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WHEN
THE STARS
DISAPPEAR

*Help and Hope
from the Stories of
Suffering in Scripture*

MARK R. TALBOT

Suffering and the Christian Life

VOLUME I

“Talbot’s experience of suffering gives him a heart of empathy for anyone who struggles to understand the hard ways of God. His rigor as a Christian philosopher equips him to voice the most disturbing questions we have about human pain without minimizing their difficulty or giving in to despair. Talbot uses stories from Scripture to offer the clear practical and theological guidance that suffering believers need to move forward in hope. This beautiful book will comfort readers with the assurance that we are never alone in our suffering but sustained by our ever-loving Savior.”

Philip Graham Ryken, President, Wheaton College

“Books offering palliatives to the problem of pain are ten a penny. But this splendid study is different. It is a careful, spiritual, sensitive treatment that does not shirk the emotional and imaginative dimensions of our lives. More importantly, it has to do with human expectations: Jesus said to his disciples, ‘In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world’ (John 16:33). Talbot sets a high standard of fidelity to Scripture as he considers three Old Testament figures—Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah—and the New Testament passages that follow in that vein. So here Talbot is paying particular attention to suffering and the Christian life. This is not a purely theoretical approach to the issues, though it is very thoughtfully written. The discerning reader will have his appetite whetted for the other studies to follow. Unreservedly recommended.”

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

“If you are a Christian experiencing suffering—or weighed down by the suffering of someone you love—then this book is for you. Talbot—a philosopher-theologian who is also a wheelchair-bound, chronic sufferer—knows what he is talking about. He offers profound, biblical reflections that do not dodge the hard questions or try to minimize the sometimes overpowering reality of pain and loss. *When the Stars Disappear* is a gift to every Christian who is hoping for a reason to hope.”

Timothy Larsen, McManis Professor of Christian Thought, Wheaton College

“Through decades of quadriplegia and chronic pain, the Bible has been my source of great comfort and encouragement. And I don’t mean only the Psalms or verses about affliction. For me, it’s been the stories of godly men and women in the Bible who radiate courage and perseverance despite unthinkable suffering. I have learned how to trust God from their examples, even when painful challenges try to drag me down. It’s why I love this new book, *When the Stars Disappear*. Mark Talbot gives the reader a remarkable study of suffering saints and how their mistakes and victories teach us lessons of endurance. I highly recommend this stellar discussion of true Bible stories that will inspire and refresh your heart!”

Joni Eareckson Tada, Founder, Joni and Friends International Disability Center

“When the Stars Disappear leads us through a deep, sobering, and powerful encounter with the depths of suffering experienced by three pivotal Old Testament figures. To those who suffer, it offers new hope, comfort, and insight into how to understand and endure such trials with biblically rooted and wise instruction regarding the indwelling grace of God and the ultimate outcome of our journeys. Talbot’s unique combination of wisdom, pastoral discernment, biblical fluency, and philosophical and theological mastery combines with his long personal experience of suffering to inform this unique work.”

Stanton L. Jones, Provost Emeritus and Professor Emeritus of Psychology,
Wheaton College

“I can think of no better way to ask hard questions about the suffering of believers than by delving into the words and stories of Scripture. In this first of four volumes, Talbot dives in deep. He sets the reality of personal, painful experience in the sure context of God’s revelation, which not only fully acknowledges Christians’ suffering but also lights up hope in God, ultimately through his Son.”

Kathleen Nielson, author; speaker; Senior Adviser, The Gospel Coalition

“Writing from the depths of his own experience, thorough understanding of philosophical issues surrounding the theme of theodicy, and careful reading of Scripture, Mark Talbot offers a superb study for people walking through the valley of deepest darkness and for those who function as the Lord’s wings to those in distress (Ruth 2:12). With keen insight, an engaging literary style, and a deep commitment to the authority of the Scriptures, Talbot presents a powerful, practical, and pastoral treatment of a subject that we all encounter at some point in life.”

