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1

STORY: GOD TELLS YOURS



“THEN IT WAS YOU WHO WOUNDED ARAVIS?”

“IT WAS I.”

“BUT WHAT FOR?”

“CHILD,” SAID THE VOICE, VERY DEEP AND
LOW SO THAT THE EARTH SHOOK, “I AM
TELLING YOU YOUR STORY, NOT HERS. I TELL
NO ONE ANY STORY BUT HIS OWN.”¹

My Dear Fellow Travelers,

I have described to you how I was sitting in my office minding my own business when I was interrupted by that unpleasant phone call informing me that I had been issued a personalized, gold-embossed invitation to join the cancer club.

My first reaction was “Why me?” Right when your Travel Writer was asking the “why me?” question, another Valley dweller was asking it too. In the summer of 2010 the popular author and self-professed atheist Christopher Hitchens was diagnosed with cancer. With his usual candor, he described his battle with the illness:

I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste. I had real plans for my next decade and felt I'd worked hard enough to earn it. Will I really not live to see my children married? To watch the World Trade



Center rise again? . . . To the dumb question “Why me?” the cosmos barely bothers to return the reply: Why not? I sometimes wish I were suffering in a good cause, or risking my life for the good of others, instead of just being a gravely endangered patient. Allow me to inform you, though, that when you sit in a room with a set of other finalists, and kindly people bring a huge transparent bag of poison to plant into your arm [his chemotherapy treatment] and you either read or don’t read a book while the venom sack gradually empties into your system . . . You feel swamped with passivity and impotence: dissolving in powerlessness like a sugar lump in water.²

LAMENT

Exactly, Christopher. “Why me?” Since arriving in the Valley, I’ve discovered that virtually everyone here has gone a round or two with that question. It’s only logical that we should. It’s only *biblical* that we should.

You see, God understands and encourages us to indulge our built-in need for good, old-fashioned lament. *Will I really not live to see my children married? To watch the World Trade Center rise again?* God *wants* us to acknowledge our bafflement and pain and express our distress and questions.

He *wants* us to ask with Moses, “Why have you brought this trouble on your servant?” (Numbers 11:11). God *wants* us to ask with David, “How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and day after day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Psalm 13:1–2). God *wants* us to ask with Jesus, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

God does not fear our lament. Instead, He welcomes it. And He rues our failure to lament because that constitutes denial, which usurps the joy and ministry our heavenly Father has planned for us even in this suffering. Nearly half of the psalms (73 out of 150) have major elements of lament—God’s people expressing their heartache and their prayerful pleas in the face of suffering. Why? They knew that lament



prepares us to trust God's response. We cannot receive healing for unacknowledged pain or answers to unasked questions. Lament is a gift of God that is wisely utilized by His godly ones.

And so your Travel Writer lamented wholeheartedly—and continues to do so occasionally! I just wanted to know, needed to know: why? Why this? Why now? Why *me*? Was it something I did? Something I failed to do? Something *God* failed to do?

Whatever it was, the results were manifestly miserable and my heart was abjectly agitated and my prayers were brutally honest. They contained a whole lot less about what I knew—"God is great, God is good"—and a whole lot more about what I felt—"God is deaf, God is gone."

My lament was simply expressing consciously the unspoken pain in my heart. I felt this sentiment with Christopher Hitchens, "Lord, I am badly oppressed by a gnawing sense of waste!" And I spat these words to the heavens: "God, this is *me* suffering down here, hello? It appears that You have fallen down on the job and I don't like it one little bit and I wish You would get with the program and do Your duty and get me out of this jam *asap*."

Admittedly, the venting of lament was (is) a welcome relief valve. Prayerful pleas honestly expressed end in trustful hope. God designed it that way so that, having faced my predicament with eyes wide open, I can relax and, with clearer perspective, join David in this concluding prayer to his lament:

Look on me and answer, Lord my God. Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death, and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing the Lord's praise, for he has been good to me. (Psalm 13:3–6)

As your Travel Writer, I urge you to do the same in this Valley. Let's face it. We're in a world of hurt and it's not happiness we're experiencing, but pain. God doesn't want us to pretend otherwise, but rather



lament our distress honestly as a way of setting the table for experiencing His hope deeply. We will get there as we understand God's two profound answers to the "why me?" lament that all of us inevitably have: our enemy and His Story . . .

