

finding hope in life's losses

BEYOND THE VALLEY

D A V E B R A N O N



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CHAPTER ONE

THE LORD, MY SHEPHERD

We all need a shepherd—a guide, a protector. Both in life's easy times and in its moments of pain, we can turn to One who knows trouble, who knows the future, and who knows how to comfort us the best when we need it the most.



THE GOD FATHER

What's behind it . . .

I can't seem to figure God out.

That's a good thing.

It's good because God is so much greater than we are that it would be foolish to suggest that we've got the God-thing down pat.

A lot of people in our world can't figure God out, so they choose not to worship Him. They say they can't understand how God and poverty can co-exist because, in their finite way of thinking, God should simply eliminate economic difficulty.

But not figuring God out is a good thing because it reminds us that He is so much greater and more complicated and more nuanced than we could ever understand.

And not figuring God out leads us to a couple of other positive results:

First, it allows us to exercise our faith. When things go wrong and God doesn't write the reasons across the sky, we are left with the good option of simply trusting that He knows what He is doing.

And second, not figuring God out completely leads us to spend time contemplating Him and sitting in awe of Him. Somewhat like we do when we see great art and have to spend time puzzling it all out, we sit enthralled at our majestic God. We read passages like 2 Corinthians 1:3, and we have the joy of piecing together what it means to us.

Walk with me through this verse and see how exciting it is to contemplate our awesome heavenly Father.

GOD'S WORD ON IT . . .

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.*

2 Corinthians 1:3

SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION . . .

Praise escapes our lips most easily during the good times in our lives.

We love to grace the Sunday morning scene with flowing words of honor and worship as a comfortable congregation joins in a chorus of music and praise singing.

We cherish the chance to speak great words of reverence to our God when our prayers come back marked “Answered!”

“Praise be!” says Paul as he begins his letter—and we value his example and our great opportunity to echo his words.

As we examine the object of the praise Paul tells us about in this passage, though, we can see a progression away from a life free of problems and toward one of struggles—a life that—regardless of our feelings—should still be marked by the same kind of praise we offered when we stood atop life’s mountain peaks.

Paul offers praise first to the “God . . . of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That single idea fills us with both wonder and mystery as we marvel in the truth of God’s triune nature. While we know in our heart and in our biblically educated minds that God exists in three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—we stand amazed that God the Father is not just our God, but He is also the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are able to praise the God who co-existed with Jesus from eternity past yet superintended His sacrificial death for us on the cross. We send glory God’s way because when Jesus said, “It is finished,” God’s work of appropriating salvation for all who believe in Jesus was being fulfilled.

Indeed, we “praise the God of our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Paul’s next offering of praise goes to God in a little different way. “Praise be to the . . . Father of our Lord Jesus

Christ.” We sense something different—something more familial and warm this time as Paul expresses glory to God’s role as the Father in the triune Godhead.

The heavenly Father. The One who first loved us. The One who is “in heaven” and possesses the hallowed name. The One whom Jesus asked to forgive the ones who didn’t know what they were doing when they killed Him. The One who loved the “Son and placed everything in His hands.”

Indeed, we “praise the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul goes on—and here those of us who have stubbed our toes on the rocks of life’s difficulties get some valued help.

The apostle sends praise next to the “Father of compassion.” Here is where those of us who have fallen off the mountain of life and are making our way through one of the valleys of trouble find the strength to stop and shout praise. Yes, we need to praise the God of our Lord and the Father of our Lord—but our hearts covet compassion.

Struggles may threaten to surround us like a rain-swollen river that has breached its banks, and we need Somebody who cares. We need compassion. And Paul points us to that One.

The Father of compassion is “father to the fatherless, a defender of widows” (Psalm 68:5), never leaving the seemingly helpless without resource.

The Father of compassion is the “Everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:6), never leaving us or forsaking us (Hebrews 13:5).