Daniel I. Block, Gunther H. Knoedler Professor Emeritus of Old Testament,
Wheaton College

“In the face of radical suffering, words often cannot do justice to the gravity of the situation, but sometimes they help us climb through our grief and hold onto the God who has not yet made manifest why such profound suffering surrounds us and happens to us. In this profound and poignant volume, Talbot takes us on a terrifying journey into the depths of suffering to make sure we are brutally honest with it, and to help us understand that our very souls are at stake in clinging to the graciousness of God. This book is not for the faint of heart, but it is for everyone whose lives have been scorched by suffering and do not want to give up.”

Richard Lints, Senior Distinguished Professor of Theology, Provost
Emeritus, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Talbot’s unique blend of careful scholarship and distinctively Christian faith and hope are evidenced throughout *When the Stars Disappear*, which serves as a reliable guide and companion to those who have faced calamity. Through Talbot’s faithful biblical exegesis and practical theological application, this book is a gift to the church.”

Mark A. Yarhouse, Dr. Arthur P. Rech and Mrs. Jean May Rech Endowed
Chair in Psychology, Wheaton College

“Anyone who has suffered, regardless of how much, should read this book. It ministered to me. We are reminded to be honest with God in prayer about how we feel about our suffering by, for example, asking God questions like the suffering psalmists do. But then Talbot places our suffering within Scripture’s overall storyline of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation, reminding us always to try to understand how God is using our suffering to fulfill that storyline. He explains how our suffering helps us better understand our relationship to Christ and his suffering. By continually going to Scripture, he shows us how saints such as Naomi, Job, and Jeremiah worked through their suffering and came to ultimate trust and hope in God about it.”

G. K. Beale, J. Gresham Machen Professor of New Testament, Westminster
Theological Seminary

“Many and varied are the books that wrestle with suffering and evil, but in his projected four volumes on the subject Talbot has found some fresh approaches. In this first volume he avoids philosophical and abstract questions, but focuses close attention on a handful of people in the Bible who went through suffering. Their suffering was highly diverse: Naomi, Job, Jeremiah, and some of the psalmists. By leading us through their darkest hours, Talbot lends a personal realism to their sorrow while showing that God often provides life-transforming grace to his suffering people in the midst of their pain, rather than simply taking it all away as fast as possible.”

D. A. Carson, Theologian-at-Large, The Gospel Coalition

Suffering and the Christian Life, volume 1

WHEN THE STARS DISAPPEAR

*Help and Hope
from Stories of
Suffering in Scripture*

Suffering and the Christian Life
VOLUME I

Mark R. Talbot

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For
Tory Houriet, Paul Winters, and Buck McCabe

and for

Cindy

To grow old with the beloved of the days of one's youth—
it is this alone that brings truly increasing pleasure in
ever new ways and ever new circumstances.

—Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*

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TO MY READERS

This book began with my reflection on the horrific tragedy that opens its first chapter. It is the first of four books, each offering a part of the Bible's answer to the questions, Why is there any suffering? Why do Christians suffer? Why am I suffering? and Why is there so much suffering?

Any Christian may suffer, from small children who have just begun putting their faith in Christ to the elderly who may have spent a lifetime following our Lord, from those who have not yet entered elementary school to PhDs.

And any Christian can be puzzled by suffering. So it is important for some of us to address those puzzles by writing books that can be understood by nearly all Christians.

This is what I am trying to do. I want this set of books to be readable by anyone who is willing to think carefully about why Christians suffer. Consequently, I've worked hard to write clear and simple prose, avoiding as much as I can any wording that may discourage someone from continuing to read. Yet at the same time, I haven't tried to diminish the problems that our suffering raises. Trying to say important things simply is not an easy task. The Reader's Guide at the end of the book can help you approach this and the three companion books in worthwhile ways.

This book tries to help you see that your suffering, no matter how awful it may be, is no worse than the suffering that some of God's people have already faced. Their stories, as they are found in Scripture, show us that we are not alone in our suffering. They show that even the most severe suffering can be survived and that we, like these people before us, can emerge from it with our faith and hope in God intact.

