

Rest for the Weary

On Hardship, the Silence of the Why, and the Christ Who Gives Rest

There are stretches in the Christian life when everything seems to go wrong at once. Not one trial, arriving alone and departing before the next, but many at the same time, each one landing before the last can be dealt with, until the days stop feeling like separate difficulties and start feeling like a single sustained one. None of the pieces alone would be worth writing about. Together they can feel like a pressure cooker, every source of strain sealed into the same pot at the same time, squeezing out whatever composure a person had left. Some believers know a heavier version still, where the collapse is not an accumulation of small things but one great blow, and the life that was standing in the morning is rubble by night.

In the middle of that squeeze, a particular thought tends to present itself, and it sounds reasonable. Maybe all of this is a sign. Maybe the accumulating resistance means the path itself is wrong, that a door is closing, that the calling being pursued was never the calling at all. It is an easy conclusion to draw, and it is very often dead wrong, for the pursuit groaning under all that strain is frequently the one place the week still makes sense, the oasis in the middle of the trial rather than the cause of it. But the ease with which the thought arrives deserves a hard look, because it rests on an assumption we rarely notice we are making: that suffering is a verdict, a report card on our decisions, a signal that we have failed somewhere and something needs to change. Scripture refuses to grant that assumption. Job's friends built their entire counsel on it, thirty-some chapters of insisting that his ruin must be the harvest of some hidden sin, and when God finally speaks, He does not commend their theology. He condemns it: *"My anger burns*

against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right” (Job 42:7, ESV). A believer can be walking faithfully, doing the very things God has called him to do, and still watch everything break at once. The pile of broken things is not a report card.

What is it, then? It is ordained. Our trials do not leak into our lives through some gap in God’s attention; they are planned, appointed seasons that He has willed to use for our growth and to draw us nearer to Himself, decreed by the same hand that decreed our redemption. That truth does not make the trials lighter, but it changes what we do inside them. If hardship were a verdict, the right response would be to fix ourselves or change course. Because it is ordained, the right response is to rest more deeply in the God who ordained it, and to cast on Christ everything the season produces, the worry and the anger and the fear alike. Scripture does not look away from how hard that is. It fills whole books with the voices of people whose lives collapsed without explanation, and it lets them speak in their grief before it speaks over it. God did not inspire a Bible of untroubled people. He inspired Naomi, and David, and Job, and He preserved their darkest sentences on purpose, because He knew His people would one day need to find their own voice already written down. What follows is a walk through three of those voices, and then to the Voice behind them all. Because the answer Scripture finally gives to the sufferer is not an explanation. It is a Person, and the rest we are looking for is located in Him.

I. The Bitter and the Blessed

Naomi lost everything a woman of her world could lose. Famine drove her from her home. Her husband died in a foreign land. Then both of her sons died, and she was left with two widowed daughters-in-law and a road back to a town she had left full. When she arrived, the women of Bethlehem hardly recognized her, and her answer to them is one of the rawest confessions in Scripture: *“Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty”* (Ruth 1:20–21).

Notice what Naomi does not do. She does not deny God’s sovereignty. She attributes her ruin directly to His hand, and she is not wrong to do so; her theology holds even while her heart is breaking. Notice also what the text does not do. It never charges Naomi with a fault that earned the famine or the graves. There is no hidden sin uncovered in chapter four that explains chapter one. Her losses were not discipline she could have avoided by living differently, and the narrator feels no need to justify them. But notice what she cannot do. She cannot see the ending. She calls herself empty while standing next to Ruth, the daughter-in-law whose loyalty God would use to restore her house. She declares the story over in the very chapter where God is beginning it. Within a few short chapters Ruth will marry Boaz, and the same women who heard Naomi rename herself Mara will place a grandson in her lap and say that he *“shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age”* (Ruth 4:15). That child was Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. Naomi’s emptiness sat inside the lineage of Christ, and she could not see one inch of it from where she stood.

Flavel understood this about providence, that its wisdom is almost never legible from the middle of it. “Providence is wiser than you,” he writes, “and you may be confident it has suited

all things better to your eternal good than you could do had you been left to your own option.”¹ Naomi, given her own option, would have written a story where her husband lived and her sons grew old in Bethlehem. It would have been a kinder story to live through, and a smaller one. The story God wrote ran through her ruin to a king, and through that king to the King, and gathered up her bitterness into a redemption wider than her own life. She was not wrong that the hand of the Almighty was in her affliction. She was wrong about what the hand was doing.

This is the first comfort Scripture offers the one whose life has collapsed: your reading of the story is not the final reading. Naomi’s grief was real, and God did not scold her for it; He recorded it. But her verdict was premature. We judge the story from inside a single chapter. God writes from the whole book, and He has never once ended a believer’s story at the grave of their hopes.

