

Book Review

by Desmond Ford

Dr. James Dobson's new best-selling book examines what happens when we hit "the betrayal barrier" and God seems to forsake us. The book is true to the Bible in saying suffering comes to all saints. But God watches over us and brings us at last to the glories of heaven and the earth made new.

Here is truly one of the great books of the twentieth century!

When God Doesn't Make Sense discusses a problem that hangs over the head of every human being like the Sword of Damocles. This problem is the problem of pain.

Honest Christians admit that the human race knows only about 1,000th of 1 percent of God's work in creation. Yet we still instinctively feel we have the right to know all about God's providences and design! This is neither rational nor scriptural.

Betrayal Barrier

James Dobson contends—and we're sure he's correct—that almost every Christian, at some stage in life, reaches the "betrayal barrier." This is when God seems to have forsaken us, and there is no way out of our trouble.

Ninety percent of Christians are unprepared for this, and are bewildered. Even if they remain as Christians, they are forever scarred.

However, the Bible teaches that security is dangerous for mortals, and pain and trial are essential for the development of character. If by faith we accept these Bible truths, we can be fortified for the inevitable conflict.

False Health and Wealth Religion

This book is very welcome at this time. We live in a climate where the majority of things said about the Christian life fall far short of scriptural truth. Much popular religion in America belongs to the "Name It and Claim It" school—a travesty of Christianity.

Can anyone read the stories of tears, wounds, and blood, found all through Scripture, and believe the "Health and Wealth" advocates? Which of the worthies of Scripture knew a life of ease, or unmitigated health and wealth?

Does the Bible used by popular religionists not contain the stories of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, the Israelites in Egypt and Babylon, Job, Paul—and Calvary? Does their Bible lack the repeated admonition that it is tribulation that develops endurance and faith? Does their Bible lack Romans 5:1-5; 8:20-26, 35, 39; Hebrews 11:33-38; James 1:2-4, 12?

I would not like to be found without tears on that great day when God wipes away all tears from our eyes (Rev 21:4).

Personal Suffering

Dr. Dobson gives many stories from Christians he has known personally. They have wrestled with the dilemma of God's absence while they were enduring trial and tribulation.

A picture facing page 134 shows Dr. Dobson with four friends. The picture was taken just before the four were lost in a plane crash.

He quotes from letters of friends telling him about traumatic experiences. God seemed to occupy no place in these experiences at the time. Some of these accounts are very recent. One is from Dr. Tony Campolo, another from veteran Los Angeles Police Chief Robert Vernon. Vernon was victimized because of his Christian faith. Most readers will deeply empathize with the people in these stories.

The Adversity Principle

Each chapter is splendid. But Chapter 7, "The Adversity Principle," calls for special mention.

The principle states that "Without adversity no soul properly matures."

Dr. Dobson writes about Dr. Stephen Hawking, the Cambridge University astrophysicist. Stephen has Lou Gehrig's disease (also known as ALS syndrome). He is confined to a wheelchair. He is unable to feed himself, to write, to comb his hair, or even adjust his glasses. Yet he influences the scientific world in a significant way.

Dr. Hawking affirms that before he became ill he had little interest in life. He found it pointless and boring, with too much alcohol and too little work. He claims to be happier since his affliction. "When one's expectations are reduced to zero," he says, "one really appreciates everything that one does have."

Dr. Dobson adds,

To a man like Hawking who thought he would soon die quickly, everything takes on meaning—a sunrise or a walk in the park or the laughter of children. Suddenly, each small pleasure becomes precious. By contrast, those who believe life owes them a free ride are often discontent with its finest gifts (page 146).

Challenges Can Help Us

Dr. Dobson quotes Hawking:

If you're disabled, you should pour your energies into those areas where you are not handicapped. You should concentrate on what you can do well, and not mourn over what you cannot do. And it is very important not to give in to self-pity. If you're disabled and feel sorry for yourself, then no one is going to have much to do with you. A physically handicapped person certainly cannot afford to be psychologically handicapped as well (p. 146).

Dr. Dobson reminds us that habitual well-being is not advantageous to any species. An existence without challenge is harmful to virtually everything that lives.

