

RANDY ALCORN

AUTHOR OF *If God Is Good*

90 Days
of God's
Goodness

Daily Reflections

That Shine Light *on* Personal Darkness

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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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*Nanci and I are honored to dedicate this book to our beloved sister
Sono Harris*

(resided here 1954–2010; now living with Jesus)

World-class daughter to Lily

Gold medal wife to Gregg

Hall of Fame mother to Josh, Joel, Alex, Brett, Sarah, Isaac, and James

Sono, you are precious beyond words.

Yours was one of the best-lived and most unforgettable lives Nanci and

*I have ever witnessed. God graciously endowed you with wisdom,
insight, heart, class, purpose, and joy. The heritage you left your family,
and the rest of us, is stunning in its breadth and depth. Your destiny is
to shine in God's presence "like the brightness of the heavens...like the
stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3). No small providence!*

*Thank you, Jesus, for your overflowing work of grace in our sister's
life. And thank you, Sono, for your example to us and our daughters,
all the way back to those ballet lessons twenty-five years ago. Even
your e-mails, expressing thoughts and prayers as I wrote my books
and blogged, were worth framing.*

*Sono, we have been touched deeply by your faithfulness to our Lord and
your service to your family and Christ's church. We can't wait to see you
again in a far better world. On the New Earth we would be honored to
serve our glorious King under your leadership.*



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Introduction

A Journey Toward Jesus

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him...

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

—LUKE 24:13-16, 28-32

Imagine eavesdropping on the conversation between Jesus and these two disciples. Consider the questions they may have asked and the answers he gave. One day in Heaven, I want to see the video!

I'll bet at least one of their questions related to that which looms large for most who read this book: If God is good...*why all this evil and suffering?* If God loves us, how can he justify allowing (or sending) the sometimes overwhelming difficulties we face?

I invite you to join me on a journey to discover what God has to say about this subject. I can't think of a better way to do this than by daily meditating on his Word. I've ended each meditation with a brief prayer, written from my heart. Perhaps my prayer will echo yours, or perhaps it will prompt for you a renewed conversation with God.

While exploring God's goodness in the midst of a suffering world, I've taken the most pleasure in focusing on him, exploring his attributes of goodness, love, holiness, justice, patience, grace, and mercy. Although I haven't unearthed easy answers, I'm astonished at how much insight the Bible offers.

I've beheld a God who says, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering" (Exodus 3:7). I've found great comfort in hearing God speak of a time when he could bear his people's misery no longer (see Judges 10:16). I revel in God's emphatic promise that he will make a New Earth, where he will come down to live with us and on which "he will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Above all, in the process of meditating on this subject and writing this book, I've seen Jesus.

The first physician to die of the AIDS virus in the United Kingdom was a young Christian. He contracted the disease while conducting medical research in Zimbabwe. In the last days of his life, he struggled to express himself to his wife. Near the end, he couldn't talk and had only enough strength to write the letter *J*. She ran through her mental dictionary, saying various words beginning with *J*. None was right. Finally she said, "Jesus?"

He nodded. Yes, Jesus.¹

Jesus filled his thoughts. That's all he wanted to say. That's all his wife needed to know.

In the end, that's all each of us needs to know.



Lord, I so look forward to having conversations with you where I not only ask questions but, like those disciples on the Emmaus road, also hear answers from your own mouth! I'm grateful there's no need to envy the disciples, because one day I, too, will walk with you in a resurrected body, and you will open the Scriptures to me, and at last I will understand so much of what eludes me now. But until then, thank you that you are not silent! You've provided your Word, your Holy Spirit, and your people to help me understand—and grace to trust you when I don't.



Conflict with a Purpose

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

“So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt...

“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.”

—GENESIS 45:4–8; 50:20

After Job had prayed for his friends, the LORD made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had

known him before...comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the LORD had brought upon him...

The LORD blessed the latter part of Job's life more than the first.

—JOB 42:10-12

While most of my books are nonfiction, I've written seven full-length novels. Now, if I were to write a novel about lives without conflict, where characters get everything they want, where life marches on comfortably and no one ever loses anything, nobody would read it. Who likes a boring story? In fact, my central characters always face great conflict, turmoil, uncertainty, and suffering. Some die. That it makes for a far better story is my main reason for doing this. (We enjoy in fiction much that we do not enjoy in life.)

So who am I to say that God shouldn't write such things into *his* story, including my part?

In our lives God uses conflict not just to make the story better but to make *us* better. In life, not just literature, we repeatedly see that protection from conflict produces soft, spoiled, and selfish people, while enduring conflict is more likely to produce someone strong, capable, and caring.

If, in an interview with a character from one of my novels, you were to ask whether he'd like to be written out of the story, he would answer no. Nonexistence appeals to no one. Now ask him if he would like to suffer less, and he'll answer yes. Who wouldn't?

I empathize with my characters since I, too, am a character in God's story. At times I'd love to take a break from the drama. Three months off without stress would feel nice. But I also realize I'm part of something great, far bigger than myself. And I trust God not only to bring the whole story together but also to do with my part of it what he knows to be best.