OUR REAL ENEMY

A functional knowledge of theology answers the "why me?" question at altitude for the whole human race. Why am I sick with cancer? Because cancer and all of its insidious antihuman allies of disease and disaster and death are the collateral damage of a world broken by sin at the behest of Satan, the great enemy of our souls.

An old French Huguenot pastor was once the guest preacher in a British church. His outline for a sermon on the devil that he preached was: "Who the Devil he is, What the Devil he is doing, and Where the Devil he is going!" His essential and accurate message was that what the devil is doing in this world is making war on God and on people. That reminds me that one of my nurses gave me a bumper sticker I mistakenly put on my office door to publically identify my enemy: STUPID CANCER. But I was wrong. Cancer is not my ultimate enemy—Satan is.

Cancer is just one of Satan's many tools deployed to bring death, which is the stock and trade of evil and darkness. Death is the ultimate expression of Satan's hatred toward human beings who, as creatures made in the image of God, remind him constantly of God. As the *imago dei*, we humans are "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5) now, but are destined to be revealed and exalted as God's children who will one day judge those very angels (of which Satan is but one).³ Because in all of these ways we remind Satan so much of God, he does to us what he can't do to God, but wishes he could. If the devil can't kill God (and even he knows he can't do that), then he will settle for maiming and killing people both physically and spiritually. The devil's ultimate intention for the children of God is not good, but evil; not life, but death; not mercy, but murder.



This poses a credibility challenge to people still living in Myopia. Is the deadly opposition of the evil one difficult for you to believe? Then hear Jesus, who characterized Satan so: “He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him” (John 8:44). Do you hear that? The primo murderer, in the history of the entire universe, is the devil. He loves to kill. There was never a time when killing wasn’t pure delight to the devil. And his rap sheet shows that he has murdered *millions* of persons since the beginning of time through holocausts and abortions and disasters and yes, diseases like cancer. This puts that comical little red-suited pitchfork-packing horned putz of comic routines in a new light, doesn’t it? As long as living human beings are dying in droves, Satan is one happy camper.

This is the bad old news: we human inhabitants of planet Earth have a vicious enemy who wants to murder us all both spiritually and physically in time and for eternity. But it is this dark and disturbing bad old news of Satan’s murderous bloodlust that makes the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ so beautiful.

The good news is that we have a Friend who wants to give us spiritual and physical life for time and eternity. The bad news is that Satan is a murderer.

The good news is that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the LIFE (John 14:6). The bad news is that the devil kills.

The good news is that Jesus saves. The bad news is that Satan wants to destroy.

The good news is that Jesus died so that you can never die. Hear His words of invitation to you and me: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats this bread will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (John 6:51).

Nothing is more vital in darkness than light. Nothing is more vital in death than life. And nothing makes light and life more beautiful than the occasional cancer-induced reminders that the decisive battle in spiritual warfare was fought and won by Christ at the cross and through



His resurrection. As Paul wrote, “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:15). In other words, Jesus has already whipped our adversary.⁴

Though we have an enemy who lands the odd withering blow, we also have a Savior who has landed Satan’s death blow and nullified the evil-caused damage in time and eternity. It gives me great pleasure as your Travel Writer to remind you of these wonderful truths!

WHY ME AND NOT THEM?

Perhaps you are like me as you grapple with the “why me?” question. You are realizing that everyone suffers the collateral damage of a sin-broken world, whether through cancer or any number of other scourges wielded by the enemy of your soul. That’s a theologically legitimate response that stands biblical muster. But you still have unease in your heart. The theological answer doesn’t satisfy. That is when it might dawn on you as it did me that it is not the answer that is defective but the question. Perhaps we have to admit that what we’re really obsessing about is not “why me?” but “why me and not *them*?”

This is an important admission for new residents of the Valley. Our adversity as cancer victims would not be so difficult nor other people’s health so divisive if we felt that everybody experienced both in equal measure. But all do not and—though embarrassing to admit—the insult added to the injury of what seems to be outrageous unfairness in my life (cancer) is unusual blessing in the lives of others (health). As a result, I struggle often here in the Valley with interpreting God’s treatment of me through the lens of how He treats others. I am constantly tempted to conclude that my lot in life is acceptable only if my pain is not greater nor my blessings less than those around me. And so I get on my high horse with God and demand to know, why me and not them? Maybe you have done the same thing. If so, welcome to the party!