WHEN THE STARS DISAPPEAR

Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.

Job 14:1

Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows.

John 16:33 (NLT)

The telephone rang about nine on a Sunday morning while we were getting ready for church. I heard the answering machine pick up. As we headed for the garage, I hit the “Play” button. A familiar voice said, “Dr. Talbot, this is Graham. Are you there?”^a After a couple of seconds of waiting, I heard him say, “Hmm,” and then hang up.

It was September. Graham had graduated from Wheaton College in May and then headed overseas for some graduate study in philosophy. He became a philosophy major after taking one of my introductory courses in the fall of his freshman year. We had talked a lot that year. I was encouraged by the depth of his Christian commitment, cheered by his quick humor, and pleased with his sharp, active mind.

a. I have changed my student’s name and some details of his story to protect his parents’ privacy.

For a couple of years after that class, we lost contact. Then I bumped into him at the start of the last term of his final year. He said he would really like to talk. Over lunch he described the depression that had dogged him for years. He had begged God to lift it. But nothing had changed. And so now he was tired, deeply depressed, and uncertain. How could he believe that Christianity was true if God hadn't answered his desperate prayers?

We arranged to talk regularly. He told me he had been in counseling for several years. I had known other chronically depressed students, so I knew how profound their suffering could be. He was grateful when I offered to talk with his parents, which I started doing right away.

Often when I'm dealing with depressed and potentially suicidal students, I ask them to promise they will try to call me at any time, night or day, if they are desperate. Graham had promised, but that Sunday morning he hadn't sounded distressed. After listening to his voice message, I found myself thinking perhaps he was back in the States temporarily and just wanted to get together for lunch.

Monday afternoon I came home from a meeting to find another message, this one from Graham's father. They had received word that Graham had been killed when he was hit by a train. I called them. They had tried to reach the proper authorities, but they hadn't yet been able to learn anything more. I kept my fears to myself. But when I got home the next day, Graham's dad had left another message: it seemed clear Graham's death was a suicide.

As I pieced it together, it became clear that Graham had kept his promise. He had called me less than an hour before he stepped in front of the train.

CALAMITOUS SUFFERING

Profound suffering involves experiencing something so deep and disruptive that it dominates our consciousness and threatens to overwhelm us, often tempting us to lose hope that our lives can ever be good again. A *calamity* is "an extraordinarily grave event marked by great loss and lasting distress and affliction."¹ Both calamities (such as losing a child

to suicide) and chronic conditions (such as the continuous care of a severely disabled child or Graham's seemingly never-ending struggle with depression) can produce profound suffering.

Graham's death has been a calamity. Calamities, like earthquakes, start in cores of tragedy that have waves of suffering radiating out from them. For onlookers, the sufferers' lives may soon seem fairly normal again. But for the sufferers themselves, there may be deep inner fault lines that outline shattered faith. The upheavals involved can be so great that it can seem that life can never be good again.

These fault lines often reveal themselves in a series of insistent, unanswered questions. Graham's parents keep asking these:

How could God allow this to happen to our son? We know God is all-powerful and governs everything, so why didn't he alter this course of events?

As Christians we have always believed God is our heavenly Father who answers believing prayer. Yet we prayed believing God would help Graham overcome his depression, so why didn't God help him?

And why did God afflict our son with this burden in the first place, especially since he, as all-knowing, was always aware it would end in Graham's death?

"Why," they ask, "didn't God arrange things so that at least one of the three people whom Graham tried to call in his last hour would have answered the telephone and perhaps helped him find the strength to live another day?"

This book began in response to this calamity. When we stand alongside suffering believers, we face our own questions. In this case, I have asked myself repeatedly, Could I have helped Graham more? Could I have said anything to him that would have made his life more bearable? Were there ways I could have helped him see that God was with him in his dark times even though God didn't take the darkness away? And how can I now comfort his parents? Are there ways to help them weather their profoundly disorienting grief?