Given the option while facing his trials, I'm confident Joseph would have walked off the stage of God's story. After betrayal by his brothers when he was a teenager and being sold into slavery and later falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and sent to prison, Joseph had surely endured enough for one life!

Talk to Job in the middle of his story—with ten children dead and excruciating boils covering his body, God apparently abandoning him and friends haranguing him. Ask if he wants out. I know what he'd say because he said it: "Why did I not perish at birth?" (Job 3:11).

But that's all over now. On the New Earth, sit by Job and Joseph at a lavish banquet with their Lord. Ask them, "Be honest. *Was it really worth it?*"

"Absolutely," Job says. Joseph smiles, nodding emphatically.

"But, Job, had God given you the choice, wouldn't you have walked out of the story?"

"In a heartbeat. I'm just glad he didn't let me."

You and I are characters in God's story, handmade by him. Every character serves a purpose. God loves a great story, and all of us who know him will recall and celebrate and continue to live in that story for all eternity.

Before we fault him for the plot twists we don't like, we should remember that Jesus has written this story in his own blood.



Father, what a privilege to be chosen by you to be a character in the greatest story ever told—and to know that one day we'll be able to read it start to finish. Thank you for this true, unfolding drama of redemption. Thank you that in the ages to come we will praise you for not letting us walk off the pages. Thank you for accomplishing the purposes in us that at first only you, the Author, understand, but in the end, looking back, we, the readers—and characters—will too.



A Happy Ending with No End

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

—I PETER 1:3–9

We are to rejoice in our inheritance in Heaven even as God sovereignly uses difficulties in our lives as a fire to refine, purify, and strengthen our faith.

I'll never forget my first thirty seconds of high school. I walked in the front door, tripped, and fell on my face...right in front of three cheerleaders. They laughed hysterically. Not a good start for a freshman desperately wanting to be cool!

At the time, that incident hurt worse than my serious ankle injury while playing football. Yet forty years later, even though I still remember it vividly, it brings me absolutely no pain. It just makes me laugh. Of course, my teenage troubles do *not* compare to having cancer, being tortured, or seeing a child die. I only mean that although certain experiences brought me genuine pain when they happened, with the passing of time and gaining of perspective, they no longer do.

If we sometimes recognize this in daily life, shouldn't we suppose that many of our most painful ordeals will look quite different a million years from now as we recall them on the New Earth? What if one day we discover that God wasted *nothing* in our lives on Earth? What if we see that *every* agony was part of giving birth to an eternal joy?

I watched an interview with two families whose daughters, students at Taylor University, suffered a terrible car accident in 2006. A truck hit a van head-on, killing five people.

At the accident scene, someone found Laura Van Ryn's purse next to Whitney Cerak. Workers at the scene mistook the students, both blondes, for each other. Laura, misidentified as Whitney, was pronounced dead at the scene, while Whitney, misidentified as Laura, fought for her life on the way to the hospital. Some fourteen hundred people attended "Whitney's" funeral, and her father spoke

at the service. No one suspected that the body they buried that day was Laura Van Ryn's.

For five weeks, the Ceraks believed their daughter had died, while the Van Ryns thought their daughter lived.

When this monumental error finally came to light, both families expressed faith in God. In one conversation, the Ceraks told the Van Ryns, "We are so sorry that we have the happy ending." Don Van Ryn responded, "We do too...we just haven't seen it yet."

The Van Ryns await their reunion with Laura in a better world.

God promises that the eternal ending will break forth in such glorious happiness that all present suffering will pale in comparison. *All* who know Jesus will have a happy ending.

We just haven't seen it yet.



Thank you, Lord, for valuing our faith in you so much that you test and strengthen it through adversity. Thank you for your promise of an unfading inheritance and that you are developing greater Christlikeness in us now that we may be better prepared to rule under you in the eternal kingdom. Though we aren't there yet, we celebrate the fact that because of your grace, we will have a happy ending; one that will never end.

Freedom and Comfort in Truth

I am laid low in the dust;
 preserve my life according to your word.
I recounted my ways and you answered me;
 teach me your decrees.
Let me understand the teaching of your precepts;
 then I will meditate on your wonders.
My soul is weary with sorrow;
 strengthen me according to your word.
Keep me from deceitful ways;
 be gracious to me through your law.
I have chosen the way of truth;
 I have set my heart on your laws.
I hold fast to your statutes, O LORD;
 do not let me be put to shame.
I run in the path of your commands,
 for you have set my heart free.

—PSALM 119:25–32

Don't you love the heartfelt honesty of the words God has chosen to include in the Bible? "My soul is weary with sorrow." It's the burden of life in a hurting world that causes the writer to turn to Scripture for strength: "Preserve my life according to your word.... Strengthen me according to your word."

