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Anchors for the Soul: Trusting God in the Storms of Life

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Introduction



When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the trouble that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him; they began to weep aloud, and they tore their robes and sprinkled dust on their heads. Then they sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.

—Job 2:11-13

WHEN JOB'S FRIENDS heard about his plight, they visited him. Their intention was supportive. They came to “sympathize with him and comfort him” (Job 2:11). The same Hebrew words (though translated differently) are used again in the epilogue, where his friends and relatives “comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him” (Job 42:11).

Their genuine sympathy for Job is expressed in a traditional Near Eastern manner (Job 2:11). They not only wept with loud cries, they also tore their clothes and threw dust on their heads. Job's reaction to his trouble was similar (Job 1:20). They sat with Job on a trash heap for seven days in silence (Job 2:13). Their

friendship could not have been demonstrated more appropriately. Silence is often better in the face of another's suffering than attempting to soothe their pain with words. Now Job was no longer alone; his friends were with him. *Finally*, Job might have thought to himself, *I have someone who will share my pain with me and provide a comforting presence.* But Job, with the reader, soon discovers the friends are “miserable comforters” (Job 16:2).

Community is important in suffering. The help of friends is immeasurable. But suffering can also destroy community. In the midst of suffering, people tend to seek their own interest. We want to preserve our own understanding of God (or our theology) in a way that evidences the selfishness within the human spirit. Job rose above this selfish inclination when he maintained his integrity—that is, when he refused to curse God, while maintaining his own innocence. But his friends did not. They wanted him to confess his sin. They sought to preserve their theology by questioning Job's integrity. They cut Job loose from their community because God, in their view, had judged him. Job was without a community.

Today, we are no different. One minister discovered he was HIV positive through a past blood transfusion. He disclosed this to his congregation, and the leaders fired him. What was once a loving community turned on him when they believed God had judged him for some secret sin. The theology of Job's friends is alive today.

The dialogue in Job is as much about the destruction of community as it is about a misunderstanding of God. The reader who evaluates the dialogue from the standpoint of the narrative background story (Job 1-2) sees the tragedy of both. The friends align themselves with the accuser's approach. Indeed, they attempt to destroy Job's faith by siding with the accuser. Job's wife counsels

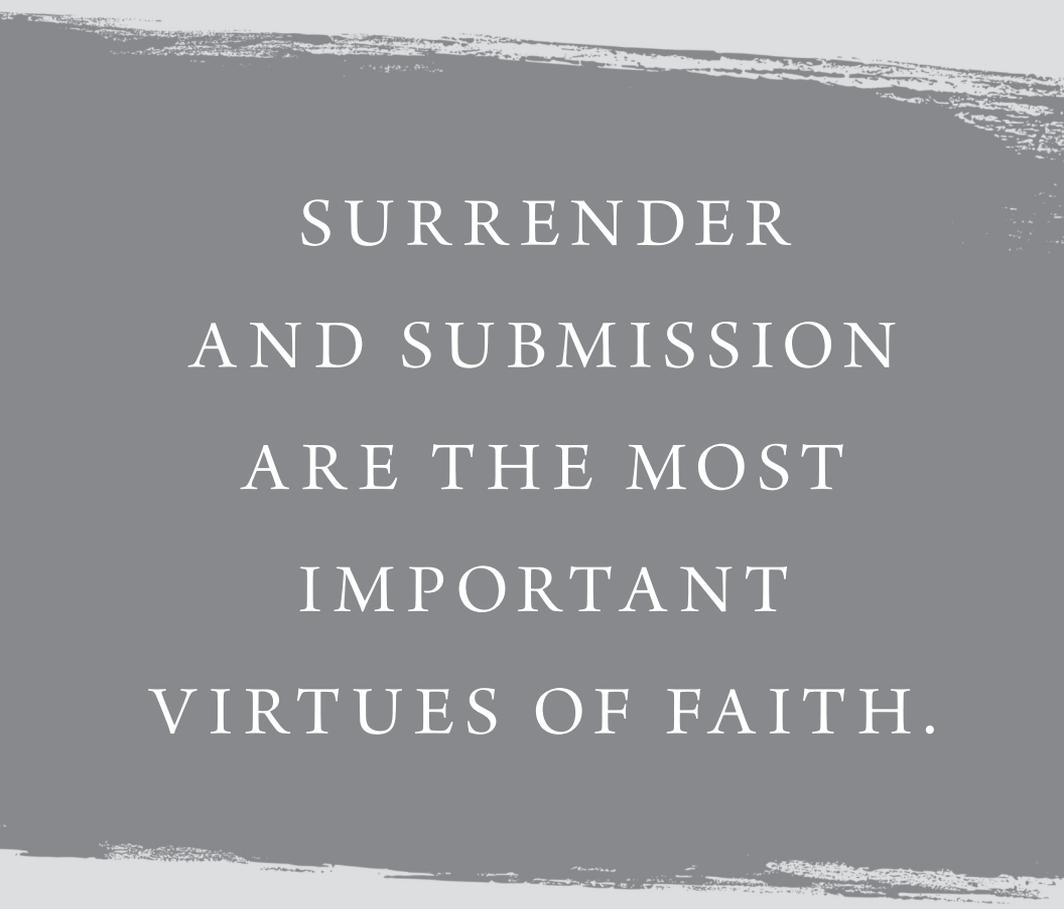
IN THIS CHAPTER:

