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God,
Where Are
You?

**A new perspective on life's most
bewildering times**

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THE HIDDEN TREASURE IN SUFFERING
by M. Basilea Schlink (96 pages)

READY WHEN THE MASTER CALLS
The Story of Sister Andrea (80 pages)

THE LORD IS MY INHERITANCE: A Compass in Times of Testing
by S. Joela Krüger (16 pages)

GOD, WHERE ARE YOU?

A new perspective on life's most bewildering times

'It's all God's fault!' 'Is that supposed to be a God of love?' 'Where was God in Auschwitz?' 'Where was he in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?' 'God, where are you?' Questions we hear almost daily, and perhaps they are even echoed in our own minds as tragedy strikes or problems pile up in our lives.

There are only a few places in the Bible that give us a 'peek behind the scenes,' a rare sense of the hidden purpose behind life situations which leave us feeling bewildered. And yet these few verses give us a vital key, a key that can unlock the seemingly incomprehensible.

Jesus knew that his Passion would be the severest trial his disciples would ever face, and he repeatedly sought to prepare them for it. That's why he had one last talk with the disciple destined to lead the church – Peter. He could see that Peter's personality and leadership position made him especially vulnerable to attack. And so he warned him in words that should have made the seriousness of the situation clear: 'Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail.' (Luke 22:31-32) The light of truth throws the coming trial into stark relief as Jesus names God's archenemy. Satan has just one aim: to bring us down. But he will not succeed, for the Lord has said, 'But I have prayed for you.'

Someone you don't speak about

It's not popular to think of Satan as a person these days. It sounds like something from the Middle Ages and smacks of fundamentalism. Surely sin, Satan, death and hell are topics that are best avoided; after all, couldn't it be misunderstood as threatening people? But Jesus tackles these uncomfortable topics in all their seriousness on more than one occasion. It would be a big mistake not to listen to what he has to say.

So how does the Bible describe God's adversary? He is the prince of this world, the serpent, accuser, deceiver, dragon, devil, liar and murderer. Leave him out of the picture and our image of God becomes distorted and perverted. The Father who was so full of love, goodness, mercy and faithfulness takes on, in our perception, increasingly unloving and cruel characteristics. We end up with the verdict: it's all God's fault. What a triumph for the enemy! And what a grief for our Father's heart.

Heaven's council

'Satan has asked to sift you' – that's how the Fall came about, and that's how we fall into sin today. There's an example in the Old Testament that illustrates this point in detail and can give insight as to why God's most faithful servants are often targeted for such a 'sifting'. In the book of Job we find a vivid description of the lead-up to such a time of hardship: a meeting of heaven's council where a man close to God's heart is the subject of debate. It brings to mind 1 Corinthians 4:9, where we are described as being a spectacle before angels and men – the visible and the invisible world. God takes delight in his servant Job. In human terms, Job is his pride and joy.

Why Satan has access to the heavenly realms, we don't know. But what we do know is that it won't always be that way. 'The dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.' And then heaven breaks out in rejoicing: '... for the accuser of our brethren, who accused them before our God day and night, has been cast down.' (Revelation 12:7-10 NKJV) Yet we also know that Satan is 'filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short' (Revelation 12:12).

Piety without payoffs?

It's important for us to realise that Satan is the one who raises the challenge against Job with his provocative 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' (Job 1:9). This is a crucial point. As long as our love and obedience in serving God are rewarded with blessing, it's not so difficult for us to follow him. But only when our love for God is put to the test can it be proved real. Only a love free from mixed motives is genuine, pure and honest.

God allows Job's righteousness to be tested, but he reserves the right to say how far. He sets the boundaries and they are not to be crossed. The enemy is given access to areas where God has promised to bless us – our possessions, family and health are affected or even taken away from us. Arenas of blessing become arenas of testing. Suddenly it's as if the Father, who showers us with his love and goodness, has turned away from us, and we struggle to understand why.

Lord, where are you?

It could be that despite faithfully making contributions for God's Kingdom and being careful and honest with our finances, we find ourselves in financial difficulties – we are fighting a losing battle. Or our family breaks apart under the pressures of today's society and we 'lose' our children, despite having done all we could. Or we are plagued with health problems – one thing after the other. We can almost hear Job's wife saying, 'Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!' (Job 2:9). Our heart cries out to God, *Where are you? Have you forsaken me? Where did I go wrong that all this is happening to me?*

Jesus, Son of the living God, cried out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' as he bore our punishment on the cross. Mocking voices surrounded him: 'Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God! He saved others, but he can't save himself! He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him!' (Matthew 27:40 ff).

