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GIVE ME  
UNDERSTANDING  
THAT I MAY LIVE

*Situating Our  
Suffering within God's  
Redemptive Plan*

MARK TALBOT

*Suffering and the Christian Life*

VOLUME 2

“This may just be the finest treatment of biblical-theological perspectives on the nature, significance, and purpose of suffering that I have ever read. The exegetical roots of Talbot’s work run deep, his theological reflections are profound, his grasp of wide-ranging secondary literature is extraordinary, and his pastoral passion is transparent. We pray that this book will challenge, comfort, and inspire many whose experiences have landed them in the swamp of confusion and despair, and that it will be a helpful resource for those whom God calls to walk—or swim—with those in this state.”

**Daniel I. Block**, Gunther H. Knoedler Professor Emeritus of Old Testament, Wheaton College; author, *The Triumph of Grace* and *For the Glory of God*

“Suffering is the greatest mystery of life, and God’s people have struggled with it since the days of Job. There is much about it that we shall never be able to understand, but Christians can know that whatever happens to us, we are children of God, and he will not allow us to fall away from his loving care. That is where we must begin, and the Scriptures offer us a rich resource for establishing our faith on a firm foundation. Mark Talbot takes us where we need to be.”

**Gerald Bray**, Research Professor of Divinity, History, and Doctrine, Beeson Divinity School; author, *God Is Love* and *God Has Spoken*

“Mark Talbot operates like a calm, rational medic checking his patients. His careful, clear accounts of the Bible’s teaching of suffering, his case that human suffering arises from the race’s fallenness—its rebellion—looks forward to the redemption and consummation that await those who repent and put their faith in Christ. Mark shows himself sensitive to the Bible’s details, its modes and idioms, and to how we humans bear our suffering, cataloging the perplexity, frustration, and futility of human life, the litany of human sin and woe, that comes from our sin. The book forms an armory for the Christian and for his family and friends, outfitting us to endure our suffering through childbearing and motherhood, through the duty and drudgery of daily work, through lives cut short and old age, and through wealth and its loss. The careful reader will want more and more of Mark’s unique books.”

**Paul Helm**, former Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, King’s College London

“None of us make it through this life without seeking to make sense of its inherent suffering. To help us in this pursuit, Mark Talbot takes us to the central story that helps us make sense of the suffering in our individual stories, the story of creation impacted by the curse because of sin. With insight and analysis of the original goal, original order, and original goodness of creation, he helps us to see not only how the impact of the curse has disrupted that order and goodness, but also what God is doing through Christ to redeem, restore, and bring us into the life of goodness and glory he intends to share with us forever.”

**Nancy Guthrie**, author, *Even Better than Eden*

“Mark Talbot joins together what can be easy to separate when thinking about suffering: consistently insightful investigation of the Bible (especially Genesis 1–3), clear-headed reflection on the human condition, and a deep tenderness toward actual sufferers. The way in which he folds together the stories we tell about our own lives with Scripture’s story was especially gratifying to read. Mark also manages to write about difficult subjects without ever being difficult to understand—he carries the reader along beautifully. I learned a lot from this book, and I recommend it highly.”

**Eric Ortlund**, Lecturer in Old Testament and Biblical Hebrew, Oak Hill College; author, *Suffering Wisely and Well*

“We need to avoid two mistakes: seeing our lives as pointless or thinking we’ll win an Oscar for best director. Wheelchair-bound Mark Talbot shows with soaring spirit that we have important roles as supporting actors in a majestic drama of creation, rebellion, suffering, and redemption plotted out by God.”

**Marvin Olasky**, Senior Fellow, Discovery Institute; author, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* and *Lament for a Father*

“With this volume, Mark Talbot continues what looks set to be a tour de force on Christianity and the suffering Christian. In his first book, he pressed the existential power and importance of individual narratives of pain and anguish. Here he steps back and sets those stories within the larger framework of the great narrative of God’s dealings with his people. If it is true that every story of human suffering has its unique pain for those involved, Talbot demonstrates with characteristic conviction and authority that all redemption from suffering must be understood in terms of the unique revelation of God in Christ.”

