

## Introduction

We first met when he was posted to my army unit in Germany. I had been homesick and feeling isolated as an outspoken Christian, and he extended generous, patient friendship to me. We ended up going for long runs together and driving around Europe on weekends. He became my best friend. He was a member of the Parachute Regiment, famed for its rough, tough ethos, but we would analyse classical music together on long drives and he would discuss art with me. His humility and humour were deeply attractive.

One weekend, we were staying in a backpackers' hostel in Berlin. As we lay on rickety old beds in the darkness, I shared the gospel with him. He was polite but non-committal. Another weekend, we went to Amsterdam for him to meet my girlfriend and buy an engagement ring for his own. A few months later, I was playing the organ at his wedding in a beautiful country church in England. (He instructed me to play 'There may be trouble ahead' as he and his bride walked up the aisle, to gales of laughter from the congregation.)

Soon afterwards, we found ourselves in a small base in Iraq, isolated out in the wilderness. We were in different units so hardly crossed paths, given the insane busyness of that period. But one evening, shortly before it happened, when the sand and dust had made for yet another achingly beautiful sunset,

## A Time to Mourn

I passed him during a run around the base. I put my arm around his shoulders and we had a joyful catch-up.

A few days later, I was commanding the Quick Reaction Force and we were scrambled to respond to an incident. As we left the base, more information came over the net, including zap numbers of casualties. A zap number is the first two initials of a soldier's name followed by the last four digits of his army number and his blood group. I spent the 20-minute journey to the incident racking my brain over those sets of initials, trying to work out who the casualties were. By the time we arrived, I was satisfied and relieved that I didn't know the victims personally. Wrong. A huge roadside bomb had crushed my friend's vehicle's engine block, obliterated his driver, and decapitated him.

In the months that followed, I agonised over the ways I had (and hadn't) witnessed to him. I writhed as I replayed his reactions to my imperfect expressions of the gospel. Now it was too late. A few months after playing the organ at his wedding, I found myself playing a keyboard at his memorial service. The verses of Scripture in the short ceremony were bitter to my taste as I reflected that, as far as the evidence pointed, they didn't apply to him. He had perished.

### **The Heartbreaking Taboo**

The death of someone you care about, whom you don't think was saved, is surely one of the most heartbreaking of circumstances. It can haunt for a lifetime. Yet the eternal loss of unbelievers is something most believers experience several times over. It's also a taboo: the anguish of the bereaved Christian makes talking to others hard. And those others, in turn, find ministering to the believer hard, given the sensitivity of the issue. Someone recently told me that out of hundreds of believers she has interacted with over the years, who have known about the loss of her gospel-rejecting parent, she can think of only two or three who have shared about a similar loss.

### No Shame

If you are struggling with the doctrine of hell, there is no shame in that. You are in good company. A friend of mine recalled walking down a garden path to visit a couple whose apparently unbelieving son had just committed suicide. He is as theologically and pastorally astute as anyone I know, a seasoned pastor who has written some good Christian books. He remembers having literally no idea what to say as he approached the front door. I know a publishing editor with great theology and a strong faith who lost her father unexpectedly four years ago. Having prayed for his salvation since she was twelve, she still had no assurance about this. She has wrestled with this issue ever since, trying to write about it but finding herself emotionally unable. Pastor and theologian, John Piper, admitted in an article that he finds the funerals of blatant unbelievers ‘way worse than anything.’\*

Consider Job. In the aftermath of devastating suffering which included the violent deaths of children whose spiritual status troubled him,† Job cries out, ‘I loathe my life ... I will speak in the bitterness of my soul. I will say to God, “Do not condemn me; let me know why you contend against me. Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands?”’‡ Yet as Job flails in the darkness with this bewildered grief, God ends up rebuking the friends who had been correcting him, and in fact *commending* him: ‘My anger burns against you [Eliphaz] and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me *what is right, as my servant Job has.*’§

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\* John Piper, ‘How do you deal with the death of an unsaved loved one’, *Desiring God*, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/how-do-you-deal-with-the-death-of-an-unsaved-loved-one>. Accessed 2 January, 2023.

† Job 1:5, 18, 19.

‡ Job 10:1–3.

§ Job 42:7.

## No Sin

This indicates that not only is there no *shame* if you're struggling to accept God's actions. There's no *sin* either – as long as you're able to keep hold of whatever truth Job had clung to when God said he had 'spoken of me what is right.' What was that? Job had voiced it just previously:

I know that you can do all things,  
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted ...  
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,  
things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.\*

The truth is that we will not always understand! God's purposes and His justification for His actions will sometimes be 'too wonderful' for us. ('Wonderful' here doesn't mean something to be celebrated as delightful. It means something full of wonder because God is acting far beyond our understanding.) As Job admits elsewhere, we observe 'but the outskirts of His ways, and how small a whisper do we hear of Him? But the thunder of His power who can understand?†' God says through Isaiah, 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.‡' God calls us to trust, humbly, that He is working in ways mysterious to us. Keep sight of this, and the angst you have over God's actions is without sin, just as it was for Job.

Yet the loss of an unbelieving loved one can, of course, make us re-evaluate our theology. How loving and compassionate is God really? Is He a God I'm able to keep following without resentment? What about predestination? What about babies? What about the severely mentally disabled? And if the person

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\* Job 42:2–3.

† Job 26:14.

‡ Isa. 55:9.

I loved is now in hell, how can I have any consolation, any closure, any peace, ever again?\*

### **Truth and Solace**

This book brings the Bible to bear on these and other questions. Four times in Scripture, God condemns false prophets for ‘healing the wound of His people lightly’ and ‘saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.’† As a writer, I don’t want to face that condemnation. So we will be looking Scripture honestly as well as sensitively, clearly as well as compassionately. Yet I trust you will discover that more clarity leads to *more* comfort, not less. In the words of C. S. Lewis, ‘... comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end: if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth – only ... wishful thinking ... and, in the end, despair.’‡

May you experience truth and perhaps unexpected comfort and solace in the pages ahead.

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\* Another question might be ‘Is the suffering of hell really eternal and conscious?’ The purpose of this book isn’t to explore the biblical doctrine of hell in detail. For that particular question, I would recommend *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity and the Things We’ve Made Up* by Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle (David C. Cook, 2001) – a thorough, honest examination of the biblical data.

† Jer. 6:14 – see also Jer. 8:11 and Ezek. 13:10, 16.

‡ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins, 2001), 32.