Such a calamity reveals how little most of us have thought about what we should say or do in circumstances like these. Does profound suffering have phases that make different responses appropriate at different times? Does intense grief have an early phase when we shouldn't say much, and the best we can do is pray that God will help his grieving children keep their faith? Is it ever appropriate to tell sufferers what many of us have learned through our own suffering, which is that a day will come when they will again feel some peace in spite of their calamity? Should we encourage them to believe they will someday receive satisfying answers to all of their questions? And what should we say to nonbelievers? Is God in some way being good to them in their suffering?

THIS VALE OF TEARS

I will address these questions as we proceed. But no matter how they are answered, all Christians need to come to grips with the potential breadth and depth of what we may suffer. Scripture does not encourage us to believe our lives will be pain free. It shows God's people have always suffered. We can feel profound, life-depleting sorrow.

In Scripture, proper names are meaningful. And so it is significant that even David, whose very name means "beloved by God,"² could cry,

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress;
 my eye is wasted from grief;
 my soul and my body also.
 For my life is spent with sorrow,
 and my years with sighing;
 my strength fails . . . ,
 and my bones waste away. (Ps. 31:9–10)

As Job observed, suffering is a regular part of human life (see Job 14:1), though it comes in different kinds and degrees. Graham's parents have undergone an almost inconceivable calamity, but not all suffering involves experiencing hurts so deep and disruptive that their presence dominates our lives, and even deep and disruptive suffering may not

shake our faith. Yet, as Henri Blocher observes, suffering often presents us with a *problem* in the original sense of that word—that is, it throws an obstacle across our paths, “something that blocks our view, for it resists our . . . efforts to *understand* it.”³ So we shouldn’t be alarmed or frightened to find ourselves perplexed when we suffer. Suffering often does perplex us, although (as we shall see in chapter 4) this shouldn’t surprise God’s people.

Readers of the books of Ruth and Job know that God’s Old Testament saints sometimes suffered calamitously, just as readers of the Psalms and Jeremiah know that some suffered chronically. And in spite of some Christian teachers’ claims to the contrary, we shouldn’t expect it will be different for us as God’s New Testament people.⁴ For we are part of the creation that has been subjected to futility and that groans for its redemption (see Rom. 8:18–25). Hebrews also tells us that God may use suffering to discipline us for our good (see Heb. 12:3–11).

We are also called to suffer for Christ’s name (see, e.g., 2 Tim. 1:8 and 2:3 with Phil. 1:29). “Here on earth,” our Lord told his disciples in his farewell discourse to them in John’s Gospel, “you will have many trials and sorrows” (John 16:33 NLT). The apostle Paul opened 2 Corinthians by observing that he and Timothy were sharing abundantly in Christ’s sufferings (see 1:5). Their suffering had in fact been so terrible that they had “despaired of life itself,” feeling they “had received the sentence of death” (1:8–9). No wonder Paul declared, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

So we Christians should not be surprised if we suffer just as much or even more than non-Christians, since we may suffer in virtually any of the ways anyone can suffer, and we will also suffer more specifically as Christians.

MY STORY

When I was seventeen, I fell about 50 feet off a Tarzan-like rope swing, breaking my back and becoming partially paralyzed from the waist down. I spent six months in hospitals. Initially, I had no feeling or

movement in my legs and no bowel or bladder control. I dropped from 200 to 145 pounds because I was so nauseated that I couldn't eat. Once my back had stabilized a little and I had regained some leg movement, the doctors tried to help me regain even more by having me crawl to breakfast each morning. At the time, I had a calcified stone lodged in my bladder that had formed around the catheter I'd needed during the first few weeks. It had been removed, but the undetected stone remained, causing raging bladder infections that made me incontinent. So when they put me on the floor each morning, I would wet myself and, because it was useless to change, remain soaked all day. When I left the hospital after the stone was finally detected and removed, I was able to control my bladder in most situations and walk awkwardly with a cane.