**Carl Trueman**, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College

“This second volume in Mark Talbot’s tetralogy on suffering is a masterful handling of the vexing and deeply personal problem of suffering in the life of the Christian. Talbot the philosopher shows his skill as a biblical theologian by situating suffering within the grand sweep of the Bible’s fourfold storyline: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. Both elegant and wise, as well as judicious and kind, this is biblical and theological reflection at its very best—the kind of thoughtful, mature analysis that feeds the people of God. There are treasures to be found on every page—and, as a bonus, in many of the endnotes! Christian, here you have a sure and steady guide. Take and read—and learn from someone who has thought more deeply and scripturally about suffering than anyone I know. Highly recommended!”

**Todd Wilson**, President, Center for Pastor Theologians; author, *Real Christian*; coauthor, *The Pastor Theologian*

“One of the greatest difficulties about enduring a time of suffering or sorrow is that it so often seems purposeless. It hurts so much and appears to accomplish so little. The path to peace is to set our suffering in the context of a wider story that God is telling in and through us—a story that Mark Talbot describes so well in the pages of this precious book.”

**Tim Challies**, author, *Seasons of Sorrow*

**Books in the Suffering in the Christian Life series:**

*Give Me Understanding That I May Live: Situating Our Suffering within God's Redemptive Plan* (2022)

*When the Stars Disappear: Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture* (2020)

# GIVE ME UNDERSTANDING THAT I MAY LIVE

*Situating Our  
Suffering within God's  
Redemptive Plan*

*Suffering and the Christian Life*  
VOLUME 2

Mark Talbot

 **CROSSWAY®**  
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*Give Me Understanding That I May Live: Situating Our Suffering within God's Redemptive Plan*

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For Cindy

The abyss and the light of the world,  
Time's need and the craving for eternity,  
Vision, event, and poetry:  
Was and is dialogue with you.<sup>a</sup>

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a. Martin Buber's dedication to his wife of his book *Zwiesprache* in 1932.





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## PROLOGUE

### *Picking Up the Thread*

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith,  
we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.  
Through him we have also obtained access by  
faith into this grace in which we stand,  
and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.  
Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings,  
knowing that suffering produces endurance,  
and endurance produces character,  
and character produces hope,  
and hope does not put us to shame,  
because God's love has been poured into our hearts  
through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

*Romans 5:1–5*

A central claim of *When the Stars Disappear: Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture*, the first volume in this series, is that we understand our lives as stories. Stories help us orient ourselves in life by placing us somewhere on a trajectory that has a beginning, middle, and end. Moreover, we need two different kinds of stories to give our lives their full meaning: a particular (or personal) story and a general

one. The particular story is about what our individual lives mean. Each of us needs to be able to tell a story that orients us to the particular people, places, and things around us, describing where we have come from, where we are, and where we think we can go so that we can project ourselves into hopeful futures where we can get what we want and need. The general story answers questions about what human life as such means. For instance, are we just chance products of blind, meaningless cosmic forces, or have we been created by God to fulfill some specific purpose? Is human life about nothing but making money and pursuing our own personal happiness, or is it about believing and obeying God and caring for others? Metaphorically, these two kinds of stories set the stars that must guide us in place, enabling us to navigate life's otherwise uncharted seas. These "stars" are the deep and firm convictions we rely on to tell us who we are and what sort of world we live in. They include convictions about who our parents are, what we take to be deeply meaningful, what we take to be worth doing, whether there is a God, and whether Jesus Christ is God's Son who redeems us from our slavery to sin.<sup>a</sup>

Suffering tends to challenge our stories, prompting us to question whether the stories we accept are true. Even a mild headache can make me doubt a small part of my personal story—the part that assumes that in a few hours I will be relatively pain-free. Profound suffering may threaten to blot out completely the light of the stars that are guiding us by making us doubt the general story we have accepted about what human life means.

