

Finding God in the War Called Life

Life has a way of crashing down on us without warning. Whether we like it or not, sooner or later all of us end up in a war zone, where life ceases to be tidy and the pain threshold goes off the charts.

Women are not spared this kind of active combat, which makes it all the more urgent for us to think through our theology so our views of God will sustain us when the battle begins to rage. Otherwise we will sink in despair instead of standing firm and fighting with courage, determination, and confidence in God.

Frequently I am reminded just how terrible life is for many women. When I hear stories of the suffering some have endured or are enduring, I am tempted to ask, "Can this be God's plan?"

No doubt this question speaks for many of us. Our stories may not be as tragic as some we hear, but all of us have looked at our own lives and wondered the same thing.

How do God's sovereignty and goodness stack up when life is hard? Can God's plan for me withstand the devastation that comes from living in a fallen world?

If our ideas of God are helpful only for headaches, make sense only in the safety of a living room, comfort only women living cozy lives behind white picket fences with adoring husbands and model children but leave other women out in the cold, something is terribly wrong. How can any of us trust God if He occasionally vacates His throne or if there are places beyond the reach of His goodness?

The war zones of life force us to take our theology seriously,

to see if our beliefs about God hold up when the tragedies and perplexities of life press down upon them. Our theology, if it is true, must apply to all of us and include all points on the Richter scale of human suffering.

If God's goodness cannot penetrate the darkness of a woman's world or breaks up under the weight of such wretchedness, if there are pockets of our lives beyond God's reach, then none of us can really count on Him. Our hope in God is no better than a placebo if His plan doesn't encompass all of life—the dark side as well as the bright.

But to say that God's plan is comprehensive doesn't make it any easier to swallow. All of us have moments when things become so chaotic or painful that we lose sight of God's plan. There are just too many places where God seems to drop out of sight or evil looms so large that God's plan seems irreparably destroyed.

If we were to name the biggest threats to His plan for us, most of us would list Satan, other people and ourselves. Our theology must confront these formidable foes and the threat they pose to our confidence in God.

Our purpose is not to fine-tune our theology for the sake of being right but to find out what is true about God. When the darkness of life is so thick we can feel it, it matters whether God is still on His throne or we are simply at the mercy of the devil, a human interloper, or the darkness of our own hearts.

EVIL FORCES AT WORK Ordinarily, life seems to follow certain laws of cause and effect. People who work hard can put food on the table and pay the bills. Attentive parenting produces responsible young adults. Balanced nutrition and regular exercise generally lead to good health.

But for many Christians there are times when this dependable pattern goes awry. Recession, market shifts and downsizing put

good workers on the streets. The child of loving, diligent parents goes off the deep end. A health-conscious jogger has a heart attack or is diagnosed with cancer. When the formula is disrupted, we are quick to suspect interference from Satan and his minions.

That's what happened to Job. His problems began when Satan questioned his loyalty to God. Satan was convinced Job's faith in God was nothing more than a selfish pragmatism that would evaporate if God ceased to reward him with material blessings. To our dismay, God grants Satan permission to find out by afflicting Job.

A series of calamities follows. A natural disaster takes the lives of all 10 of Job's children, marauders confiscate his property and murder his servants, and his own body is tormented with painful sores. As if that were not enough, he is divided from his grieving wife and crushed by words from well-meaning but misguided friends.

Despite all this, Satan's scheme backfires. Rather than distancing Job from God as expected, suffering intensifies Job's focus on God. The plan that falls apart is Satan's, not God's.

The book of Job drives home the point that God is the central figure behind even the tragic events in our lives. He is the one who is in charge and who holds us in His hands. Not even the devil can touch us without God's permission, and even then God overrules and works through Satan's schemes to accomplish good for us.

WHEN PEOPLE GET IN THE WAY But what happens to God's plan when people get in the way, as in the case of Joseph? Joseph enjoyed the best of his father's love and indulgence but paid dearly for it with his half brothers' jealousy and hatred.

Passions exploded when Joseph was only 17. His brothers assaulted him and threw him in a pit. Then instead of killing

him as planned, they pulled him up and sold him off to Midianite slave traders bound for Egypt.

Joseph was dragged off to a land, a people, and a language he did not know and thrown into the stale air of an Egyptian prison. He knew the meaning of depression.