I am now in my sixties, and the consequences of my fall continue to multiply. I have to worry about things most people never even think about. In the last two decades, I sometimes have sleep-robbing leg spasms. And in the last few years my inability to do much walking has depleted the bone density in my hips to the point where, when I fell a couple of years ago, I broke my left hip and became wheelchair bound. Other complications have hindered my traveling, and some have sometimes put my life at risk.

I have thought about God's place in my suffering for over fifty years. Yet it is not primarily in terms of my paralysis that I have learned the most about human suffering. Those lessons have come in other ways. I know, like Graham, what it means to have prayed desperately for God to change some of the more distressing aspects of my life. I have had seasons of profoundly disorienting perplexity when, night after night, sleep fled from me because I was utterly unable to understand how God in his goodness could have been playing any part in what was happening to me. I have experienced hurts so deep and disruptive that they have dominated my consciousness, making me feel I could lose the Christian faith that has oriented me for almost my whole life. Like one suffering psalmist, I have felt like a little owl alone in the wilderness, feeling that my days were disap-

pearing like smoke and my heart was withering away like parched grass (see Ps. 102:3–11).

I am not one who jests at scars while never having felt a wound.

MY AIM

Although this book began in response to a particular calamity, it is written for all Christians who are puzzled or distressed by the griefs, troubles, sicknesses, trials, betrayals, persecutions, and afflictions we and others undergo, whether that suffering is acute and perhaps calamitous, or chronic in some potentially overwhelming way, or even if it is simply significant enough to make us wonder why it should be. I hope it will remove some of the obstacles that suffering tends to throw across the path of Christian faith and hope. I want to help you, my fellow Christians, trust that our suffering is part of God's loving care for us as his people, and that we shall ultimately see each piece of it as an *unsought gift* from him, no matter how difficult or perplexing it may now be. I shall show this from Scripture as corroborated by personal experience. As Augustine said, "I feed you on what I am fed on myself. . . . I set food before you from the pantry which I too live on, from the Lord's storerooms."⁵

THE STORY OF A STORM, A SHIPWRECK, AND A POISONOUS SNAKE

In Acts, Luke records an event in the apostle Paul's life that helps us understand our experiences of profound suffering.

When God called Paul from being the church's persecutor to be a gospel preacher, the Lord showed him how much he would suffer for the sake of his name (see Acts 9:10–16). Part of Paul's suffering came during a storm and shipwreck on the Mediterranean Sea (see Acts 27–28). By this time, he was a prisoner being transported to Rome to appear before Caesar. Luke was with him and details for us the hardships suffered during the storm, including the crew's having to throw the ship's cargo and tackle overboard, and everyone being so worried that they didn't eat for two weeks. Eventually the ship ran aground on a reef and everyone swam for shore after the Roman centurion in charge

had persuaded his soldiers not to kill Paul and the other prisoners to prevent their escape. As if all that wasn't bad enough, once on shore Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake.

When the Stars Disappear

For us, the main lesson of this story is that God remains in control of everything even when those involved lose all hope. For at one point in this story, Luke remarks that when “neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved” (27:20 NIV). In ancient times, sailors got their bearings by seeing the sun and the stars. So when the storm blotted out heaven's lights, the condition of crew and passengers was indeed very grave. But then Paul stood up, telling everyone they should take heart because God had assured him in a dream that he would appear before Caesar and that in the meantime he would also keep everyone safe.

What happened to Paul and his companions in this storm when neither the sun nor the stars appeared for many days can serve as a metaphor for what often happens to us when we suffer.⁶ As I explain more fully in my second volume, God has made us to be *needy* and *wanty* creatures who are constantly on the hunt for various goods—air, food, water, shelter, safety, health, love, and happiness. Pursuing such goods requires our learning how to lead our lives so we can navigate through life in ways that are likely to secure what we want and need. Taking a particular tack on life in order to pursue our wants and needs requires us to get our bearings, much as the sailors in Acts needed to see the sun and the stars in order to navigate the Mediterranean Sea.