Only a love that is pure will stand the test; the love that Jesus won for us at Calvary. Only this love always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. This love is as strong as death; a blazing fire that many waters cannot quench (see Song of Solomon 8:6-7). Only this love, described in 1 Corinthians 13, never fails. It doesn't cease when all comforts are taken away, but continues even when darkness covers the land, the earth quakes and the rocks burst apart (Matthew 27:45,52). It is the love of Jesus, which he has promised us for every dark stretch we go through. The powers of hell raged in full force against Jesus to the very end – and we, as his followers, can't expect everything to be plain sailing.

Knowing him

It's worth noticing how God responds to Job in his distress. He doesn't answer any of his questions, legitimate as they are. There's no mention of what Job's been going through; it's almost as if it had all gone unnoticed. Yet he answers Job's questions by giving him a deeper revelation of himself; a revelation that overshadows everything else. All the questions and all the pain melt away before this revelation of the Lord. Now Job, totally convicted and shaken to the core, can only reply: 'I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.' (Job 42:2,5-6)

Job knew nothing of God's love as revealed on the cross of Calvary. The only revelation he had was of God as the majestic and mighty Creator. Yet this was enough to bring him to repentance. Shouldn't it be much easier for us?

In areas of Europe that are predominantly Catholic, you'll often find a wayside cross on a house wall or in a scenic spot. Beneath one of these is an inscription:

*In the beauty of nature we trace God's hand;
but would you see his greatness,
at his cross take your stand.*

The greatest of all wonders lies in Jesus' wounds. It is there that the tormenting question 'God, where are you?' disappears. It is there that we see the fatherly love of God in the crucified Son – full of compassion and rich in mercy. When we come to know him as the crucified Lord of Calvary we are brought to repentance and so to a new and deeper union with our Lord.

This is heart knowledge, not head knowledge. We read in Hosea 2:19-20, 'And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.' (RSV) These verses express the incredible love and affection that God has for his chosen people, which he also extends to us. As we experience his judgment and his grace, we learn to know and love him more deeply – and that is the greatest of all gifts. Out of this intimate and loving relationship will grow a trusting surrender. Then we will still be able to understand his heart even when we don't understand his ways.

Knowing him – that was the Apostle Paul's sole aim. It meant so much to him that he now regarded everything he had once valued as worthless, even as rubbish, for: 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death' (Philippians 3:10). The knowledge of his Lord that Paul seeks reaches its climax, not in Jesus' resurrection power, but in the fellowship of his sufferings. And he does not stop short of desiring to become like him in his death. This is the language of a love that is passionate.

A lesson for the end times

We too are to share in this deeper knowledge and purity of love, for the end times will bring varying degrees of hardship for us all. Intimacy with the Lord will enable us not only to endure the tough times, but to come through them as a radiant bride going forth to meet her bridegroom.

One of Satan's major tactics in the last days will be to undermine our faith in God's love. It's in his interests that we have an unbalanced view of God, taking the line that God doesn't want us to suffer, that all suffering has to be 'prayed and believed away'. This deflects our attention from God's purposes in times of testing. And when, despite much prayer, there is no healing, no solution, we can be tempted to despair and feel condemned: *You don't have enough faith; unrepented sin is blocking God's blessing; you're being punished by God.* And the blessing that such trials can bring remains undiscovered.

Nothing – and yet everything

An artist by the name of Hans Lang gives us a telling example of a modern Job:

Russia, 1943: I was lodging in his cabin. There was something special about this elderly Russian man – it was refreshing to spend time with him in those days of battle, suffering and death. I asked if I might sketch him – for in painting a portrait one discovers the secrets that lie behind a human face. And as I did so, he revealed the paradox of his life. He was 80 years old, a former czarist officer and wealthy landowner, married with seven sons and five daughters. He and his whole family had been exiled to Siberia for 27 years, where his wife and seven of his children died. The remaining five he had lost in this war. He turned down my offer for him to join us when we went home. 'What more have I to lose? I've owned a lot. I've been through all the heights and depths of life. I've got nothing left – except this...' Reaching into his pocket he brought out, wrapped in a cloth, a crucifix. 'This is all that remains. It's nothing – and yet it's everything.'

As the story of Job demonstrates, God doesn't create or bring about suffering. But in his permissive will, it can serve a wonderful purpose: that our love for him be proved genuine. In a day when the love of many has

grown cold, and even many Christians are ultimately still living for themselves, God seeks those whose love has been tested and found true. What must such love mean to him!