II. The Burden and the Bearer

There is a particular grief that Scripture treats as its own category, and that is the grief of being wounded not by an enemy but by someone who was supposed to be safe. David knew it. In Psalm 55 he writes, *“For it is not an enemy who taunts me, then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me, then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together”* (Psalm 55:12–14). An enemy’s attack bruises. A companion’s betrayal cuts to a place armor never covered, because trust is precisely the place where we take the armor off. And notice that the wound is not evidence against David. The trust he extended was not naivety to be repented of, and the betrayal was not a consequence he manufactured. The sin in Psalm 55 belongs entirely to

¹John Flavel, *The Mystery of Providence* (1678; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1963), 121.

the friend who broke covenant, and the psalm never once suggests that David should search himself for the reason he was wounded. Being sinned against is not a sin.

David does not pretend the wound is smaller than it is. He says his heart is in anguish within him, that fear and trembling have come upon him, that horror overwhelms him, and then he says the thing that most sufferers are afraid to admit they feel: *“Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest”* (Psalm 55:4–6). The longing to simply escape, to be anywhere but inside this life, is not unbelief. It is in the Psalter. God gave His people a hymnal that includes the desire to run, and He gave it through a man He Himself called a man after His own heart. The believer who wakes up wishing he could fly away from his own life has not left the company of the saints. He is standing in the middle of it.

But David does not end where the wound is, and where he lands matters. *“Cast your burden on the LORD, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved”* (Psalm 55:22). The word is cast, not carry. David had every worldly reason to seek his relief elsewhere, in vengeance, in vindication, in the loyalty of the men who remained to him. He commends none of it. The burden of a broken trust is too heavy for any human shoulder, including our own, and David’s counsel from inside the wound is to throw it onto the only One who cannot betray. Faithfulness is not merely something God does; it is what He is. *“If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself”* (2 Timothy 2:13). Every human promise rests on the character of the one who made it, which is why human promises break. God’s promises rest on the same foundation, which is why His cannot.

Peter carries David’s counsel into the new covenant and adds the reason that makes it bearable: *“casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you”* (1 Peter 5:7). Because He cares for you. The invitation to cast the burden is not the offer of a warehouse that stores

what we cannot lift. It is the care of a Person who wants what is crushing you because you are His.

III. The Silence and the Sight

Job's collapse was total, and it came in a single day. Messengers arrived one on the heels of another, and by nightfall his wealth was gone, his servants were dead, and all ten of his children were buried under the ruins of a house. He had done nothing to cause any of it. The book says so in its first verse, and God says so twice, calling him blameless and upright before the first blow ever fell. Whatever God was doing in Job's life, He was not correcting a man who had drifted; the suffering fell on a man who was standing exactly where he was supposed to be. And here is the hard truth at the center of the book that bears his name: Job asked why for more than thirty chapters, and God never told him. The reader is shown the heavenly council in chapters one and two. Job never is. He goes to his grave, as far as the text tells us, without ever learning the reason.

When God finally speaks out of the whirlwind, He does not explain. He reveals. He walks Job through creation, through the sea shut behind doors and the storehouses of the snow and the ordinances of the heavens, question after question that Job cannot answer, and the effect on Job is not that his questions are resolved but that they are quieted: *"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes"* (Job 42:5–6). Job does not get the why. He gets the Who, and it is enough. It is more than enough; it is the thing his why had been reaching for the whole time without knowing it.

This is a severe mercy, but it is a mercy. If God had handed Job the explanation, Job would have gone home leaning on the explanation, and explanations are a thin place to rest a life.

Instead God gave Job Himself, and Job went home leaning on God. The deepest need of the sufferer is not information about the trial. It is the presence of the Lord inside it. Explanations run out. Circumstances turn, and then turn again. But the God who answered Job out of the storm is the same God who says to every one of His children, *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5). We are not promised the why. We are promised the Who, and the Who is better, because a reason can only satisfy the mind, while the presence of God sustains the whole man.

There is one more thing in Job worth carrying out of the book. In the depth of his agony, with no explanation on offer and his friends’ theology failing him, Job says something he could not possibly have measured at the time: *“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth”* (Job 19:25). The sufferer with no answers reached forward through the darkness and took hold of a Redeemer. He did not know that Redeemer’s name. We do.