*When the Stars Disappear* examined the personal stories of Naomi, Job, Jeremiah, and some of the psalmists in order to help those of us who are suffering not lose hope that God is with us and working in and through our suffering for our good. *Give Me Understanding That I May Live: Situating Our Suffering within God's Redemptive Plan* steps back to look at the general Christian story that explains why there is any suffering, why there is so much of it, and what will finally, gloriously, be true

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a. For more on the need for such metaphorical stars, see Mark Talbot, *When the Stars Disappear: Help and Hope from Stories of Suffering in Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 20–23.

for those who confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead (see Rom. 10:9).

When suffering overwhelms us, it is hard to focus on anything else. Yet often our focus needs to shift. As we saw in *When the Stars Disappear*, when God finally spoke to Job, he did not commiserate with him. He didn't answer Job's questions or address his complaints. Instead, he shifted Job's focus to the world's creation, accusing Job of obscuring his plans "by words without knowledge" (Job 38:2). He then battered Job with questions, exposing Job's ignorance and impotence while celebrating his own knowledge, power, and dominion over all things, including his dominion over wicked human beings and the world's most terrifying creatures.<sup>b</sup>

By shifting Job's focus, God enabled Job to gain some perspective on his suffering. What had seemed to Job in his suffering to be life's full story was not in fact the full story. Job came to see that the full story involved much more than his suffering. This led him to confess that he had spoken of things that were, in fact, too wonderful for him to understand (see Job 40:1–5; 42:1–6).

This volume tells the full Christian story, "the true story of the whole world."<sup>1</sup> That story has four parts: creation, rebellion, redemption, and consummation. Scripture considers each part, and our coming to understand the main features of each is crucial if we are to live the lives for which God has made us and to which he calls us.

Just as our high schooler in *When the Stars Disappear* made sense of her life by embracing a storyline that aimed at her becoming a primary-care physician,<sup>c</sup> so all of us make sense of our lives by the stories we tell. And none of us cook up these stories by ourselves. We learn to tell stories by others telling us stories that help us make sense of our lives.<sup>2</sup>

Even very young children understand that their personal stories are anchored in the past. They ask questions like, "Who made me?" "Who was your daddy, Grandma?" and "What did you do when you

b. See Talbot, *When the Stars Disappear*, 75–76.

c. See Talbot, *When the Stars Disappear*, 65, 91–92, 96–97.

were a little girl, Mommy?” The answers they are given set some of the metaphorical stars that guide them in place. It is the same for us all. In particular, having an answer to the question, “How have human beings come to be?” is essential to answering other questions like, “Why are we here?” and “What does life mean?”

Whether we believe that God has created us to fulfill a specific role in creation or that we have evolved entirely by chance should make all the difference in how we think about ourselves now. A little girl’s “Who made me?” expanded to “How have we”—meaning all of us—“come to be?” is one of life’s most crucial questions. Moreover, knowing whether our ancestors made good or bad choices and whether their lives went well or poorly can be crucial for understanding ourselves. Learning that my grandfather was an alcoholic who left my grandmother very early in my father’s life tells me something important about my father’s history that inevitably has shaped his relationship with me.

In Scripture, God answers life’s most fundamental questions, helping us get our stories straight. As Luther recognized, the opening chapters of Genesis are “certainly the foundation of the whole of Scripture,” providing a true account of our beginnings.<sup>3</sup> He found nothing more fascinating than the Bible’s first book. Of course, “curiosity about our beginnings,” as Henri Blocher notes, “continues to haunt the human race.”<sup>4</sup> It accounts for the current flood of books about human beginnings, especially from those who deny divine creation.<sup>5</sup>

The question, “How have we come to be?” is answered by the story of creation in Genesis 1–2. The question, “Did our first parents make good or bad choices?” is answered in Genesis 3 where we are told that they chose to rebel against God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The consequences of that most disastrous of all choices started to become clear immediately. They became horrifyingly apparent in Genesis 4.

Even Christians may find themselves doubting God’s goodness or power when they become aware of some kinds or degrees of suffering. They can find themselves asking, How is suffering like this possible if there is a perfectly good, all-powerful God? Wouldn’t such a God pre-

vent such suffering?<sup>d</sup> Those doubts require us to consider the first two parts of the Christian story. We have to understand creation and rebellion in order to understand that while nothing that happens falls out of God's hands, he is at the same time not to be blamed for the world's suffering, either for its first appearance or for its persistence.

