

**What readers have said about *Where Is God When It Hurts?***

I know firsthand that pain and paralysis sometimes seem to push away the presence of God. To ask *Where Is God When It Hurts?* is honest, reasonable even. And thank the Lord, Philip puts our questions into perspective, helping us find out exactly where God really is when we hurt.

~ JONI EARECKSON TADA

I started to read it thinking I was going to read a pleasant little easy-to-read book on the subject of pain; I finished feeling as if I had read a classic. It probes aspects of pain that C. S. Lewis never touches and draws upon the lives of suffering saints from John Donne to Joni Eareckson Tada. But I was most impressed with Philip's honesty and willingness to admit the inadequacy of words to unravel problems that go back to the patriarch Job.

~ WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

I've read everything I can get my hands on about the problems of pain and evil, and this book is the clearest, most practical thing I've read.

~ KEITH MILLER

If I expected to find inside a shallow theoretical treatise unworthy of such a profound question, that's not what I found . . . by the time you get to the end of these chapters your heart is crying out, "Thank you, God, for pain!"

~ PAUL HARVEY

One of the most helpful treatments of the problem of evil that I've ever read . . . on a level that really speaks to people. If I were looking around for something to give to individuals who are going through travail or difficulty, this is the book I'd recommend.

~ DR. VERNON GROUNDS

What a book. A masterpiece. Complete, moving without waxing sentimental. Not the kind of book you'd expect to be unable to put down, but just that.

~ JERRY JENKINS, *MOODY MONTHLY*

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# PHILIP YANCEY

WHERE IS GOD  
WHEN  
IT HURTS?

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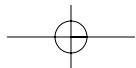
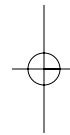
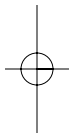
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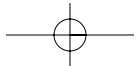
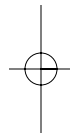
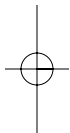
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To Dr. Paul Brand, who  
unselfishly shared with me  
a lifetime of medical and  
spiritual wisdom





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## PREFACE



There's a cardinal rule in book publishing that applies equally to brain surgery and auto mechanics: "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." Since people are still buying the original *Where Is God When It Hurts?* I may be breaking that rule by attempting a major revision.

I wrote *Where Is God When It Hurts?* back in the mid-1970s, when I was in my mid-twenties. In the years that have passed since then, I have never ceased thinking about the subject. Like a dog on a fresh spoor I keep circling around the problem of pain, searching for clues. In that time I have also heard from hundreds of readers, many of whom wrote wrenching letters describing their own odysseys with pain. For these reasons I felt it necessary to go back to a work I had completed long ago and bring it up to date.

Many biblical scholars date the book of Job as the oldest in the Bible, and it amazes me that the questions Job voiced so eloquently have not faded away. They have grown even louder and shriller over the centuries. A recent novel, *The Only Problem*, gets its title from a phrase in a conversation about how a good God can allow suffering. "It's the only problem, in fact, worth discussing," concludes the main character.

Another thing amazes me. Books on the problem of pain divide neatly into two groupings. The older ones, by people like Aquinas, Bunyan, Donne, Luther, Calvin, and Augustine, ungrudgingly accept pain and suffering as God's useful agents. These authors do not question God's actions. They merely try to "justify the ways of God to man." The authors wrote with confidence, as if the sheer force of their reasoning could calm emotional responses to suffering.

Modern books on pain make a sharp contrast. Their authors assume that the amount of evil and suffering in the world cannot be matched with the traditional view of a good and loving God. God is thus bumped from a "friend of the court" position to the box reserved for the

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defendant. “How can you possibly justify yourself, God?” these angry moderns seem to say. Many of them adjust their notion of God, either by redefining his love or by questioning his power to control evil.

When you read the two categories of books side by side, the change in tone is quite striking. It’s as if we in modern times think we have a corner on the suffering market. Do we forget that Luther and Calvin lived in a world without ether and penicillin, when life expectancy averaged thirty years, and that Bunyan and Donne wrote their greatest works, respectively, in a jail and a plague quarantine room? Ironically, the modern authors—who live in princely comfort, toil in climate-controlled offices, and hoard elixirs in their medicine cabinets—are the ones smoldering with rage.

After reading several shelffuls of such books I asked myself, “Does the world really need another book on the problem of pain?” As I spent time among suffering people, however, I had to conclude yes. I learned that many books on pain seem oddly irrelevant to suffering people. For them the problem of pain is not a theoretical problem, a theology game of lining up all the appropriate syllogisms. It is a problem of relationship. Many suffering people want to love God, but cannot see past their tears. They feel hurt and betrayed. Sadly, the church often responds with more confusion than comfort.