Here’s an important cause and effect relationship that I’ve learned



TIM KELLER WRITES:

I am reminded of a line from Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*: "The hands of the king are healing hands, and thus shall the rightful king be known." As a child blossoms under the authority of a wise and good parent, as a team flourishes under the direction of a skillful, brilliant coach, so when you come under the healing of the royal hands, under the kingship of Jesus, everything in your life will begin to heal. And when he comes back, everything sad will come untrue. His return will usher in the end of fear, suffering, and death.⁵



as your Travel Writer here in Cancerland. When I succumb to the notion that God has treated me unfairly, emotional poison flows through my veins. I become angry, bitter, and hopeless. But most devastating, my faith fails in the One whom I've effectively thrown overboard as a delinquent Deity.

To all who are secretly exercised by these unheroic yet altogether human sentiments, take heart. You're not alone! One of Christ's most prominent disciples was outspoken on the issue of comparative fairness. Simon "The Rock" Peter was an angler by trade. I think of him as the CEO of A&P Fishing Enterprises (Andrew and Peter). As an employer, Peter paid his employees' wages based on a comparison to what others of similar production levels were making. Fairness was determined by market value. That's why Peter was so interested in what Jesus told the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:21. "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me."

When Peter heard those words, his businessman's brain engaged. If pay is determined comparatively in the physical world, why not in the spiritual? If this tightfisted young ruler had a shot at "treasure in heaven," what compensation might Peter, who had sacrificed to follow Jesus, command? Thus his question in verse 27: "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" A rather mercenary question, wouldn't you say? Yet, do we not all raise it with God, if only subconsciously? "Lord, if I live a comparatively good Christian life, will You bless me in relation to others? And if I do more than others, will You do more for me? Can I at *least* assume that You will prevent me and my family from ever getting cancer?" Jesus' response to Peter and to us all in the Valley was the following parable from Matthew 20:1-16, which I've paraphrased:

In the Middle East, grapes were picked in September before the destructively cold and wet autumn winds came. When a certain vineyard owner saw those storms brewing, he was motivated to get his



grapes in—and fast. Down to the local labor pool he went at six a.m., hired a group of workers at a denarius a day, and sent them into his fields. By nine he knew he would need more workers to finish the job, so back he went and hired more. He did the same at noon and at five p.m., giving work to men who by then had probably lost hope for employment that day.

Finally the vineyard was harvested and the workers queued up for their wages. The last group hired was paid first. They stepped up to receive pay for work begun just an hour before. These men were still fresh. Their Levis were pressed, their Doc Martens unreddened, and their Right Guard still working! Since they'd only worked 1/12 of the day, they would have been content with a pondion, worth about 1/12 of a denarius. But to their amazement, they received the full day's pay of an entire denarius.

At first the original workers were ecstatic. As the paymaster shelled out wages, they were calculating their take: "Hey, if these one-hour guys got a denarius, surely we'll get twelve since we were here that many hours!" But their glee turned to apprehension as the next groups who had worked longer hours also received a denarius. Then came what seemed a slap in the face. When these exhausted men who had labored all day in the sweltering heat received their pay, they too were paid the same: one denarius.

An outspoken member of the first group complained bitterly about the perceived injustice. But how was it unjust? Had the employer paid the agreed-on amount? Yes. Was there a breach of contract? No. So what was wrong? Not the way the owner had treated them, but the way he had treated them in comparison with the others. He had hired them and paid what they expected. But by comparison, they had determined they deserved more than they had a right to expect.

Comparing has the same effect on us today. Especially in this Valley where the stakes are so high, we don't just want the chance to play the game, but the assurance of winning it. Jesus' timeless parable points



out the foolishness of comparison, a sentiment seconded by Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:12: “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”

So when we come to this Valley, dwelling on the question “why me and not them?” is not a biblically recommended activity? Correct!

Why not? Let me count the ways! First, comparison destroys our gratitude to God. In Jesus’ parable, poor workers who lived from hand to mouth had been given a chance to earn bread for their families. An employer had hired them for a fair wage, provided them honest work, and paid them promptly for their services. They should have been grateful. But because they measured themselves against others, they were rude, selfish, and ungrateful.