A large part of getting our bearings involves our coming to lead our lives in terms of some stories. Stories help orient us by placing us somewhere on an arc or trajectory that has a beginning, middle, and end.^b Two different kinds of stories are necessary to give our lives their full meaning: a particular story and a general one. The *particular story* is about what our personal lives mean. Each of us needs to believe a story that orients us to the particular people, places, and things around

b. For more on the place of stories in our lives, see chap. 4, especially 63–65.

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.⁷ The *general story* answers questions about what human life means. For instance, are we the product 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 or pursuing our own personal happiness? Or is it about serving others and believing and obeying God? Metaphorically, these two kinds of stories are the stars that guide us, helping us navigate life's otherwise uncharted seas.

Suffering tends to challenge these stories and shake our confidence. Even a mild headache can make me doubt a small part of my personal story, which assumes that in a few hours I will be relatively pain free. And 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. For instance, Graham's parents have found themselves doubting whether God really is our heavenly Father who answers believing prayer. Losing their bearings so thoroughly means losing hope that they can move forward in any meaningful, satisfactory way.

Yet as Luke's account of Paul's and his shipmates' suffering portrays, even if we lose our bearings we shouldn't conclude that God has lost his. God is *provident* over life's storms—that is, he sees the future and *provides* in advance for the needs of his people (see Ps. 107:23–29; Jonah 1:4; Mark 4:35–41). Just as he spoke the sun and stars into existence to illumine and guide us (see Gen. 1:14–19), so he has given us biblical stories like Paul's to help keep our faith, hope, and love alive.

Paul suffered three other shipwrecks, including one involving a night and a day adrift on the open sea. He was imprisoned and repeatedly flogged and beaten as well as stoned. He had been in danger from rivers and robbers as well as from Jews and Gentiles and false Christians. He knew many cold and sleepless nights and hungry and thirsty days. On top of it all, he was constantly anxious for all of the churches.⁸ Yet precisely because of what he had learned about God and his faithfulness

through all this suffering (see Rom. 5:3–5 with 2 Cor. 1:3–7), he could confidently declare, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” For how will he “who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, . . . not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:31–32). These convictions enabled Paul to believe God when God assured him he would save him and his shipmates. Though the light of this world’s sun and stars had disappeared, Paul kept his bearings by believing what God told him in that dream.

Indeed, even before God had shown Paul the remarkable providence of saving him and his shipmates from this terrible storm, Paul was already urging his New Testament readers to trust in the good news God had called him to preach. This good news is the story of the ultimate triumph we shall know in Christ, the triumph of God’s keeping us in Christ’s love and thus ultimately delivering us from all bad things. Paul’s faith in this story resounds throughout the letter he wrote to the Roman Christians not long before his arrest and his perilous trip over the Mediterranean Sea. It comes out in his attitude toward suffering:

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. (Rom. 5:3–5)

It comes out in his trust in God’s perfect providence:

We know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love [him] and [who] are called according to his purpose for them. (Rom. 8:28 NLT)

And it comes out in his unshakable confidence that nothing—absolutely nothing!—can separate Christians from the love of God in Christ: “Can anything ever separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?” (Rom. 8:35). No! Assuredly not! For “despite all these things,” Paul declared, “overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us” (8:36–37 NLT).

Of course, sometimes these great declarations don't seem to ring true. Sometimes we can be so overwhelmed by what has befallen us that we cannot understand how God could possibly be working through it for our good. How can *this*, we find ourselves asking, be coming from a loving Savior's hand? Sometimes, as it was for Graham as well as how it is now for his parents, it can seem as if our suffering is so bad, so catastrophic, that we cannot imagine how it can ever be part of any "overwhelming victory" that will one day be ours through Christ. So sometimes our suffering does indeed threaten to destroy our faith in the Christian story we have been using to guide us on our earthly ways. Sometimes the stars of faith and hope disappear.