Just look at the flabby animals in a zoo, for example. Food is delivered to them every day, and they need do nothing but lie around and yawn. Or consider a tree planted in a rain forest. Because water is readily available, it does not have to extend its root system more than a few feet below the surface. Consequently, it is often poorly anchored and can be toppled by a minor wind storm. But a mesquite tree

planted in a hostile and arid land must send its roots down 30 feet or more in search of water. Not even a gale can blow it over. Its unfriendly habitat actually contributes to stability and vigor. (p. 147)

Sin Results in Suffering

Dr. Dobson is to be applauded for his emphasis that some of our pain is the result of our violations of moral and physical law. This truth is too rarely taught. All the fruit of sin is sour or rotten. It always leads to death.

Clearly, a vast amount of the pain in our world cannot be blamed on the Creator, however crookedly we reason. The link between cause and effect, between sinful choices and resulting sorrows, is too obvious.

It's not that God sits in His Heaven and determines to abuse those who make mistakes. God forbade certain behavior because He knew it would ultimately destroy its victims. It is not God who leads to death, but sin, and sin becomes a cancer that consumes those who embrace it. (pp. 181-182)

Results of Sexual Transgression

A good example of the connection between sin and suffering is today's widespread plague of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). This is clearly linked to "the sudden crumbling of sexual mores in the late 60s and early 70s." Dr. Dobson quotes *Time* (December 13, 1971):

On Mount Sinai, God was unequivocal: "Thou shall not commit adultery." Traditionally, most devout Christians have interpreted the Hebraic commandment to extend to all sexual relations outside marriage. Jesus even condemned lustful thoughts, saying that the man who indulged in them had "already committed adultery in his heart." But in recent years, pressed both by changing sexual behavior and by liberal theologians, the churches have reluctantly come to grips with a "new morality" that questioned whether any "sin"—including adultery or other nonmarital sex—is wrong in all circumstances.

The movement began in the 1960s with a group of writers who championed "contextual" or "situation" ethics. As defined in a widely read book by Episcopalian Joseph Fletcher, situation ethics holds that there are always circumstances in which absolute principles of behavior break down. The only valid ethical test, the argument goes, is what

God's love demands in each particular situation....

Against the traditional concept that God wants men to conform to a fixed divine design, the new morality stakes its case on the idea that God would prefer men to make their own responsible decisions. (pp. 185-187)

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Fruits of Careless Sex

Dr. Dobson gives a sheaf of statistics showing the fruit of this evil philosophy. Right now, there are over 110 million people infected with HIV worldwide. Over 16 percent of the U.S. population between the ages of 15-74 is infected with genital herpes. That means more than 25 million Americans.

The most common STD killer of women is not AIDS, but the human Papilloma Virus, that can cause cancer of the cervix. Twenty-four million American women are infected with HPV, and thousands die of it every year in the USA.

In this "Christian" country, 43 million of our citizens—that's nearly one in five—are infected with an incurable STD. Many will die, while others suffer all their lives.

No wonder James said,

Each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death (Jas 1:14-15 NIV).

When Suffering Ends

In the last chapter, Dr. Dobson says much about the transitory nature of life. He urges upon us the truth that if we are convinced that heaven is real, life's frustrations will not be so, well, frustrating!

He urges us to keep in mind the impermanence of everything that looks so stable. We are to anticipate that Day when our present trials will only be a distant memory:

A day of celebration is coming like nothing that has ever occurred in the history of mankind. The guest of honor on that morning will be one wearing a seamless robe, with eyes like flames of fire, and feet like fine brass. As we bow humbly before Him, a great voice will thunder from the heavens, saying:

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelation 21:3-4)

And, again the mighty voice will echo through the corridors of time:

Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes. (Revelation 7:16-17)

This is the hope of the ages that burns within my breast. It is the ultimate answer to those who suffer and struggle today. It is the only solace for those who have said good-bye to a loved one. Thought the pain is indescribable now, we must never forget that our separation is temporary. We will be reunited forever on that glad resurrection morning. As the Scripture promises, our tears will be banished forever! (pp. 248-249)

Buy and Share

We recommend *When God Doesn't Make Sense* without reservation. Buy many copies and share them with your friends. Lend them to your friends. You don't have to give them as gifts. People will more often read a borrowed book than a gift book. You want your friends to **read** this book! ❖

If you have difficulty finding this book, contact: Focus on the Family, 8605 Explorer Drive, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80920 Phone 719/531 3400.