Comparison destroys our gratitude to God in the same way. A friend’s business mushrooms while yours drowns in accounts receivable and you demand to know, “Why him and not me?” Childless, you leave the maternity ward where a joyful neighbor has just welcomed her third child, look up to heaven and cry, “Why her and not me?” Sure, you’re glad when God does generous things for others. But oughtn’t He do the same for you? Sick from chemotherapy treatments and facing an uncertain future, you crawl off the couch to attend a Bible study and pass your next-door neighbor who has not darkened the door of a church in thirty years. Why is he working on his tan while you are working to keep your supper down? Christ hasn’t violated His Word when your desires aren’t met, but it’s tough to be grateful when the next guy’s are.

But most seriously, comparing damages our relationship with God. The vineyard owner’s words to the disgruntled workers have an ominous ring of finality. “Take your pay and go. I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you” (Matthew 20:14). These workers’ displeasure with what he had paid caused them to lose faith in him, and they probably never saw him again. He had paid them fairly, but



they left in a huff because he didn't follow the rules of their comparison game. How many believers have become similarly estranged from God by interpreting His blessings to others as slights to them?

WHY NOT ME?

So if the “why me?” question is already answered and the underlying “why me and not them?” question is off-base, is there a legitimate question that we should ask upon entering the Valley that has not yet been answered and that produces gratitude and not resentment? It's perceptive of you to ask, my friend, and I'm excited to share the answer. Yes, there is a question that we Valley dwellers are wise to ask often and with enthusiasm, and that is “Why *not* me?”

This question arises from faith, not fear. It also arises from knowledge, not ignorance. “Why me?” ignorantly assumes that God was too weak to protect me from the assaults of Satan, and “Why me and not them?” ignorantly assumes that God was too distracted to treat me with equanimity. The fact is that God is neither weak nor distracted, but sovereign and good, powerful and just. King David expressed as much in his Old Testament declaration: “The Lord is gracious and righteous; our God is full of compassion. The Lord protects the unwary; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return to your rest, my soul, for the Lord has been good to you” (Psalm 116:5–7).

That means that even though we do have a virulent enemy who seeks to destroy us, we have a heavenly Father who is even more powerful who seeks to protect us. It means that even though our adversary wants to wreck our lives and render us hopeless, we have a heavenly Father who plans to make something beautiful of our lives in this Valley and give us a future for His glory. He is sovereign and therefore ultimately in control of all things, able to make even the wrath of man and the assaults of the adversary to praise Him. As the children's song so poignantly expresses it, “He holds the whole world in His hands.” That is endlessly reassuring to people of faith given God's stated intent for



their lives: “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). This has always been His blueprint for His people. As the prophet proclaimed and Jesus reiterated eight hundred years later:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has
anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the
brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the
prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of
vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for
those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes,
the oil of joy instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be
called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor. (Isaiah 61:1–3)*

The unique hope that we followers of Christ have upon entering Cancerland is that God is not only able to make this a beautiful journey for us, but that He plans to make it so. All we have to do is to stop fearing and start trusting, stop comparing and start anticipating. Because we know that our sovereign heavenly Father and not Satan calls the shots for His children, we can predict that something beautiful is going to come of this journey because of the One who makes “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28 KJV).

In this vein, Jesus’ parable suggests that there is a superior alternative to seeing what others are getting (or not getting, e.g., cancer) and demanding the same for ourselves. That is to trust our God to do the right thing, the best thing, and the good thing in our lives, not in



AS THE GREAT CHURCH FATHER
ST. AUGUSTINE OBSERVED:

Great is the work of God,
exquisite in all he wills! so
that, in a manner wondrous
and ineffable, that is not done
without his will which is done
contrary to it, because it could
not be done if he did not permit;
nor does he permit it unwillingly,
but willingly; nor would he who
is good permit evil to be done,
were he not omnipotent to bring
good out of evil.⁶



spite of our cancer, but *through* it. Did you notice that the later groups of workers in Jesus' parable had no agreement for pay? They labored on the basis of trust in the owner's simple promise in verse 4: "He told them to go to work in his vineyard and he would pay them "whatever is right." These workers didn't stipulate demands for wage rates, or unionize, or negotiate a contract. They simply placed themselves in the master's hands, believing he would do right by them. God calls us to trust Him here in the Valley in the same way.