Perhaps you are puzzled right now by your own suffering or someone else's. Perhaps you are in the midst of some great or long-lasting storm of suffering that threatens to blot out heaven's lights and thus tempts you to lose all hope that you will ever see good again. If this is so, then I hope this book's message may play a part like the one the apostle Paul's message played when he stood and told his despairing companions right in the midst of their storm that God had given him a word guaranteeing he would deliver them. Paul proclaimed a message of hope in the midst of hopelessness. He knew that God never loses his bearings, no matter how bad things may seem, and that God would not promise what he could not do. And God did as he said, for God sovereignly controls all of life's storms. He can—and *ultimately will*—see his people safely through even the worst storms. We have his word that when (whether in this life or in the one to come) those storms finally begin to subside and the sky begins to clear, we will look up and once again see the sun and the moon and the stars, and then realize that our loving heavenly Father has been with us all along our way.

NOTES

Chapter 1: When the Stars Disappear

1. Webster's *New Collegiate Dictionary*, 7th ed. (1971), s.v. "calamity."
2. "The name 'David' would appear to be connected with the Hebrew verbal root *d-w-d*, 'to love.' 'David,' then, would mean 'beloved,' presumably by Yahweh." David F. Payne in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, rev. ed., 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 1:871.
3. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: An Analytical Look at the Problem of Pain* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1994), 9. Blocher's book is about the problem of evil and not just about the problem of Christian suffering. He believes the larger problem is insoluble, which leads him to observe that "the *problem* of evil . . . torments the human mind. It is a 'problem' in the original sense of the word, that of an obstacle thrown across our path, something that blocks our view, for it resists our unrelenting efforts to *understand* it."

I think the reasons why God has ordained specific Christians to suffer in specific ways may transcend our understanding, although his utter and complete goodness to each of us in ordaining what he does will be apparent in the life to come (see Rom. 8:28 and 2 Cor. 4:17).

To say that God *has ordained* something means that he has so ordered or arranged events so that it comes about at the appropriate time. I will have much more to say about God's providential ordering of everything in my third volume.

4. I am using the phrase "God's Old Testament saints" to refer to God's Old Testament people. As C. John Collins explains in reference to Ps. 4:3, the Hebrew word that the ESV translates there as "the godly" is "the adjective form of 'steadfast love' (Hb. [*chesed*]). This term, variously rendered 'godly,' 'saint,' 'faithful one,' and 'holy one' in the Psalms, refers to those who have genuinely laid hold of God's steadfast love" (*ESV Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Grudem [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], 945). The New Testament enlarges the class to include God's New Testament people (see, e.g., Matt. 27:52 with Acts 9:13 and Rom. 1:7). I shall sometimes refer to all of those whom God has redeemed as "the saints."
5. Augustine, *Sermons*, vol. 9 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994), 282 (Sermon 339, sec. 4).

6. Scripture licenses this metaphor in passages such as Ezek. 32:7–8; Joel 2:1–2, 10; 3:14–15; and Zeph. 1:14–16. The psalmists often likened their suffering to being in storms at sea, as we shall see.
7. More technically, getting our bearings in life involves understanding our lives as including a set or series of *narratives*—that is, a set or series of stories that orient us to life by enabling us to perceive series of events and actions as involving meaningful sequences. Some narratives are short (e.g., “When I went to the grocery store today, you’ll never guess who I saw!”) and others longer (e.g., “My high school and college years were quite eventful”). Christians believe God has created the world for a purpose and that he has a narrative that articulates how he will accomplish that purpose. They believe their particular stories should track God’s narrative.
Of course, my use of the word *story* to refer to narratives does not imply that those narratives are untrue. I may, for instance, ask you, “What’s your life story?” and expect you will (so far as you are able) tell me a true story about your life. In fact, you are obliged to tell as true a story as you can.
8. See 2 Cor. 11:16–12:10 for Paul’s first-person chronicle of his sufferings and afflictions, including his thorn in the flesh. Paul Barnett explores in detail the place of suffering in Paul’s life and ministry in his *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).