If abuse, rape, desertion, paralysis, debilitating disease, or the loss of a loved one has devastated you, then the issue of evil and suffering isn't merely theoretical, philosophical, or theological. It's deeply personal. Logical arguments won't satisfy you; in fact, they might offend you. You need help with the emotional problem of evil, not merely the logical problem of evil. Like children at times, each of us must snuggle into our Father's arms, and there receive the comfort we need.

But remember this: you are a whole person. Truth matters. To touch us at the heart level—and to keep touching us over days, months, years, and decades—truth must work its way into our *minds*.

Never seek comfort by ignoring truth. Comfort in falsehood is false comfort. Jesus said, "The truth will set you free" (John 8:32). When you try to soothe your feelings without bothering to think deeply about ideas, you are asking to be manipulated. Quick-fix feelings won't sustain you over the long haul. On the other hand, deeply rooted beliefs—specifically a worldview grounded in Scripture—will allow you to persevere and hold on to a faith built on the solid rock of God's truth.

In writing his magnificent story of redemption, God has revealed truths about himself, us, the world, goodness, evil, suffering, and Heaven and Hell. (I capitalize those terms as proper nouns throughout the book because they are actual places, like New England or Saturn.) Those truths God reveals to us teem with life. The blood of

man and God flows through them. God speaks with passion, not indifference; he utters fascinating words, not dull ones. To come to grips with the problem of evil and suffering, you must do more than hear heart-wrenching stories about suffering people. You must hear God's truth to help you interpret those stories.

The Bible reveals him to be a great God, sovereign and all-powerful, gracious and all-good, kind and all-wise. And he is also our Abba, our Papa. But we do not always feel warmth and security, do we?

Maybe you're holding on to years of bitterness and depression. You blame someone for your suffering—and that someone may be God. You will not find relief until you gain perspective. That perspective can be found as you meditate on his wonders and ask him to use the truths of his revealed Word to strengthen you.



Lord, at times my heart is heavy with sorrow. This fallen world isn't an easy place to live in. You know because you descended from Heaven's happiness and lived here, laughed here, suffered here, and were crucified here. Thank you for living as you did and dying as you did and rising as you did so I can live forever with you and your people in a world where you will, once and for all, make all things right.

Honest Faith

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning.
O my God, I cry by day, but You do not answer;
And by night, but I have no rest.
Yet You are holy,
O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel.
In You our fathers trusted;
They trusted and You delivered them.
To You they cried out and were delivered;
In You they trusted and were not disappointed.

—PSALM 22:1–5, NASB

What an honest cry to God for help: “*Why, God? Why does it seem like you’re not answering my prayers?*” As he wrestles with this, David turns to Scripture, where God’s deliverance of his people is documented. David reflects on their trust in God. In the end, God’s faithfulness to Israel inspires David to believe that God will prove faithful to him as well.

God's Word contains countless expressions of concern and anguish about the hard times people experience and the fact that they sometimes don't feel God's closeness. In this fallen world, "Why?" is a common question.

Randy Butler, a pastor, told me about his teenage son's death. "For twenty years, God gave me a perfect life, family, and ministry. Then Kevin died, and nearly every morning, for three or four months, I screamed questions at God. I asked, 'What were you thinking?' And, 'Is this the best you can do for me?' And finally, 'Do you really expect me to show up every Sunday and tell everyone how great you are?' In the silence I began to hear the voice of God...then, without any announcement, when I became silent, God spoke to my soul. He had an answer for each of my three questions."

Had Randy not been unreservedly honest with God, he couldn't have completely grasped how the God he spoke to had watched his own Son die long before Randy had. God the Father had endured the horrible death of Jesus, his only Son. So, better than anyone in the universe, God empathized with Randy's pain.

A lot of bad theology inevitably surfaces when we face suffering. When people lose their faith because of suffering, it suggests a weak or nominal faith that didn't account for or prepare them for evil and suffering. Any faith not based on the truth needs to be lost—the sooner, the better.

Suffering and evil exert a force that either pushes us away from God or pulls us toward him. But if personal suffering gives sufficient evidence that God doesn't exist, then surely I shouldn't wait until *I* suffer to conclude he's a myth. If my suffering would one day justify denying God, then I should deny him now in light of other people's suffering.

Believing that God exists is not the same as *trusting* the God who exists. A nominal Christian often discovers in suffering that his faith has been in his church, family, career, or social network, but not Christ. As he faces evil and suffering, he may find his beliefs shaken or even destroyed. But genuine faith—trusting God even when we don't understand—will be made stronger and purer.

If your faith is based on lack of affliction, it's on the brink of extinction and is only a frightening diagnosis or a shattering phone call away from collapse. Token faith will not survive suffering. Nor should it.



Thank you, Lord, for welcoming the honest cries of our hearts. Thank you for allowing us to ask, “Why?” It’s a gift to us that your prophets and King David asked, “Why,” and even your Son, Jesus, asked, “Why?” as he hung on a cross. But give us the grace and wisdom, Lord, to ask our questions while looking to your Word and to your Holy Spirit for answers.