

WHERE IS GOD?

In Pain and Suffering God is
Closer and More Loving Than
You Could Ever Imagine

John W. Nichols

WHERE IS GOD?: In Pain and Suffering God is Closer and More Loving
Than You Could Ever Imagine

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*Thank you, Trinna, for following the Spirit
with me, for pulling me out of my head to
laugh and play, for loving our family so well,
and for enduring alarms at 3:55 a.m. Thank
you most of all, sweet girl, for loving Jesus.*

—YOUR JOHN



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*For years to come, the debris of a convulsed
world will beset our steps.
It will require a purpose stronger than any
man and worthy of
all men to calm and inspirit us. A sane society
whose riches
are happy children, men and women, beautiful
with
peace and creative activity, is not going to be
ordained for us. We must make it ourselves.*

—HELEN KELLER
THE OPEN DOOR



Paradise Lost

What We've Always Wanted

IMAGINE A PERFECT WORLD. Where the evils of crime, hate, and envy are inconceivable—in fact, completely alien. There's no pain, sickness, disease, or disability. No stinging bugs, venomous, or bloodthirsty animals. There aren't even earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, or tornadoes.

In this imagined utopia, motives are genuine. No one has thoughts they can't tell others. We have no misunderstandings and don't need to pretend. Our best foot is always forward because both our feet are perfect. There's constant pleasure. People smile and laugh, freely and unashamedly. Joy overflows each person's heart. Everyone is known and loved. Peace covers the land.

Not only is this ideal society rid of selfishness, it's also rid of poverty. Resources overflow. Every need and want is met.

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People go to their jobs not merely to scrape by. Their reward is found in the enjoyment of work more than the paycheck. Occupations are easy, because people are passionate and fulfilled. In our perfect world, nobody's "workin' for the weekend."¹

Whether we recognize it or not, this is what each of our hearts cries for. Why don't we have it?

What We've Had As Long As We Can Remember

When we look at the real world, we see a blurred image of the perfect, tainted with all the opposite characteristics. In the best of times, imperfection lingers and calamity waits at the door. In the darkest times, we cling to the hope that disaster can only last so long.

Even attempting to lead a life of joy and selflessness is draining. Each heart instinctively knows our many anxieties are an injustice. But despite every effort, we suffer.

Faithful friends are rare. Community threatens to shun. We long to be known and accepted, even as we put up walls. Our goodness, we fear, is surely nullified by the hate, impatience, lust, and envy hidden within.

We have impure motives, dirty politics, depression, illness, betrayal, starvation, deformity, natural disasters, perversion, rage, chaos, war, and death—among many other problems. These are the atrocities our hearts cannot

understand, the horrors every person desperately wants to escape but has no idea how.

Humanity's made many attempts at solutions, but our problems persist mixed in with the answers. Still lone flowers push out of the asphalt. The starving inexplicably share their bread. Lows turn to highs and back again. We inevitably drink from a diluted, bitter-sweet mixture of heaven and hell on earth.

The Clue In Our Desire

Within our distress is a flickering reality. Every heart desires paradise. Deep down each of us demands things be set right inside and out. We want a place where we are at peace. We yearn for success, prosperity, and abundance of good things. There's an unending search for the fountain of youth where there is promised long life, filled with strength, health, beauty, and vigor. While we can barely conceive undying glee and laughter never squelched, we know we were made for it.

Why does our real world fall short of our dream? What in us longs for utopia? Where does this perpetual longing come from if we've never known its satisfaction?

If we're honest, half the time we don't even know exactly what we want. Despite our disappointment though, we continue to strive without reaching the goal. Only to find when we come close, the mark is moved. There is a clue

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hidden in all of this though. When our desires aren't met or pain overwhelms us—who do we blame?

The God Problem

In the moment of suffering, we feel we are on our own. Few understand what we are going through. We're helpless and hopeless. No one's there for us, or can help us in meaningful ways. But God could, so why doesn't He?

We wonder, "God, are You with me? And if You're here, do You care I'm hurting? Why did You let me go through this pain? Why aren't You doing something to stop this?"

People blame God for being absent, uncaring, and allowing or even causing disaster, sickness, and death. But it's interesting that we blame Him. Why do these thoughts about God come up? Why do we expect there to be an almighty presence who loves and cares enough to help? The fact that this is our default response proves His existence.

Even zealous believers see tragedy in another's life and think, God has a reason. They have concluded He is using evil for purposes far above our understanding. Catastrophic events get attributed as God working "for the greater good." Secretly, we avoid such thoughts because the road they lead down is too disturbing. Letting go of certain religious ideas and exploring other answers could unravel our whole approach to life so we avoid them as long as possible.

God's Sense of Humor

Now that I've gotten you thoroughly depressed, I want to lighten things up with a story. Let me set the stage: It was a beautiful day, I was in my early-twenties, walking in the park with two friends—but I had my own metaphorical storm-cloud. I was struggling with a revelation I'd had at church that morning. I felt like God communicated something for me to do, and it involved confessing a sin to someone I had wronged.

I was filled with a mixture of self-abasement, self-pity, and anxiety. My friends knew I was having an internal battle and were giving me some space. We were walking in the same direction, but they were a few feet ahead of me when I tripped, rolled past them, and at the end of my momentum stood up as if I had meant the acrobatic feat. We were all so surprised the only thing we could do was laugh. In fact—it was hard to stop laughing, which made me feel bad for feeling good.

A beam of sunshine broke through my gloom. In the midst of my trial it was possible to find joy. I just needed to open my eyes to see things through a positive light. I'm only human, far from perfect, but do I have to take that fact so seriously? God shook me out of my funk with a reminder to smile. It's all going to be okay.

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The Answer

I'll let you in on the answer to this book's question: God is close and loves you deeply. He only *seems* distant and aloof. I'm qualified to tell you this, because I've been "far" from God and am now "near." In the midst of overwhelming depression, loneliness, and pain, I experienced God turn my life around. Even as I hated Him for what I had concluded about life, He revealed Himself as good in ways I could not deny.

My focus on the negative in the first part of this introduction was to make a point most of us know all too well—we live in a broken world. Although this was all I could see at one time, my perspective has shifted. I'm more like Tigger than Eeyore now, but it's not because I ignore the pain and suffering around me. I've found there to be a true Light overcoming the darkness. I've encountered God and it was a surprisingly good experience. He's not to blame for our tragedies. In fact, He's the perfect representation of good and is at work in us and around us in amazing ways, beckoning us to join Him.

In this book, I'll share the story of God breaking down my wrong ideas and how He helped me see another perspective. I'll talk about the darkness in us and the world, as well as the Light, and how you can know God's goodness despite the struggles you're facing. My hope is you'll walk away with a peace that defies understanding.

You've had different experiences than mine, but I believe you're not reading this by accident; and God wants to help you in a similar way as He has me. He wants you to know: He's always been with you, desperately wanting to help, and never holding back His love.

—JOHN W. NICHOLS

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