the psalms, she had taken to heart their inner logic of honest faith. Her faith was not necessarily tranquil—faith can't be tranquil when troubles squeeze in on us and erupt inside us. Like in so many of the psalms, God repeatedly met Martina's daily honesty with what she needed for that day.

Second, God does bring good from evil. Sometimes, when you are early in the process of coming to grips with suffering, it is insulting when someone says, "God will bring some good out of this." It sounds as if overwhelming pain is being trivialized, glossed over so that we can all get on to talk about more pleasant things. But later in the process, this is one of the most precious truths of all. It works out in real life—over the long haul. (God sequences and stages significant

truths according to when we are ready to respond.)

Much of the good that has happened is obvious. Why is Martina intuitively able to be both kind and firm with children whose lives are in wreckage? Some people are nice and sympathetic (but ineffectual); other people are clear-thinking and blunt (but unsympathetic). How is it that Martina is able to be both sympathetic and candid? Paul put the dynamic this way: "God comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (2 Cor 1:4). You can give away what you have received. And that is one of the ways that good comes out of evil, without ever insinuating that evil is anything but evil.

You'll do well to get others to walk with you, to help you find and keep perspective. We aren't made to do life alone.

Third, Martina will be marked in some way by pain and struggle throughout her life. For example, she has no relatives she can call her own. Her foster parents are dead; it's not quite the same with her in-laws, as much as she appreciates them. Her children have only one set of grandparents. Sexual intimacy with her husband can be shadowed with darkness—when she is tired, if they've not been communicating well, when he's in a bit of a rush, if she's been doing some fruitless remembering. It gets tiresome to always have to be dealing with her temptation to flinch and withdraw when she's around confident or opinionated people. Those are some of her battles. Is she abnormal? No. One of the fine promises of God that speaks most deeply to her is this hope:

> He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying or pain; the first things have passed away. And he who sits on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new." (Rev 21:4f)

One of the effects of being marked by suffering is that you learn to value the future. Like all of us, not all of Martina's crying or pain goes away now.

You see in Martina, and Kumalo, and Msimangu, and Mrs. Lithebe, and Solzhenitsyn things that you need. Have you been marked by something that feels like you'll never get over it? Has something ruined your life? Are you completing the destruction by your rage, despair, indifference, and escapism? Perhaps you are

attempting to help someone else whose life seems in ruins, and they struggle in all these ways. Take to heart what these sufferers took to heart, and take heart.

Finding Help When You Are Aggrieved

How do you do the calculus as you seek to face and weigh your sufferings, to understand yourself, to seek and find God our Father? I will pose a series of questions to help walk you through the process. They are like a GPS (or a map and compass for those of us who want something less fallible!). A GPS doesn't get you from here to there, but it keeps you oriented as you travel. If you are haunted by old suffering, by a nuclear waste of wraths and sorrows, put these questions to work to structure your processing. They will help keep you on the road. You may have to drive slowly sometimes. You may even have to get out and walk. Or crawl! Sometimes you may feel like giving up and crawling into a hole.

You'll do well to get others to walk with you, to help you find and keep perspective. We aren't made to do life alone. You need others—to pray for you and with you, to share the load. I love an old line from essayist Francis Bacon: "Those who lack friends to open themselves unto are cannibals of their own hearts…. This communicating of a man's self to his friends works two contrary effects; for it redoubles joys and cuts griefs in half." [4] Friends who are wise counselors are especially needed when pain runs deep and unruly emotions run high.

Take time to think—to reflect, to pray, to read Scripture. Unlike dissecting a simple act of irritability or complaining, your answers won't fit neatly within any workbook lines I might insert in this article. You'll probably need another sheet of paper. You could write a book.

First, will you ask for help? You may have particular, favored ways of seeking God, of asking for strength, for protection, for mercy, for help. One of my favored places is Psalm 23. This prayer descends into the darkest places—death threats, assorted evils, the settled enmity of others—with eyes firmly on the Shepherd who walks with you. Whatever this psalm says God is, you can ask him to be for you. If it is so that "He restores my soul," then you can ask with all your heart, "Lord, restore me! Renew me! Turn me back to you!" And if it is so that "I will fear no evil, for you are with me," then you can ask with all your heart, "Lord, be with me. Do not forsake me."

Second, what happened to you? What did you experience? Who did what when? What are you facing? It needs to be stated. It is helpful to name it as a matter of fact: This happened.

It is helpful to label it accurately. This was evil.

[4] Francis Bacon, "Of Friendship," in *Essays or Counsels, Civil and Moral*, 1625.

It is helpful to acknowledge what the experience was like. It hurt. It felt overwhelming. I despaired. I felt paralysed. I felt crushed by shame and self-recrimination. I felt angry yet powerless. It seemed like God was not there, that he did not care.

It's not helpful to spiral into fruitless remembering. Remember instead the order of your current vigil. You are seeking to go somewhere good. A whirlpool of excruciating details is an easy place to drown. It is helpful to remember basics of God's essential attitude. He is with you. He hates evil. He cares for victims. He promises to never leave us or forsake us. He promises to bless you. To keep you. To make his face shine on you. To be gracious to you. To turn his face toward you. To give you peace. These truths do not erase the struggle and disorientation of the previous paragraph. But they call you back to *fruitful* remembering so that the order of your vigil is conducted in his presence and in your need for him.

Third, how have you reacted? Do the hard moral reckoning. Where have you gotten stuck? How are you tempted to return evil for evil? How has appropriate hurt, fear, disorientation, and anger become exaggerated or stuck in ruts? There's usually a history to this. Perhaps initial numbness led to searing pain. Led to utter confusion. Led to all-consuming hatred. Led to suicidal despair. Led to anesthetizing yourself with temporary feel-goods. Led to paying the price for a self-destructive addiction. Led to hurting other people. Led to great unhappiness. Led to indifference and cynicism. Led to…. The interplay between what happened to you and your instinctive sinful reactions is part of your unfolding life story. Your story counts. Any positive step, any invasion of God's grace, will be the next step in *this* story.