- Learn about suffering from firsthand experiences.
- See the benefits of faithful lament.
- Understand the difference between joy with lament and joy without lament.

I MARRIED ON May 22, 1977. I was young, only nineteen, and even though I had already earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Bible and Ministry at a private Christian college, I was incredibly naive about the world's evil and pain. I had not experienced the pain of personal suffering, nor had my understanding of God been radically challenged. Suffering, I had thought, does not come from God and is not in any way connected to God—only good is connected to God, which to my mind was the absolute absence of suffering.

However, 1980 shook this vision. My innocence was shattered, and my naive and simplistic belief in God's providential goodness was tested. On April 30, 1980, Sheila, my wife of less than three years, died suddenly and unexpectedly at home due to a complication while recovering from surgery.

You see, we had hoped for children in the near future. In fact, because she had significant scoliosis, Sheila underwent back surgery so she could carry a child to full term without experiencing extraordinary pain. We had planned to pursue a missionary career in Germany, where we hoped to minister in the Eastern Bloc. We had planned, prayed, and pursued so much, but on April 30, 1980, all those dreams crashed to the ground. The pillars of my



SURRENDER
AND SUBMISSION
ARE THE MOST
IMPORTANT
VIRTUES OF FAITH.

GROUP READING AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



At the end of each chapter, we've included a selected reading with discussion questions to help you process suffering with others and to discuss how we as a community can live through these difficulties. This is intended for you to process your own sufferings and the sufferings of those around you through group discussion.

As mentioned in the “Special Note to the Reader” above, we have made available supplemental videos for groups and individuals, along with *Journaling Through Anchors for the Soul*, which is a journal for those who want to process this material through writing and take further action. You can access these through www.himpublishations.com.



Read Psalm 119:65-88 as a group and discuss the questions below.

1. Does it disturb you to think about the “goodness of affliction” as the Psalmist describes? What can be good about affliction?
2. Does the recognition of that goodness dispel its pain and hurt? Why or why not?
3. What do we do when we cannot see any “good” in the affliction? This was the case with Job. How does he model endurance for us when we cannot see any good in the situation?
4. What is your story in relation to suffering?

God invites us to speak our hearts and promises to be near us no matter what we say. God will listen and comfort. God will come to us in our lament, hear our cry, and comfort us in our troubles. We are not alone.

GOD LISTENS TO OUR LAMENT

When suffering invades our lives, when pain, disease, or death strike our loved ones, our hearts cry out in protest. We sense that



This is not the way things are supposed to be.



something is terribly wrong with the world. This is not the way things are supposed to be. Indeed, it is not the way God created Eden. God created peace, life, harmony, and joy in the Garden, but sin and chaos decimated that world. It has broken the original harmo-

ny. Death has entered God's good creation. Our protests, then, are yearnings for the original harmony. They are a natural response to the brokenness we now experience. We protest against death, and we refuse to accept it in God's good creation.

The laments of Scripture are filled with those kinds of protests. The people of God cry out to their God under the burden of that brokenness. The Psalms provide example after example of faithful lament. The people of God confront their God in anger, bitterness, doubt, confusion, and bewilderment. They ask God, "Why?" (Ps. 88:14), and, "How long?" (Ps. 13:1-2). They ask God, "Where are you?" and, "Why have you hidden yourself from your people?" (Ps. 44:24; 102:2; 143:7). They ask God when he will bring justice to the earth. They complain, question, and weep. The story of God is filled with the protests of God's people because they have nowhere else to turn.