The Father of compassion is our “abba,” our “daddy” (Romans 8:15), providing the kind of close, personal help that marks the best human fathers.

Indeed, we can send “praise to the Father of compassion” because when life breaks down, there is not one thing we need more profoundly than One who has concern and love and help for us wrapped up in His heart.

But wait! There’s more. “Praise be,” Paul concludes, to “the God of all comfort.”

God of creation. God of the Israelites. God of the new covenant. And thankfully, God of all comfort.

He made us.

He guided our story.

He provided life eternal.

And He comes beside us to put a cool cloth of comfort on our worried forehead.

He assures us of eternal life when death stares us down.

He calms us with His sovereignty when life seems out of control.

He soothes our damaged hearts when sadness wakes us in the morning.

Indeed, we “praise the God of all comfort.”

One verse. Four titles.

One incredible, awesome God.

REFLECTION . . .

- What makes you stand in awe of God? His creation? His plan? His work in your life? His comfort?

- When has God comforted you the most? What does it mean to you that He is the “God of all comfort”?



DECISIONS, DECISIONS

What's behind it . . .

We sat, stunned, across the desk from a young man who was doing everything he could to help us. He was calm, polite, and exceedingly caring. Yet the task he was helping us accomplish could not have been made easy or pleasant no matter how he conducted himself.

We found ourselves in the office of a funeral home being asked the most out-of-place questions we had ever been asked. We had barely had a chance to pick ourselves up off the floor from the shock of Melissa's sudden, unexpected death.

We had just finished a private viewing of our once-vibrant teen's body in another section of this horrible place, and now we were expected to try to figure out how to memorialize a young woman who just hours before had been jet-skiing on Lake Michigan.

Our minds were still numb. Our eyes and our heads still hurt from endless tears and sobbing. And it didn't really feel like we were experiencing reality. This could not be happening.

“What kind of flowers do you want?”

“How about the program for the funeral?”

“Have you picked out a cemetery?”

He had to ask the questions, but why did he have to ask them of us? What had just happened? How could life have gone so awry?

Stunned, we stumbled our way along as we began a new existence, one with just a sliver of realization that what we were to say and do regarding our daughter's death could have an impact on others. For now, it was hard to see past our despair. It was hard to wrap our minds around a concept that would later bring us at least some hope: Melissa's life was in control of a sovereign and loving God.

GOD'S WORD ON IT . . .

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

James 4:13–15

SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION . . .

The sudden and unexpected death of a child leaves a family with a host of decisions that they had never given one second of thought to before. Life leads to decisions about schooling and clothes and music tastes and vacations.

Death leads to decisions about gravesites and caskets and obituaries.

So, on June 7, 2002, Sue and I found ourselves in a place we never imagined in our worst dreams we would be—sitting in the office of a funeral home, writing Melissa's obituary.

Her obituary! She was just seventeen. She was just learning to live. She was just beginning to become the woman she felt God wanted her to be. Obituaries and teenagers aren't supposed to go together.

Her obituary? What can you say in one column that appears in the most depressing section of the newspaper to encapsulate the beauty and wonder that was your vibrant young daughter's life? How can you do her any kind of justice with cold, dark words on a piece of newsprint? How do you testify to a community while your broken heart can hardly keep your shattered life alive?

As I sat contemplating how to tell the world about my precious daughter, one word came to my mind above all others: sovereignty. To my wife and me, God's sovereignty had to be at the top of any list of words that could explain Melissa's death.

In these opening moments of our sad new life without Melissa, I had to have assurance that this God we had loved and served and studied about and worshiped had been paying attention at nine p.m. on Thursday, June 6. We had to know that God had not misplaced Melissa momentarily that night. We had to have the reassurance that He had superintended

her death and that He had been waiting in open-armed joy to receive her as she entered His kingdom.

Without sovereignty—without God’s active role as the controlling figure in this tragedy—where else could we possibly go in our thinking?