Fourth, why do you react in dark ways, returning evil for evil? This is a harder question. It gets at who you are on the inside. Here is what's at stake: "Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid."

You are getting at your desires, your fears, your core beliefs—things that run deeper than we are aware, because our own hearts are evasive. God knows, and will help you understand yourself. That earlier question about what happened is the easiest to answer, however painful. That next question about your reactions was a little harder because our self-justifying instinct gets in the way. But it, too, reads straight off the pages of your life. With this question about our motives, we run head-on into our tendency to be blind to ourselves. Ask God, before whom all desires are known and no secrets are hid, to search you, to help you to see as much as you can, to cleanse you by his grace and power.

Something inside us energizes and guides destructive reactions. Not all sufferers respond the same way, because who *you* are stirs in the crucial ingredient. What are your core expectations and desires? Core fears? Core beliefs about yourself, others, God, the meaning of suffering? The motives that master us for ill always have a peculiar blinding effect. The universe shrivels to the size of your experience of pain, your flailing reactions, your instinctive and obsessive motives. We tune out the God who is bigger than our sufferings.We blank out to any deeper purpose within all that has gone so wrong.

Never forget that whatever hard truth you learn about yourself, God has known already. He is merciful. Ask for what he freely gives.

Fifth, what are the negative consequences of your reactions? What vicious circles have kicked into operation? Have your reactions contributed to tense or wrecked relationships? How do you shoot yourself in the foot? Has your health been affected? Has your job been affected?

Sixth, how does the God of all comfort comfort you in your affliction? (2 Cor 1:2–3) We began this process with the God of mercies. Now we come back again after doing some soul-searching. Is there a psalm that particularly speaks to you by giving shape and voice to your experience? Is there a line from one of Paul's letters that speaks directly? Something that Jesus did or said that takes you in hand and bids to turn your world upside down for good? What difference will it make if you can make this fully your own? What one thing from this article could make a real difference as you take it to heart? Are there other things you have already learned about God that will rewrite the script of your life as they take root more deeply?

Seventh, will you honestly seek him? We sought his help at first. In the light of the self-assessment you've been doing, where do you need his help? What are you thankful for? Relate to God. That is the biggest change of all. It's not just a matter of thinking different thoughts or trying to work up different feelings or willing different behaviors. Change involves all those things, but underneath it all is a change in relationship with the Shepherd who nourishes and forgives. A change with the Father who gives his love freely. A change with the Spirit who makes us alive and writes God's promises and will on our hearts. The psalms give us many templates for honest dealing. Make them your own by speaking to God and filling in your own particulars.

Eighth, how should you now live? What does it mean for you to forgive? For this we are born. What would it mean for you to find a new and constructive purpose for your life? For this reason we live. What small constructive things

count, no matter how insoluble the large evil you face? Little things always matter. How will you actually help some other person who is going through similar things? You can give away what you have received. How do you get on with your life? By going through what has happened. By finding and then giving comfort—not by somehow getting over it so you can just forget about it and move on. You are God's workmanship, and he has prepared good things for you to do with your life (Eph 2:10). What does your obedience look like now?

The psalms give us many templates for honest dealing. Make them your own by speaking to God and filling in your own particulars.

Lastly, what are the consequences of such changes? This will take time to work out. But can you imagine gracious circles that might happen? What have you already seen happen that is good? Can you help pass the baton of wisdom and hope to another struggler? Can gratitude slowly replace despair? What would it mean to begin to taste the peace of God that passes all understanding? So often the sins of the fathers pass down to the children—what a redemption when that pattern of destruction is supplanted by the birth of a new life!

Continuing Your Journey

As you continue forward, you'll probably want to read a book or two. You might want to take up Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*. Notice how deep reasons for distress, despair, and hatred become changed by a deeper moral calculation, and by transactions that find deeper mercies. You might want to ponder *When God Weeps* by Joni Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes. Their signature sufferings are likely quite different from yours, but the same human struggles take place, and they find a God bigger than pain and loss. You might want to read Nancy Guthrie's *Be Still My Soul*, Tim Keller's *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering*, or Dan McCartney's *Why Does It Have to Hurt?*[5] Wisdom comes in many forms, and is mediated through the insights and experiences of many different people.

And don't forget worship. Many of the most thoughtful and meaningful

[5] Nancy Guthrie, *Be Still My Soul* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010). Timothy Keller, *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* (New York: Dutton, 2013). Dan McCartney, *Why Does It Have to Hurt?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1998).

hymns were born out of grievous trials: Five of my favorites are

- "When Peace Like a River" (Horatio Spafford)
- "Be Still My Soul" (Katerina von Schlegel)
- "How Firm a Foundation" (anonymous)
- "Amazing Grace" (John Newton)
- "Blessed Be Your Name" (Matt and Beth Redman)

And those only scratch the surface. When we skim through a hymn, we're just mouthing words. When you slow a hymn down and make it your own, it is amazing how pertinently the lyrics and melody map onto your experience. It informs and nerves your faith. You will never again sing it by rote.

I'll leave you with a few words from John Newton and from Psalm 23. Newton "never got over" the sins and sufferings that brought him to Christ both initially and throughout his life. Here's how he summed it up: "Through many dangers, toils, and snares I have already come. 'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home."

We are going home.

And that's where Psalm 23 goes. "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever." When it says "house," don't take that to mean a building. It means the place where God is at home, where he is leading you. It means his family that gathers around him. It means a place where you are safe forever, a community where you belong.