My first chapter considers *creation*, emphasizing the world's perfection as God created it. Chapter 2 considers *rebellion*, telling how suffering entered the world. Chapter 3 explains what suffering is and how it affects us. And then chapter 4 begins considering *redemption* and *consummation*, the story's third and fourth parts. Our redemption and creation's ultimately complete restoration at the consummation of all things are the great gifts that suffering should lead us to seek. The epilogue returns to stressing how crucial it is for us to keep in mind all four parts of "the true story of the whole world"—and especially its first and final parts. If in your reading of my first two chapters you find yourself wondering why I am not immediately engaging the topic of suffering, reading the epilogue may help you see that we need to be concerned about much more than our suffering if we are to live the lives to which God is calling us.

Sometimes when we are perplexed about what should be our next step in life, we seek wisdom. In Scripture, the basic meaning of *chokhmah*, the Hebrew word for *wisdom*, is "skill"—as Allen Ross puts it, its various grammatical forms "can be applied to commonplace things in life that require skill,<sup>e</sup> or to the religious life that may also be described as living life skillfully."<sup>6</sup> Two Hebrew words for *understanding* are often paired with its word for *wisdom* (see, e.g., Prov. 3:13–15, 18). *Bin* involves gaining the *insight* necessary to live wisely or skillfully, and *tebunah* the *know-how* necessary actually to live such a life.<sup>7</sup> In the final analysis, we will have lived our lives wisely and skillfully to the degree that we have gained the insight and know-how to align the trajectories

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d. See, for instance, the series of insistent, unanswered questions that Graham's parents kept asking after he committed suicide in Talbot, *When the Stars Disappear*, 15. An adequate answer to their questions can only come at the end of surveying the full Christian story. I attempt to give part of that answer in this volume's fourth chapter.

e. Such as having the skill to discern what would be a good career for me, given my interests and talents.



of our individual life stories with the trajectory of the world's true general story, which has been revealed to us by God, who alone is truly wise (see Rom. 16:25–27).

If the price to be paid for our coming to understand the need for that alignment is that we must suffer, then ultimately we may see such suffering to be, as the apostle Paul claimed, a very small price to pay (see 2 Cor. 4:16–18). That was also the testimony of the psalmist who prayed, “Give me understanding that I may live” (Ps. 119:144), when he wrote:

You have dealt well with your servant,

O LORD, according to your word. . . .

Before I was afflicted I went astray,

but now I keep your word.

You are good and do good. . . .

It is good for me that I was afflicted,

that I might learn your statutes. . . .

*I know, O LORD, that . . . in faithfulness you have afflicted me.* (Ps.

119:65, 67–68, 71, 75)<sup>f</sup>

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f. For advice on how to read my books, please see the appendix “More Advice for My Readers” in this volume as well as the appendix “A Reader’s Guide” at the end of *When the Stars Disappear*.

## MORE ADVICE FOR MY READERS

When we are suffering, we need assurance that things won't always be so bad. As I hope to convince you as you read this book, if the full Christian story is true, then the world is not as it ordinarily seems. To the naked, untrained eye, the world can seem merely to plod on from one day to the next or, as the apostle Peter quotes of the scoffers in his day, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation" (2 Pet. 3:4 NIV). Even in the eyes of someone as godly as Job, suffering can tempt us to conclude that the days just grind on endlessly, meaning life will never be good again.<sup>a</sup>

Christians must trust what they have heard more than what they can see. Scripture tells us that the world's causal regularities depend on the existence of a Word by whom "all things were created" and in whom "all things hold together" (Col. 1:16–17). Because God the Son "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:3), we know that the world doesn't just grind mercilessly on according to impersonal and uncaring natural laws but that its causal regularities are part of its progression toward a glorious future, a time when, for God's people, suffering and death will be no more (see Rev. 21:1–4). By listening to God speak to us