Without sovereignty, there was only randomness. And not just with Melissa’s death, but with all of our existence.

Or chaos.

Or maybe something worse. Maybe it could have been God’s inability to act—that Melissa’s death was out of God’s hands. Without sovereignty, we would be left contemplating a surprised God unable to intervene in a terrible, horrible accident. Without sovereignty, Melissa’s death would have been, to us, either the worst mistake God ever made or proof that there are some situations over which God has no control.

Everything we ever knew about God, however, indicated that this was simply not the case. We don’t call Him the Almighty because He is incapable or limited. We don’t worship Him as “King of kings and Lord of lords” because He is subject to some other power in this universe. We don’t call Him Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, because He has somehow fallen asleep at the controls in the middle of things. No, He is the Creator, the Ruler, and the Sustainer of all that is. And if He is all those things—and we are convinced that He is—then He had to be alert and paying attention to the events of what, from this side of heaven, appeared to be an avoidable error.

So—clinging to God’s supreme authority and power in this world—we began Melissa’s obituary with these words: “By God’s sovereign and loving hand, Melissa Ruth Branon . . .”

Since Melissa’s death, I have found myself to be like a radar detector for any mention of the concept of sovereignty. My ears perk at any mention of God’s role in life’s events. Songs that speak of our heavenly Father’s hand on our lives get played over and over on my CD player. It has become essential to grasp the difference between a life that is considered to be snuffed out suddenly without purpose or reason and a life that was taken from us under the caring, watchful eye of a God with a plan.

And it is a great comfort to know that God’s loving control of Melissa’s life was operational right up until the time He took her home.

How is tomorrow looking? Got plans?

Don’t forget to say, “If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.” There is assurance, hope, and comfort in those words, for they guide us to recall God’s hand on our lives.

REFLECTION . . .

- When has God’s sovereignty comforted you? When have you found it helpful to realize that God has things in His control?
- What do you have planned for tomorrow? Think of tomorrow as God’s day to do with it as He wills. Then plan what you think He wants you to do.


THE BIG UNANSWERABLE***What's behind it . . .***

Here are some situations that continue to make me think of this question: *Why?*

On September 11, 2001, some friends of ours lost their young married daughter, Lindsay, in a car accident as she was driving home from a prayer meeting for our country in the wake of the sad events of that day. To further complicate the why: she was pregnant; she had recently reconciled with God; she was killed in front of her parents, who were driving along behind her; and she was killed by a man on drugs. *Why, indeed?*

Another couple we know lost their preteen daughter, Heather, to a sudden onset of juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. It blazed into a full-fledged disease and took her life in a matter of days.

A twelve-year-old girl was practicing softball. Maggie was playing first base when a throw grazed off her glove, hit her in the neck, and killed her.

Another girl, Brianna, who was blind, attended a camp with other kids who had the same disability. While at the camp, the kids went swimming—and Brianna drowned.

Each of these families is a Christian family. Each of these girls had trusted Jesus as Savior.

Why? How can we not ask the question?

GOD'S WORD ON IT . . .

I trust in God's unfailing love for ever and ever.

Psalms 52:8

SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION . . .

We can understand the sovereignty.

We can grudgingly grasp the rights of the Almighty over everything.

We can make sense out of the centrality of God in our world.

But we are still left with the Big Unanswerable Question.

Why?

God, there were other ways. Your name could have been glorified in ways other than her funeral and memorials.

We could have sensed your sovereignty in more normal situations. We wouldn't ever have doubted that you were in sovereign control of her life had things turned out differently.

The loved ones we have lost could have continued to glorify you with their life as you've asked them to do in their death.

So we still stand in bewilderment, God, at the most nagging and inglorious question we can imagine.

Why?

Why, when Christian young people are living for you, do you take them and leave behind the millions their age who snub their noses at you?

Why, when you knew how fragile the families left behind would be, did you steal them away?