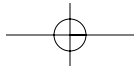
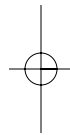
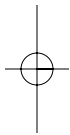
Fifteen years ago, at an age when I had no right to tackle the daunting problem of pain, I wrote *Where Is God When It Hurts?* for those people. Partly because I have heard from so many of them, I have now revised and expanded that book. In a sense, this new edition represents a dialogue with my readers, the next step in my own pilgrimage.

I have especially expanded the section “How Can We Cope with Pain?” because I believe God has given the church a mandate of representing his love to a suffering world. We usually think of the problem of pain as a question we ask of God, but it is also a question he asks of us. How do we respond to hurting people?

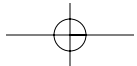
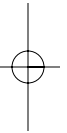
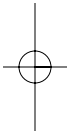
In this revision, I have drawn from several of my articles published in *Christianity Today* as well as the booklet *Helping the Hurting*, published by Multnomah Press. I am grateful to them for permission to incorporate that material.

*Think too  
of all who suffer  
as if  
you  
shared their pain.*

**HEBREWS 13:3  
(J. B. PHILLIPS)**



WHERE<sup>IS</sup> GOD  
WHEN  
IT HURTS?



CHAPTER 1

## A PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY



*Meanwhile, where is God? This is one of the most disquieting symptoms. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing Him, if you turn to Him then with praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to Him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away.*

C. S. LEWIS  
*A Grief Observed*

I feel helpless around people in great pain. Helpless, and also guilty. I stand beside them, watching facial features contort and listening to the sighs and moans, deeply aware of the huge gulf between us. I cannot penetrate their suffering, I can only watch. Whatever I attempt to say seems weak and stiff, as if I'd memorized the lines for a school play.

One day I received a frantic plea for help from my close friends John and Claudia Claxton. Newlyweds in their early twenties, they were just beginning life together in the Midwest. I had watched in amazement as the experience of romantic love utterly transformed John Claxton. Two years of engagement to Claudia had melted his cynicism and softened his hard edges. He became an optimist, and now his letters to me were usually bubbly with enthusiasm about his young marriage.

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But one letter from John alarmed me as soon as I opened it. Errors and scratches marred his usually neat handwriting. He explained, "Excuse my writing . . . I guess it shows how I'm fumbling for words. I don't know what to say." The Claxtons' young marriage had run into a roadblock far bigger than both of them. Claudia had been diagnosed with Hodgkin's disease, cancer of the lymph glands, and was given only a fifty percent chance to live.

Within a week surgeons had cut her from armpit to belly, removing every visible trace of the disease. She was left stunned and weak, lying in a hospital bed.

At the time, ironically, John was working as a chaplain's assistant in a local hospital. His compassion for other patients dipped dangerously. "In some ways," he told me, "I could understand better what other patients were undergoing. But I didn't care any more. I only cared about Claudia. I wanted to yell at them, 'Stop that sniveling, you idiots! You think you've got problems—my wife may be dying right now!'"

Though both John and Claudia were strong Christians, an unexpected anger against God surged up—anger against a beloved partner who had betrayed them. "God, why us?" they cried. "Have you teasingly doled out one happy year of marriage to set us up for this?"

Cobalt treatments took their toll on Claudia's body. Beauty fled her almost overnight. She felt and looked weary, her skin darkened, her hair fell out. Her throat was raw, and she regurgitated nearly everything she ate. Doctors had to suspend treatment for a time when her swollen throat could no longer make swallowing motions.

When the radiation treatments resumed, she was periodically laid out flat on a table, naked. She could do nothing but lie still and listen to the whir and click of the machinery as it bombarded her with invisible particles, each dose aging her body by months. As she lay in that chill steel room, Claudia would think about God and about her suffering.

### **Claudia's Visitors**

Claudia had hoped that Christian visitors would comfort her by bringing some perspective on what she was going through. But their voices proved confusing, not consoling.

## 1. A PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

A deacon from her church solemnly advised her to reflect on what God was trying to teach her. "Surely something in your life must displease God," he said. "Somewhere, you must have stepped out of his will. These things don't just *happen*. God uses circumstances to warn us, and to punish us. What is he telling you?"