IV. The Sorrow and the Savior

All of this would remain cold doctrine if it stopped here, because a sufferer does not finally need examples. He needs a Savior. And the glory of the gospel is that the God who governs our hardships is not a God who observes them from a distance. He entered them. Isaiah calls Him *“a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”* (Isaiah 53:3), and the Gospels bear the title out in detail. Jesus was betrayed by a friend who had shared His bread, and the betrayal came with a kiss. He was abandoned by every companion He had in the hour He needed them most. He was falsely accused, publicly shamed, stripped of everything down to the clothing on His back, and He was innocent of all of it. Whatever category of undeserved suffering a believer can name, his Lord has stood inside it first.

And from the cross He took up the sufferer's own question. *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46). Every child of God who has ever cried why into the dark should stop and hear that. The Son of God asked it first, and He asked it in our place. There on the cross the why had a real answer, and the answer was us: He was forsaken because our sin was upon Him, forsaken so that our why, however long it goes unanswered, will never end in forsakenness. The worst thing that could ever happen to a child of God, abandonment by God Himself, has already happened to Christ instead. That is the unbreakable floor underneath every collapsing floor. We may lose much. We cannot lose Him, because He was lost for us.

This is why the writer of Hebrews can say, *"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Hebrews 4:15), and then, in the very next breath, extend the invitation: *"Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16). The throne we approach in our ruin is occupied by Someone who has stood in the ruin Himself. His sympathy is not the sympathy of a spectator who imagines how it must feel. It is the sympathy of a fellow sufferer who remembers, and who now holds all authority in heaven and on earth, so that His compassion is never helpless and His help is never cold.

V. The Cistern and the Fountain

So where does the weary soul go? The world has its offers, and they are not hard to find. Distraction, until the quiet comes back. Bitterness dressed up as strength. The approval and sympathy of people, which is real but runs out. The hope that if the circumstances can just be rearranged, if the situation resolves, if the vindication comes, then the ache will finally quiet

down. Every one of these is a cistern, and Jeremiah told us long ago what cisterns do: *“for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water”* (Jeremiah 2:13). The tragedy of worldly comfort is not that it is forbidden. It is that it is empty. It cannot hold what we pour into it, and the soul that keeps returning to it comes away thirstier each time.

Against every broken cistern stands one standing invitation: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”* (Matthew 11:28). Read it slowly. He does not say come to answers, though He is truth itself. He does not say come to better circumstances, though every circumstance is in His hand. He says come to me. The rest is located in a Person, and the Person is offering Himself. His love is not a resource He dispenses; it is His own heart opened to the weary, a love that Paul says *“surpasses knowledge”* (Ephesians 3:19) and from which nothing in all creation can separate us, *“neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come”* (Romans 8:38). Things present and things to come. The wreckage of today and the uncertainty of tomorrow are both named in that list, and both are declared powerless to pry His people out of His love.

Rutherford, who buried children and lost his pulpit and wrote his best letters from an exile he did not choose, testified from inside that love: *“I see grace groweth best in winter.”*² He was not romanticizing the winter. He was reporting what he found there, that the seasons which strip everything else away are the seasons in which Christ becomes most real, because for the first time He is all that is left, and the soul discovers that He was always all that was needed. This is what our hardships are ordained to teach us, not that the things we lost did not matter, but that the One we cannot lose matters more, and that He is enough when everything else is gone. Paul

²Samuel Rutherford, *Letters of Samuel Rutherford* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), Letter to Lady Culross.

learned the same lesson under his thorn and recorded the answer he was given: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

VI. The Ruin and the Rest

Naomi found that her emptiness was not the end of her story, and that the hand she thought was against her had been writing redemption the whole time. David found that a burden cast on the Lord is a burden carried, even when the burden was put there by a friend. Job found that the presence of God is better than the answers of God, and reached through his darkness to a living Redeemer. And all three of them, whether they could see it or not, were resting on the same foundation we rest on now: Christ, who was broken so that the broken could be made whole, who was betrayed so that the betrayed would have a Companion who understands, who was forsaken so that we never will be, and who stands at the door of every ruined life and says, come to me, and I will give you rest.

None of them suffered because they had failed. Naomi was not being punished, David had not earned his wound, and Job was blameless when the messengers arrived. Their hardships were not verdicts, and neither are ours. They were ordained, seasons appointed by the God who was already planning redemption in Naomi’s famine, already sustaining David under his burden, already standing as Job’s living Redeemer before Job could see Him. When everything goes wrong at once, the pile of broken things is not God’s assessment of your life, and the way through it is not to find the flaw and fix it, nor to conclude that the path must be wrong. The way through it is to come to Him, and to keep casting on Christ everything the season produces, until the season has done what He ordained it to do.

He keeps that promise. He is keeping it now, in the middle of the chapter, before the why is answered and before the story turns, because the rest He gives was never waiting on the circumstances. It was only ever waiting on the coming.

*"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls."*

Matthew 11:28–29