Why, when parents invest so heavily in their children's lives, do we not get to see the dividends for just the few short years that intervene between now and eternity?

Why, God?

At our daughter's funeral, our friend and former pastor Dr. James Jeffery addressed that monstrous question. He said, "If you knew why God took Melissa, would it make it any easier to bury her?"

Jim's logic is inescapable. Indeed, even if God had written His reasons across the gloomy June sky above our church on the day of Melissa's funeral, that knowledge couldn't have undone reality.

Asking why is second nature to those who grieve or suffer through other of life's serious difficulties, even though we know we cannot get the answer here, nor would getting the answer heal the crack in our heart.

We keep asking this question, in one sense, because we do trust God. We trust that He is the controller of all that happens to us and therefore is responsible when struggles land in our path. And if He is responsible, we assume God had some reason for sending us this trial. That reason, if we knew it, would not lend any more importance or purpose to what is so inexplicable.

For a long time after Melissa died, I imagined that when we arrive in heaven, there would be a long line under a huge flashing sign that says, "Why?"

I envisioned shorter lines all over heaven.

"Talk to Paul" one would read.

“Sing with David” would be another.

Maybe there would be “Creation Questions Answered by Moses.” But in my mind’s eye I could see that the lines waiting under those signs would be miniscule compared with the long line stretching into eternity under the “Why?” sign.

“Why did my parents divorce?”

“Why was I so ugly?”

“Why didn’t Someone heal my dad?”

“Why was my family so poor?”

“Why was I so mistreated as a child?”

“Why was there so much suffering in the world?”

But as I contemplated that question over and over and anticipated the day when I might get my answer from God himself, I began to dismiss my silly notion of heaven’s *why* line—for two reasons.

First, as I thought about what I already knew about heaven, I decided that once we have entered heaven’s reality, our glorified minds will suddenly be equipped with any information we need to know. Heaven, I decided, will not be a place for sighing and sadness as we relive the trouble and tragedies of earth. It will, instead, be a place of worship. Reunited with our loved ones, we’ll join them in the worship of God that they will have already been enjoying. *Why* won’t matter because what we will be doing will be what matters—and what we will then know will eliminate the retrospective sorrow that now clouds our lives.

And there is a second reason the *why* question has lost some of its compelling, overwhelming influence on my thinking. I have decided that I think I know the answer—or at

least I know of an answer that, while not all-encompassing, does offer hope amidst the pain.

My daughter died for the same reason God brings anything into our lives—both things we wish for and those we wish hadn't happened. In reality, the *why* answer that causes some hope for my heart is the *why* answer even for our existence.

Tragedy comes so God's name can be glorified.

I must admit that I am not happy with this answer, because in my human, finite way of looking at things, Melissa's life, not her death, would have been a much better way of bringing glory to God.

However, we do not have the option of considering God's workings as an either-or situation. I cannot say that God can work only in the way I want Him to. And because of God's sovereignty, I do not have the right to suggest that my vision for Melissa's missing future was the better plan. Better for me, it would seem. Better for my family, we think. But somehow in God's mysterious dealings, truly not the best.

So now I am left with a choice. I can continue to trust God and then trumpet His greatness through recounting Melissa's life, or I can repair to a caved-in world of ongoing pain and hopeless musings about what could have been.

As Melissa's dad, I always felt I knew what was best for her. That makes it doubly hard to turn over the awful realities of her absence to Someone else. It is a painful, frightening thing I do when I release Melissa and suggest that the *why* of her death finds its answer in a positive outcome.

Yet I must. Against a heart crying, “No!” and a life seeking solace, I must release my child to God’s sovereignty, to His plan, to His ultimate glory.

And in so doing, I move a step closer to returning to the arms of our heavenly Father.

REFLECTION . . .

- What have you had to turn over to God’s loving hand—even if you didn’t quite understand why this thing was happening?
- What is your top question regarding God’s mysterious ways? Maybe it’s not *why*. Maybe it’s something else.