Such trust may be tough, but it makes sense to people in the Valley. First, because the vineyard owner, who represents God in Jesus' parable, would go back time and again to hire workers, even at the eleventh hour. Why hire guys to work only one hour? Could he really hope to gain that much from their limited labor? No. He hired those men because he cared for them. He hired them, not because he needed them, but because they needed him. That's why he gave them big pay for little work.

In the same way, God cares for you. The comparison game will make you wonder if God cares for you when your life doesn't go well. You question His love if others seem more blessed than you. But you don't know what God may be doing in the lives of others through His generosity, and you don't know what He may be doing in your life through testing. The Lord is about the business of grafting godliness into the character of His people. It's a vast oversimplification of His ways to expect that He must treat everyone equally.

In Jesus' parable those who demanded a particular wage got exactly what they requested and not a mite more. But those who trusted the master got far more than they could have imagined. That is what Jesus meant when He said, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last." Those who aggressively demand from God will someday be surprised to find themselves behind those who simply trusted Him. An old saying goes that God gives His best to those who leave the choice with Him. When that happens, we can fully appreciate the marvelous mosaic His



grace is creating in our lives. We will stop existing to keep up with the Joneses and start living out the unique story of salvation God is spinning in our own experience, even our experience in this Valley of the Shadow of Death.

Do you have faith in the story God has for you? When you come to this Valley, you will want to have faith in this story! Do you believe that Christ is with you now and always, guiding your steps in the Valley and straightening your way through the Shadow? He is. He is the Master of the vineyard who responds to trust, not demand. He is the Author of our salvation who delights in weaving an utterly unique and beautiful story in each believer's life.

But to comprehend His work, we must be willing to reject all comparisons. Evidently, this was a difficult challenge for Peter. It was his self-absorbed "what's in it for me" question that elicited Jesus' parable, but unfortunately Peter didn't grasp Jesus' full meaning in it. Not long after, he was still comparing his life with others in deciding if God was fair. We see this in his last conversation with Christ who said to him:

"Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go." Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, "Follow me!" Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is going to betray you?") When Peter saw him, he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." (John 21:18-22)

I can understand Peter's curiosity. He's just been told how he will die. Can we blame him for wondering if his friends faced a similar fate? But when he asked about John, Jesus' reply is blunt: "None of your



business, Peter! I tell no one any story but his own.” This time, Peter understood. The Lord doesn’t issue cookie-cutter callings. When Peter got his eyes off others and accepted God’s unique work in his own life, the greatest chapters of his story unfolded.

God is writing a bestseller, and you are His coauthor. Your history is the plotline, your experiences the setting, your faith responses the dramatic tension. Insisting that He craft your story to mirror that of others is a demand for monotony.

So many heroes of the faith—Joseph, Daniel, Ruth, Esther . . . the hall of famers in Hebrews 11—allowed the Divine Writer to finish His story in their lives even if, for some of them, it meant not receiving earthly deliverance. Each received God’s best because they left the choice with Him. Each trusted until every sentence was crafted, every paragraph polished, every chapter completed “. . . that they might obtain a better resurrection.” Won’t you do the same? The result will be yet another masterpiece. It’s always too soon to quit if God is in the picture. As Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 2:9 NLT, “However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.’” I have become fond of quoting that promise to myself every time I sit down in the chemo lab. My endurance is bolstered by knowing that each drip from that poisonous IV is just a new sentence in a pretty darn good tale that my heavenly Father is spinning about my life.

God is the Maker, the Master of new things, the Singer of new songs. Don’t insult His creativity by asking Him to plagiarize old stories. In your experience in this Valley, God is creating something special. Trust Him to do a good job. So when He introduces a dramatic element into your story that includes cancer, just ask enthusiastically the rhetorical question, “Why *not* me?” No matter how bleak your prospects, no matter how blessed your peers, be assured that if Christ is your King, every heartache is but a new chapter in your story. Never forget: in a master-



piece, every chapter is not only elegant, but essential. Let the Almighty Author finish!

Jesus tells no one anyone's story but their own. Those latecomer workers in the vineyard listened. Peter and all those biblical heroes listened. I'm listening. And I pray you will listen, too. And the proof for all of us that we are indeed listening as Jesus tells us each our own story will be our often asking of a similar-sounding but actually quite different new question . . .

Your "Why NOT Me?"
Travel Writer,

Pastor Andy