Subsequent events caused his hopes to rise sharply with opportunity, then drop abruptly with disappointments. He was always the victim of another person's treachery or forgetfulness. Joseph easily could have believed God's plan had been shattered the instant his brothers seized him and threw him in the pit.

But when famine reunited Joseph and his pain with his brothers and their guilt, no one was prepared for Joseph's response. Instead of bitterness, resentment or anger, he spoke of the mystery he had learned in the depths of his misery, which had given him the incentive to make the most of his grim circumstances.

The same lips that once begged his brothers to stop now spoke with unwavering confidence in God's plan. "'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good'" (Gen. 50:20, NKJV).

Behind the wickedness of his brothers and others who had injured him, Joseph saw God's hand at work. Despite his suffering, he knew God's purposes were being carried out even through the wrongs done against him. From Joseph we learn that other people, no matter how injurious they are in our lives, cannot overturn God's plan for us.

I can't explain the mystery of God's hidden plan—how He works good for us through such appalling circumstances. I know only that He has promised that "in all things" He is at work for our good and that through the ages His people have said it is so. Even in the worst moments, God's scepter never slips from His hand.

WHEN I'M MY OWN WORST ENEMY Another time when hope and God seem to slip away from us is when we look in the mirror and know, in our heart of hearts, we have only ourselves to blame for the mess we're in. Many of us agonize secretly over a dark time in our lives when we made hasty decisions or pursued our own way.

Rahab was such a woman. While Israel wasted 40 years in the wilderness, complaining against God, Rahab was living in the city of Jericho, wasting herself. She was turning tricks and piling up a mountain of sordid memories that would trouble her the rest of her life. When she looked at her life through the rearview mirror, all she saw were rubble, ruin and shame.

Marked forever by her Gentile ancestry and her shameful past, Rahab would never outlive the stigma of her profession. We still think of her as "Rahab the harlot."

How did Rahab feel when the Israelite army escorted her back to the camp of God's people?

Far from being a worthless, ruined woman, Rahab was the apple of God's eye, and He was carrying out His plan for her. In fact, God put her name in lights as a mother in the royal line of King David and as an ancestor of Jesus, the King of Kings (see Matt. 1:5).

God's plan for Rahab included raising a son and instilling in him a tender consciousness of God's grace. We know nothing of her husband, Salmon. But we know plenty about Rahab and her son, Boaz.

Perhaps it was his mother's lessons in God's grace that motivated Boaz to display compassion and grace to another foreign woman, Ruth the Moabitess. If Boaz' treatment of Ruth is any indication, Rahab was indeed a gifted mother and theologian.

If we learn anything from Rahab, it is that our own sins,

failures and mistakes cannot destroy God's sovereign plan for us. In fact, He is at work in the midst of our self-destructive actions and the pain we bring upon ourselves to advance His good purposes for us.

God's plan isn't contingent on a flawless life. Not even our sins can obstruct His plans.

Most everyone feels a pang when they look in the rearview mirror. But once we have felt the warmth of God's grace, new feelings emerge when we look over our shoulders—an overwhelming gratitude to God, a passion for holiness and a softer heart toward other sinners. We feel an irrepressible urge to worship and to follow the God who redeemed us and who was at work in spite of our prodigality to prosper our souls and draw us to Himself.

Women are called to be soldiers. We never know when we are going to be called up. Sometimes the battle descends on us without warning. Other times we march into the war zone for someone else—a husband, a friend or a child.

A woman's theology can make all the difference in how well she fights the battles that are part of God's plan for her. Sometimes theology is all we have in the war zone. When faith is stripped to the bone and all our props and crutches are gone, our knowledge of God—that He is good and still on His throne—is the only thing that keeps us going.

Our courage and determination in battle hang on our understanding of God's character. Marching into battle with false and flimsy ideas of God is like going to war with a popgun tucked under your arm.

When fatigue hits and still the battle rages, it makes all the difference in the world to know that God's plan is in place, even here. The thought that He has temporarily surrendered His sovereignty to someone else undermines our confidence, drains

us of courage and weakens our hope.

None of us can afford a theology that cannot withstand the pressures of the war zone, that fits only within a world of comfort and pleasure. We are called to enter the war zone, to feel the heat of battle for ourselves and for one another, and to see God more clearly within the context of our struggles.

Read a companion devotional.

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