Love tested by fire

Job's experiences can also give us insight into the present world situation. Unless we keep God's adversary in view, we'll never be able to understand the conflict surrounding Israel or get the right perspective on the irrational hatred of this nation that is on the increase worldwide. Justifiably, we ask how the Holocaust could happen in a civilized nation like Germany, a nation with a strong Christian heritage. This, in fact, should wake us up to our own susceptibility. We are all in danger of being taken in by the 'father of lies' and following him unquestioningly. Job's story provides us with a backdrop which explains the blindness of our nations and the blindness of the church.

According to Scripture, the time for 'destroying those who destroy the earth' is near (Revelation 11:18). In Luke 17, Jesus reminds us of the days of Noah and of Sodom and Gomorrah: judgment is impending. God is love – but he is also holy, a consuming fire. His love and his holiness cannot be separated. If the approaching hardships were not to be shortened, not even the elect would survive (Matthew 24:22). None of us can simply assume that we'll be raptured away before the great tribulation begins. Love must be proved in the fire – the love of the Bride of Jesus most of all.

Even if we don't like hearing it, the time has come for us to take the warnings about the end times seriously. They are not there to fill us with fear, but rather to spur us on to trust the love of God all the more resolutely – and so come to know him more deeply than ever before. We can rest in the knowledge that our Lord is always there in the midst of our distress and has everything under his control. He watches over us as the apple of his eye and always has a way out prepared for us. James

writes, 'As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.' (James 5:11)

Darkening his counsel?

After twenty chapters of questions and complaints as Job desperately searches for answers, God confronts him out of the storm – not with an answer, but with a question: 'Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?' (Job 38:2). The bottom line is that we need to learn not to 'darken his counsel' by doubting his wisdom, be it in our personal lives or in the increasing judgments on the earth as world history draws to an end.

We read in Isaiah 28:29 that 'All this also comes from the LORD Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.' The context? A discussion of the various sorts of grains and how each should be handled to produce a maximum harvest.

God knows how to deal with each one of us so as to bring the most out of our lives. When adversities come, God hasn't allowed them because he wants to destroy us. Precisely the opposite – his purpose is to make us more fully his own. That's why Paul can maintain that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God (Romans 8:28 NLT). Those who love him will be able to recognize the loving heartbeat of God behind each of the trials that come. They know that they are never forsaken and have the certainty that nothing – absolutely nothing – can ever separate them from his love (Romans 8:38-39).

Culmination in worship

Nothing is lost on God, nothing is forgotten by God. With him, nothing is ever in vain. When we bring the rubble in our lives and in the world to him, his love is able to create something even better out of it than what

it should have been in the first place. ‘How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!’ (Romans 11:33). As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are his thoughts higher than ours. His thoughts are always for peace and not for harm. He comforts like a mother, and as a father has compassion on his children, so God has compassion on us. And one day he will wipe away all our tears (Isaiah 55:9, Jeremiah 29:11, Isaiah 66:13, Psalm 103:13, Revelation 7:17). Who can even begin to fathom such love? Indeed it cannot be fathomed, only worshipped.

Praising the loving counsel of God characterized the life of our founder, Mother Basilea Schlink. The older she grew, the greater her awe and joy at the love of God became, even during stretches of her life that were hard and beyond understanding. What was the secret behind the extraordinary blessing on her life? In a nutshell: God is Yes and Amen – he is wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom. Mother Basilea’s adoration of God’s love and wisdom found expression in hundreds of songs and countless new melodies. She praised him during times of judgment and discipline, of isolation and deep night. And she sang with great happiness and joy, overwhelmed by the love of God, who leads each of his children to a glorious goal:

Father God, on high exalted,
Reigns in majesty and power
O’er confusion and distress.
When we seem to walk in darkness,
God the Father reassures us
That his plans are wonderful.

With your hands so kind and holy,
O my Father, you will guide me
On each pathway to the goal.
And your child is filled with wonder,
For your plans and deeds and counsels
Are a masterpiece of love.

There are situations and stages in our lives where even the best advice and offers of assistance don't help. The blessing that God promises those who love him is nowhere to be seen. Instead financial, family and health problems mount up. And God is silent.

'Don't I have enough faith? Am I being punished? What did I do wrong?' are the questions that run through our minds. What we need is a deeper understanding of spiritual principles so that we can discover the loving father heart of God in the midst of our suffering and gain a lifelong treasure that will prove its worth in the darkest of hours.