A few days later Claudia was surprised to see a woman from church whom she barely knew. Evidently, this plump, scatterbrained widow had adopted the role of professional cheerleader to the sick. She brought flowers, sang hymns, and stayed long enough to read some happy psalms about brooks running and mountains clapping their hands. Whenever Claudia tried to talk about her illness or prognosis, the woman quickly changed the subject, trying to combat the suffering with cheer and goodwill. But she only visited once, and after a while the flowers faded, the hymns seemed dissonant, and Claudia was left to face a new day of pain.

Another woman dropped by, a faithful follower of television faith healers. Exuding confidence, she assured Claudia that healing was her only escape. When Claudia told her about the deacon's advice, this woman nearly exploded. "Sickness is never God's will!" she exclaimed. "Haven't you read the Bible? The Devil stalks us like a roaring lion, but God will deliver you if you can muster up enough faith to believe you'll be healed. Remember, Claudia, faith can move mountains, and that includes Hodgkin's disease. Simply name your promise, in faith, and then claim the victory."

The next few mornings, as Claudia lay in the sterile cobalt treatment room, she tried to "muster up" faith. She wondered if she even understood the procedure. She did not question God's supernatural power, but how to go about convincing God of her sincerity? Faith wasn't like a muscle that could be enlarged through rehabilitation exercises. It was slippery, intangible, impossible to grasp. The whole notion of mustering up faith seemed awfully exhausting, and she could never decide what it really meant.

Perhaps the most "spiritual" woman in Claudia's church brought along some books about praising God for everything that happens. "Claudia, you need to come to the place where you can say, 'God, I *love* you for making me suffer like this. It is your will, and you know

## WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?

what's best for me. And I praise you for loving me enough to allow me to experience this. In all things, including this, I give thanks.'"

As Claudia pondered the words, her mind filled with rather grotesque images of God. She envisioned a figure in the shape of a troll, big as the universe, who took delight in squeezing helpless humans between his fingernails, pulverizing them with his fists, dashing them against sharp stones. The figure would torture these humans until they cried out, "God, I love you for doing this to me!" The idea repulsed Claudia, and she decided she could not worship or love such a God.

Yet another visitor, Claudia's pastor, made her feel she was on a select mission. He said, "Claudia, you have been appointed to suffer for Christ, and he will reward you. God chose you because of your great strength and integrity, just as he chose Job, and he is using you as an example to others. Their faith may increase because of your response. You should feel privileged, not bitter. What we see as adversity, God sees as opportunity." He told her to think of herself as a track star, and to view adversity as the series of hurdles she would need to leap over on the way to the victory circle.

Sometimes the notion of being a privileged martyr appealed to Claudia, in a self-pitying sort of way. Other times, when the pain crescendoed, when she vomited up food, when her facial features aged, Claudia would call out, "God, why me? There are millions of Christians stronger and more honorable than I—couldn't you choose one of them instead?" She didn't feel like a track star at all, and she wondered why God would deliberately place hurdles in the path of someone he loved.

I, too, visited Claudia, and found her desperately confused by all these contradictory words. She repeated for me the advice given her by well-meaning Christians, and I listened to her bewildered response. Which of these lessons was she supposed to be learning? How could she have more faith? Who should she listen to? In the midst of much confusion, Claudia had one certainty: her happy world with John was disintegrating. Above all, she didn't want that to end.

I had little advice for Claudia that day. In fact, I came away with even more questions. Why was she lying in a hospital bed while I

## 1. A PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

stood beside her, healthy? Something inside me recoiled as I heard her repeat the clichéd comments from her visitors. Is Christianity supposed to make a sufferer feel even worse?

At the time I visited Claudia, I was working for *Campus Life* magazine while also moonlighting as a free-lance journalist. In a short span I wrote six "Drama in Real Life" stories for *Reader's Digest*. I interviewed a young Canadian couple who had been mauled by a grizzly bear. Although both survived, the young man lost one eye, and no amount of plastic surgery could hide the scars across his face. In another city, two young adults told me the story of a childhood camping trip taken with their father up Mount Rainier. Caught in a blizzard, they frantically dug a snow cave. Their father, lying protectively across the face of the cave, froze to death overnight.

All these people repeated their own versions of the cacophony of voices from Christian "comforters." One amputee told me, "My religious friends were the most depressing, irritating part of the entire experience." That pattern disturbed me greatly. Something was wrong. A faith founded on the Great Physician should bring peace, not confusion, at a time of crisis.

