

A Conversation With The Author

Why did you choose the title, A Small Cup of Light?

The title comes from a poem, titled "Tuesday, June 4, 1991," by Billy Collins, in which he personifies early morning as a peasant woman who offers him a handful of birdsong and a small cup of light. I thought that was a beautiful picture of what God did during my suffering. He offered me small cups of light, small tastes of hope. Those small tastes of light really amplified my longing for him, very much like the psalmist who wrote, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:2). Now I've written a book that I hope will serve as a small cup of light for those living with suffering.

Why did you write the book?

I wrote this book for two reasons: first, to process my health collapse. Writing this book afforded me the opportunity to deal with a significant event in my life. I was able to retrace my steps through that suffering and listen a second time to what the Holy Spirit was saying. I also wrote this book because I think suffering is one of the most important subjects we can tackle, for our own sake at the very least. What could be more urgent or more relevant than suffering?

There are many kinds of suffering. I'm thinking of the rape victim and others who have suffered incredible brutality.

What would you say to someone who has suffered tremendous abuse or witnessed atrocities?

I'd want to tell them that I thought a lot about them while I wrote this book. In fact, I had a hard time really confronting my own suffering because it paled in comparison to the atrocious pain and grief that others experience. Thankfully, a dear friend pulled the rug out from under that argument when he said, "Ben, until you take your own pain seriously, you'll never hear what God is trying to tell you in it. Stop avoiding God by dismissing your particular story."

Those were wise words that I haven't forgotten. There's no doubt that many, many others have suffered far more than I have, but I can only climb into the mystery and brokenness of my pain. It's much harder to successfully climb into other people's pain and I will have zero success, zero empathy, until I've come to terms with mine. Who knows what God has in store for my life, what kinds of pain I'll encounter? But there are certain reliable promises God has given us to hold on to as we walk through this valley of tears. Writing this book helped me not only recognize those promises, but also claim them as my own.

What are some of those promises that sufferers need?

Well, God has promised that he is good (Mark 10:18, Psalm 145:9, Psalm 107:1) and that he is intimately in charge of history (Daniel 4:35, Proverbs 19:21, Isaiah 45:6-7). It's easy to doubt both those promises when we look around, but we can still count on them because they come from a

reliable God (II Cor. 1:20). Scripture makes it clear that history is God's story (Psalm 119:9-91), he's obviously telling it and his telling includes the dark parts of the story. God is good and nothing falls outside his plan. Those two promises have become a great comfort to me.

Are you suggesting that we'll see the purpose for our suffering in this life?

I don't think there's any way I can guarantee that we'll see why something happened before we come face to face with our Maker. I don't think we'll see the big picture until we're on the other side. We still see through a smudged window (I Cor.) and that means we may not see our suffering redeemed on this side of heaven. Nonetheless, God is in control of all happenings and he is good.

Since God is good, isn't it true that God can't be held responsible for atrocities performed by sinful, fallen human beings? Do you agree with those who say that, "God doesn't cause calamity, but he can use it for good"?

It helps me to remember that we mortals usually wake up with a plan for the day. If that principle is true of us, how much more so for the God who made us. A God without a plan is no God at all. As A.J. Gordon wrote, "A universe without decrees would be as irrational and appalling as would be an express train driving on in the darkness without headlight or engineer, and with no certainty that the next moment it might not plunge into the abyss." Some well-intentioned folks want to give God sovereignty

only over the big events, but there really aren't any small moments because each one has its exact place in God's plan. Big events are downstream from a million small moments. Control of big events requires control of little events. I believe God's plan is specific, involving the details of our lives, and our suffering is meaningless if we suggest that God isn't somehow in charge of suffering, especially brutalities.

The Bible teaches that God "works all things after the counsel of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). "All things" includes small events and big ones. Little events like a falling sparrow (Matthew 10:29) or a rolling die (Proverbs 16:33) are under the sovereign will of God just like big events are. Persecution (Hebrews 12:4-17), birth and death (I Samuel 2:6), daily plans (James 4:15), and a king's decisions (Proverbs 21:1) are all under his control.

I'm reminded of that great calamity, the Chicago fire of 1871, which killed hundreds of people. Legend has it that it started when a cow kicked over a lantern. The impact of that fire was massive, but Amos asks a provocative question I don't think we can afford to ignore in this circumstance: "If a calamity occurs in a city has not the LORD done it?" (Amos 3:6). The New York catastrophe of September 11, 2001, even more than the Chicago fire, impacted many lives in atrocious and immeasurable ways. Still, God governs them intimately according to his good, just, and wise purposes (Isaiah 46:10). Job suffered more than most, but even while covered in boils he said, "Shall we indeed accept good from

God and not accept adversity?" (Job 2:10).