A COMPLETE LIFE

What’s behind it . . .

On occasion, I’ll get a letter from someone who wants to help me out regarding Melissa. This person has read my articles about Melissa’s death, and he or she wants to fill me in about the reason Melissa died.

I have long since given up on trying to figure out why people do this—as if they have a special revelation that I’ve somehow missed. But I do realize that they are trying to help.

Regarding the hopefully helpful letter writers, the suggested reason that I dislike the most goes something like this: “Melissa died because God was protecting her from problems she might have in the future.” I don’t like this for a couple of

reasons. First, it suggests what I don't want suggested: a life of trouble for my daughter. And second, it violates the truth of God's control.

Melissa's life was complete when she died. Some unwritten chapters were not out there waiting to be completed—maybe bad chapters with nasty things poised to happen. That's not the way it works.

There is comfort in this truth for me, as this devotional explains.

GOD'S WORD ON IT . . .

Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed.

Job 14:5

SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION . . .

During the winter after Melissa's death, I was sitting at a school event with one of Melissa's good friends, Tara. This young woman had been among those girls Melissa made sure was included in group activities. A bit shy, Tara could easily have stayed on the fringe of high school life—except for Melissa. Mell made sure Tara was included.

On the day of Melissa's death, Tara had taken Melissa to the beach in her car. Then she had taken her to the cottage in her car. But then she turned Melissa over to Mell's boyfriend Jordan for the trip home.

As Tara and I talked about Melissa on that cold winter's night, she turned to me with tears in her precious eyes and said, "Mr. Branon, I wish I had taken Melissa home that night instead of Jordan."

I looked at this sweet teenager with such a tender heart and said, "Tara, if you had taken Mell home, you would have been in an accident."

Obviously, I am not clairvoyant, and I cannot hang my theological hat on this as a hard and fast truth, but Tara knew what I meant. I have grown to believe that there was nothing anyone could have done that night to prevent Melissa's death.

We can find evidence that God's hand controls the events of our lives by examining the words of Paul, who explained to the people of Ephesus that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). There is a divine pattern to the often-chaotic events of our lives, and while we may not be privy to how that pattern will eventually unfold, we know that God doesn't have to use an eraser on it. Each new event is designed as a part of that total pattern, and each event fits into the ultimate, completed picture.

More specifically, we know that each life God designed was on His drawing board for a purpose. And each day of that life was designated as important and pertinent to His plan. Psalm 139:16 tells us,

*All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*

In God's mysterious yet perfect plan, He gives us each an appointed amount of time on this earth. He has written the book of our life, and He knows how many pages that book contains—and there are no surprise endings to Him. When that final page is written, God superintends the end of that earthly life and, for the Christian, the beginning of a heavenly existence.

Other passages of Scripture seem to verify the concept that each of us has been assigned a length of time on this earth—a length that is part of God's distinctive plan for each of us. In Job 14:5, the great sufferer said this: "Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed." The psalmist as well understood God's hand of control in matters of life and death. Directing his conversation toward God, David said, "Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days" (Psalm 39:4).

Whether it is my niece, who died just hours after she was born; my wife's grandmother, who lived to be 104; my teenage daughter; or your loved one who is too early gone—it is not the length of life that is most important (and believe me, it's an immense struggle to admit this truth). What is important is that God has His hand of control on that life.

I have to believe that God gave Melissa just seventeen years, ten months, and sixteen days to make a difference on this earth. She successfully fulfilled her mission, and on June 6, 2002, God called her into His presence. The last page of her book was written that day, and then God ushered her into His glorious presence.

We were shocked, stunned, and saddened by this sudden end to a remarkable young life, but we are in part comforted to know that Melissa does not get an incomplete in the grading scale of life. She had finished her race. She had run well. She was surely greeted by God's "well done" as she entered the awesome and unspeakable glories of heaven.