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a. "Has not man a hard service on earth, and are not his days like the days of a hired hand? Like a slave who longs for the shadow, and like a hired hand who looks for his wages, so I am allotted months of emptiness, and nights of misery are apportioned to me. When I lie down I say, 'When shall I arise?' But the night is long, and I am full of tossing till the dawn. . . . My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope. Remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good" (Job 7:1–4, 6–7).

through his Scriptures, we come to understand how the world actually is. We learn that God's power and goodness produce and ground those regularities (see Gen. 1:3–19; 8:22; Isa. 45:18; Rom. 1:18–20) as well as guarantee that he will finally bring our suffering to an end (see 2 Cor. 4:16–18; 1 Pet. 1:3–9). This helps us endure—as we must (see Heb. 10:32–38; 12:1–7)—until that end.

Yet becoming deeply and thoroughly convinced that the world is not purposeless takes effort. We must learn to live in ways that are true to the reality rather than conformed to the way things seem (see Hab. 2:2–4; 2 Pet. 3:8–18). This requires immersing ourselves in the full Christian story and then dedicating ourselves to the kind of careful, consistent thinking that resists the world's squeezing us into its own, ultimately hopeless mold.<sup>b</sup> Becoming deeply and thoroughly convinced of the full Christian story requires an unrelenting, unconditional commitment to growing in biblical wisdom and understanding, as Solomon urged: “Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or turn away from them. . . . The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom. *Though it cost all you have, get understanding*” (Prov. 4:5, 7 NIV).

Deep and thorough conviction grows out of familiarizing ourselves with a coherent web of detailed claims. When a perspective is developed in a way that shows how it all hangs together, it becomes more convincing.<sup>c</sup> In this volume, as in *When the Stars Disappear*, the superabundance of endnotes is intended to offer another layer of detail and coherence to the text's claims. The text outlines the basic storyline as clearly and concisely as I can. The footnotes, marked by superscript lowercase letters, refer to other parts of my first two volumes where I have said more about what's in the text or where I need to make a clari-

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b. See Eph. 2:12, where Paul declares that those living apart from Christ, live “without God and without hope” (NLT) and J. B. Phillips's rendering of Rom. 12:1–2: “With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, . . . as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity.” *The New Testament in Modern English* (New York: Macmillan, 1960).

c. Of course, detailed false narratives can tempt us to embrace untruths. Yet we as Christians are simply working to become more firmly anchored in what we already have good reason to believe is trustworthy and true (see John 1:14; Eph. 1:13–14; Rev. 21:5–7).

fying comment without cluttering up the text. Reading just the text and footnotes your first time through will give you the lay of the land. But good reading is always rereading, and so on your next reading look up the parenthetical biblical references to check whether my claims are properly anchored in God's word.<sup>1</sup> That will also enable Scripture to start echoing through your mind. Then, finally, sample the endnotes, identified by numbered superscripts. They place the text and biblical references in a much more detailed web. Considering them enables the Holy Spirit to help you become fully convinced of truths we must hear because they are not ones we can see. Many readers of *When the Stars Disappear* have told me that reading its endnotes brought them to a much deeper level of insight and conviction. I think they should be especially helpful for pastors and teachers as they preach and teach the full Christian story. In all of this, my strategy is to give these four volumes on suffering and the Christian life layers of meaning that can be explored bit by bit.

When Paul was in Athens, he engaged the foremost intellects of his age (see Acts 17:16–34). Commenting on that meeting, John Stott writes that “Christ calls human beings to humble, but not to stifle, their intellect.”<sup>d</sup> We humble our intellects by acknowledging that there are truths that are indispensable to human life that we cannot discover on our own. As I argue in the epilogue, these are truths that God himself must teach us. Learning them enriches, uplifts, and invigorates us beyond anything we could, without God's words, ever attain. The gospel opens us up to a world of profoundly satisfying truth that otherwise we would never know. Listening to God as he teaches us through his Scriptures assures us that our suffering will end. It also reveals truths that will enthrall us throughout eternity, long after our suffering has ceased.

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d. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 281.