It's true that our suffering is a product of sin and part of the consequences of living in a fallen world, but that truth is only one side of the coin. The other side of that coin is that God is in control. Yes, people do horrible things, myself included, and we are responsible for those actions. Yes, people are free to make wicked choices, but they aren't at liberty to make those decisions apart from God's sovereign control. We are not autonomous beings and those who keep preaching human autonomy rob us of our only hope; namely, a good God who has complete authority over all things and who comes to the aid of those who cry out to him. Suffering in every form is meaningless and hopeless unless God is in control of it.

What are three principles that helped you during suffering?

As I've already said, the first principle is that God is sovereign: my suffering does not come as a surprise to him and, in fact, it's a very important part of the story that he is telling. Another principle is that God will remove my suffering in his timing, not mine. I think it was Brother Lawrence who wrote that God will take us off of our cross when he is ready to do so and not a moment before or after. Be patient.

Another principle that took me a long time to learn was that God uses suffering to speak to us. We need to be still and listen to him in our suffering. Pray. Soak in the

Scripture. And pray some more. I remember Paul's beautiful prayer for his friends where he asks God to give them both patience and faith in their suffering. He prays that God would fulfill all his good pleasure and glorify the name of Christ in them during their suffering (II Thess. 1:4 and 11). It's striking to me that he doesn't ask God to make the suffering go away. In another place, he asks that God would remove his affliction (II Cor. 12:8). When Paul makes that request, he's simply imitating Christ who asked God to remove the coming affliction when he was in the Garden, just before his crucifixion (Luke 22:42). So I'm learning to imitate Paul in both respects, to pray first for patience and faith *and then* to pray for healing. Finally, I learned that suffering provokes in us a deep longing for God. Christians are fond of saying that suffering makes us better people. I don't think that's always true, but I think it amplifies the fact that this is not our home. We long for our heavenly home.

What are some lessons you carry with you after the health collapse?

Well, there are a lot of lessons I've learned. I can't say I've learned them all in a permanent way, but I'm trying to live by them. One of the most important lessons and the one I have the hardest time implementing is to set margins in life. I have people who know me well and they keep an eye on me to make sure that I'm not over-committing. Busyness isn't a virtue and most of the activity in our lives simply distracts us from listening to God's still, small voice (I

Kings 19:12). It often keeps us not only from encountering God, but from a genuine encounter with real people in real time.

I think another lesson I learned is that life is not so much about what I'm doing for God as much as it is about how I'm learning to see what God is up to in my life. I try too hard to please God by my efforts instead of letting my efforts spring naturally from a kind of thankfulness for what he has done and is doing in my life. Perhaps the hardest prayer I've learned to pray is this one: "Lord, I'm ready for you to do whatever you must to draw me close to you." It's a terrifying prayer for some reason, but it's also very liberating to vocalize.

If you were to offer one piece of advice to those walking through their own wilderness season, what would it be?

I'd tell them to imitate Job. He didn't pretend to be happy during his suffering. He didn't look for distractions from his pain. He didn't find solace in other people. Nor was he passively mute in the face of God. Job was actually very vocal with God, asking "Why?" right to God's face. I think that's the best way to deal with suffering: ask the hard questions, wrestle with what God is doing, but do it all face to face with God. That approach to suffering mirrors so many characters including the prophets and especially the Psalmist. I think any other response to suffering is not only unbiblical, it's spiritually and emotionally unhealthy.

What about those who serve sufferers? What advice would you give to those who live with and serve people who are suffering?

Eugene Peterson said, "Suffering attracts helpers, like roadkill attracts flies." So I think it's important to resist the temptation to quickly fix the problem. I'm all for medication and the aids of modern science, but, as I mentioned earlier, we tend to look for a solution first, instead of listening to God in our suffering first.

Another small piece of advice is that a person's suffering might be for you as much as for them. I think it's easy to get self-righteous and assume that the person's suffering is God working on them, but it might very well be that their suffering is for you, not them. Maybe God is using their suffering to draw you closer to himself.

Finally, I think it's easy to grow impatient with those who suffer. I'm thinking especially of those with chronic pain or depression, or those whose lives seem to consist of one problem after another. In those cases, we just need to ask God for the grace to walk with them for the long mile. What was Christ's response to suffering? Compassion. He is now, and will remain, our model.

Finally, what's your hope for this book?

I hope this book will have a life of its own, encouraging sufferers the world over, whether in hospitals or in lonely houses. I can't be in all those places at once, comforting them as I'd like, but this book can. Most of all, I hope this book glorifies the name of Jesus who has redeemed me,

given me new life, and taught me how to sing my suffering.