Why do people have to suffer so? What does the Bible really say? Because of the questions that arose from my contacts with Claudia\* and others like her, I began a quest that culminated in this book. I have looked for a message we Christians can give to people who are suffering. At the same time, I've hunted for a message that can strengthen my own faith when I suffer. Where is God when it hurts? Is he trying to tell us something through our pain?

### A Personal Approach

After an extensive tour of the United States, the well-known German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke was asked what he had observed as the greatest deficiency among American Christians. He replied, "They have an inadequate view of suffering." I have come to agree with him.

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\*Claudia's dilemma was eventually resolved when the cobalt treatments effectively destroyed the cancer cells. She's had no recurrence of the disease.

## WHERE IS GOD WHEN IT HURTS?

That deficiency stands out as a huge blemish to the non-Christian world. I've asked college students what they have against Christianity, and most of them echo variations on the theme of suffering: "I can't believe in a God who would allow Auschwitz and Cambodia"; "My teenage sister died of leukemia despite all the Christians' prayers"; "One-third of the world went to bed hungry last night—how can you reconcile that with Christian love?"

No other human experience provokes such an urgent response. No one sits in smoky coffeehouses late into the night debating the cosmic implications of the sense of smell or taste. *Smell! Why this strange sensation? What did God intend? Why was scent apportioned so capriciously, lavished on roses but not on oxygen? And why must humankind get by with one-eighth the sensory ability of the dog?* Oddly, I hear no one debating "the problem of pleasure"; why do we take for granted sensations of pleasure but react so violently against pain?

As I did library research on the problem of pain, I discovered that many great philosophers, otherwise sympathetic to Christian principles and ethics, have stumbled over this problem of pain and suffering, ultimately rejecting Christianity because of it. C. E. M. Joad wrote, "What, then, are the arguments which for me have told so strongly against the religious view of the universe? . . . First, there was the difficulty presented by the facts of pain and evil."<sup>1</sup> Other philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell and Voltaire, share Joad's complaint.

The messy problem of pain and suffering keeps popping up despite erudite attempts to explain it away. The great British writer C. S. Lewis offered perhaps the most articulate treatment of the subject in this century with *The Problem of Pain*, written at the height of his intellectual powers. But years later, after his own wife died of bone cancer, Lewis wrote another book, *A Grief Observed*, which he published under a pseudonym. It covers the same topic, but in a very different way. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter reveals, Lewis's confidence had been shattered, his emotions stretched to the breaking point—stretched beyond the breaking point. "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you," he said.

As in Hercules's battle against the Hydra, all our attempts to chop

## 1. A PROBLEM THAT WON'T GO AWAY

through agnostic arguments are met with writhing new examples of suffering. Novelist Peter De Vries has called the problem of pain “the question mark turned like a fishhook in the human heart.” And too often the Christian defense sounds like a red-faced, foot-shuffling, lowered-head apology.

“The problem of pain” represents a profound riddle, and the philosophers’ approach to the subject sometimes takes the form of abstract reasoning, such as you might find in a textbook on pure mathematics. I will not attempt to address philosophers with this book; others with far more training have done that. Rather, I have tried to keep before me the scene of my friend Claudia Claxton lying on a hospital bed. Most of our problems with pain are not exercises in mental gymnastics. They are problems like Claudia’s: the loss of youth, an ulcerous throat, the prospect of a new marriage gouged by death, the paralyzing fear of the unknown. Claudia heard much conflicting advice about these problems from fellow Christians. What can we believe with confidence?

To prepare for this book, I talked to Christians who suffer at a level far worse than most of us will ever experience. For some of them, pain nearly defines life. It is the first sensation to greet them in the morning and the last they feel before drifting off to sleep, if they are lucky enough to fall asleep despite it. Ironically, I also spent time among people with leprosy, who feel no pain physiologically but desperately wish they could. With such people as my guides, I have entered the world of the sufferer to find out what difference it makes to be a Christian there.

First, I will examine pain biologically—through the microscope, you might say—to see what role it plays in life. Then, stepping back, I will look at our planet as a whole, asking what God is up to. Is suffering God’s one great goof? And, finally, I will ask what response we can give when suffering strikes, and how we can also reach out to others.

Perhaps the next time I’m sick, when the flu hits and I toss in bed, fighting off waves of nausea, perhaps then my conclusions about pain will offer no solace. But as a Christian trying to fathom what God is up to in this world, I have learned a great deal. And as I’ve come to better understand the suffering of this world, my attitude toward God has changed dramatically.