God is in total control of our days. We cling to that truth, not because it makes us miss the departed ones any less but because it helps us step back into the loving arms of a loving, comforting, merciful God.

REFLECTION . . .

- How does recognizing God's control on your life or on the life of someone you love help you when trouble comes?
- How do we deal with the word *accident*? Are the events that seem to occur randomly (a building collapses; a train jumps the track; a child gets hit by a misplayed softball or baseball) still under God's control?



RANDOM ACT?

What's behind it . . .

Melissa was indeed a precious gift from God, and we loved her with an unending, unconditional love. We guided her to God, knowing that the most important decision she would ever make would be to put her faith in Jesus.

We watched her turn from a painfully shy little girl who had to be held back from starting kindergarten because the teachers feared she wasn't ready to interact with other kids into a beacon of joy for her friends.

We protected her. We trained her. We smothered her with love—as did her brother and sisters. She grew up secure in our love and in God's care.

We entrusted her into that care, looking forward to what God might have in store for her as His child and as one who sought to honor Him.

But then came the call. The empty arms. The broken heart. The shattered family. God, what have you done?

GOD'S WORD ON IT . . .

Trust in the Lord with all your heart.

Proverbs 3:5

SERIOUS CONTEMPLATION . . .

As much as I believe the truth of God's sovereignty, I cannot say that I am happy about what it means. Yes, I can believe that Mell had an appointment with God in heaven on June 6, 2002, and yes, I can take some measure of comfort in knowing that her death was not random and meaningless in God's economy, but that does not mean I am pleased about it.

That God can superintend our conception, birth, and death is clear. Yet, there's another part of this equation that continues to trouble us.

How could He? Yes, He has the power, but there is something about His swooping down and intercepting our daughter that makes me ask, "How could you?"

How could a loving God do something that will for the rest of our lives bring ongoing sorrow and pain?

The death of a family member casts a dark pall on life. Heaven's rich gain is a family's deep loss, and the brightest day of the bereaved families' lives are tinted with an unpleasant gray.

Indeed, answering the question of sovereignty raises other questions about God that are nearly as unanswerable. Among those is this query, one that we posed to our former pastor shortly after we buried Melissa. Sue and I both were burning in our hearts to know what to think about a question that was troubling us greatly.

James Jeffery had been our pastor for several years. We had developed a unique relationship with him, and for the first time in my life I had developed a true friendship with my pastor. He was "Jim" to me, and that meant we could share on a different level. However, he had left our church a few months before Melissa died and was serving as a college president in Pennsylvania at the time of her death. I was hesitant to ask him to come back to perform Melissa's funeral, but when I did, he was more than glad to do so. We were honored and grateful.

When Jim stopped by our house shortly after the funeral, we knew that we could depend on his deep wisdom and his close, personal relationship with God. We knew we could ask him the really tough questions, and he would gladly attempt to answer them with a sincerity that we cherished and a love that warmed our hearts.

On behalf of Sue and myself, I posed the question.

“Jim, if someone had come into our home in the middle of the night and killed Melissa, we would have so much hatred for that person in our hearts. We would be so angry with that person for robbing her from us. We would want the full extent of the law to come down on his head, and we would have a hard time allowing for any mercy for him. He would have stolen our most precious possession, and we would expect eye-for-an-eye justice. In our theology, we say that God is responsible for Melissa’s death. Why, then, if it is not okay for a murderer to take Mell’s life, is it okay for God to?”

With the confidence of a man of God, Jim did not flinch from our question. Instead, he calmly and forcefully told us, “Because only God has the right to.”

Perhaps this goes even deeper than the question of sovereignty. It goes to ownership and creatorship. It reminds us that our very existence is a gift from God’s hand. As our Creator-God, He has the ultimate right over our every breath. We may live sometimes as if God is not even around, but in reality it is only by God’s permission, power, and provision that we can even hope that our heart beats one more time.