MORE THAN AN ASPIRIN

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CONTENTS

chapter 1

DOES GOD PROMISE A HAPPY ENDING?

Pain has many faces, but these faces often wear a mask.

At first glance, a congregation on Sunday morning appears to be a group of friendly individuals greeting one another, settling into their customary places, preparing for worship. People gathered in an airport terminal lounge appear to be preoccupied travelers, concerned primarily with catching their scheduled flights. But behind the social façade of their everyday lives, most men and women struggle with another reality. With their outer mask securely in place, the majority of people move through life with their emotional pain hidden, at times even from themselves. And for the most part, people carry their burdens in lonely isolation. They have few companions on their painful personal journeys and few skills to ease the downward drag of suffering in their lives.

Most of us become quite skillful in masking emotional pain. Few people around us guess its presence from the appearance of our lives. And in turn we rarely gauge accurately the size of the burden our neighbor is carrying.

Picture people moving through the hurry and confusion of the departure process at a major airline terminal. Suppose that as the passengers board their flight, one man is pleased to find that his seatmate is an attractive young woman; he has noticed that she

is not wearing a wedding band. He likes what he sees and engages her in social small talk. What he does not see behind the mask of her cheerful conversation is the pain that travels with her.

She is a single mother of four, one of whom is a preschooler. She is en route home from a doctor's appointment in a neighboring city. Early this morning a specialist at the clinic confirmed her family physician's diagnosis: the lump in her breast is malignant. Surgery is necessary; the outcome uncertain.

Suppose that as a congregation enters for worship, a cheerful young usher greets members by name and provides a warm smile and nametag for visitors while keeping a watchful eye on the clock and the door to the choir loft. People like what they see—his smile, his skill with people, and his obvious love for his task. What they do not see, or guess, is the pain that he carries. His wife and mother of his four-year-old son recently informed him that she has fallen in love with a man with whom she works and no longer wishes to keep their marriage intact.

Managing the Inevitable

Wherever we go, whatever path we walk, we come into contact with the walking wounded, people whose pain is cleverly masked but brutally present in their lives. There is the pain of justice delayed, of justice denied, the pain of loneliness, of grief and loss, of betrayal, of lost and broken dreams. For untold thousands, there is the grinding pain of poverty and economic fear. For many of us, there is the relentless pull of temptation and the shaming pain of failure when we yield. And while we seek to keep it safely below the radar of conscious awareness, we all live each day with the existential pain of our own limitations and the limitations of others. However we may wish to evade real-

ity, we must live out our lives as flawed and finite creatures in a flawed and finite world. Pain is an inevitable part of this life, and, despite our best efforts, it is a part of life from which we cannot run away.

Given this reality, we are confronted with an important question. If pain is inevitable, is it possible to live with pain in such a way that we alter its negative impact on our lives? Intuitively we expect that the answer to this question is yes. Most of us know at least one individual whom we privately admire, a person whose flawed humanity is marked by the faint scent of developing sainthood. We may know little of that person's life history, but we don't believe that the whiff of saintliness we catch from time to time is the product of easy living. We may not like the implications of what we understand, but if pushed to explain what we see, we would guess that pain has likely had a part in shaping those qualities we respect and admire.

Yet at the same time, we also know individuals whose unyielding anger and bitter despair suggest that, like most life tasks, managing pain may be done poorly with life-altering consequences. We sense that it is possible to influence the impact of pain in our lives. We rightly suspect, however, that this task is likely to be easier to read about than to do.

Confronted with pain, our first impulse, and a sensible one at that, is to attempt to make the pain go away. But if we find that avoiding or removing our pain is not a workable option, what then? Confronted with managing what we cannot avoid or remove, we often find ourselves with limited skills. We do not know how to think clearly about pain, and we do not know how to deal practically with the experience of pain. We alternate angry attacks of *I-just-don't-get-it* with despairing times of *I-just-don't-know-what-to-do.* We find ourselves at the point Barbara

Brown Taylor has described: "[We are] people who do not know how to suffer. We know how to relieve suffering, and we know how to evade it. What is hard for us is to confront it, with no power to make it go away."[1]

Acquiring Management Skills

Finding a remedy for this deficiency in skills is not an easy task. When we undertake to work out good management of our suffering in practical terms, we find ourselves facing difficult questions. Should we deny the pain? Minimize it? Dismiss it? Hide it? Ask God for miraculous deliverance? Accept it as God's discipline? Abandon in anger or despair a God who has failed to keep us from harm's way? What can—and should—we do?

Our problem does not usually lie in motivation. We want to deal well with the hard things in life. We want to come through the dark times triumphantly, faith intact. But often we have no clear biblically buttressed understanding of ways in which we can deal effectively with disappointment, loss, and the destructive life circumstances in which we may find ourselves. Despite our best intentions, we are often unable to manage grief and suffering in a way that permits *us* to be all right when everything around us seems to be all wrong.[2]

And we don't always find God's instructions at this difficult point to be of great help, at least at the moment of crisis. For example, James speaks clearly to us regarding our behavior when trouble comes: "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing" (James 1:2–4 NLT).

We hear the text. We nod our heads in public agreement. We may not speak our doubts aloud, but nonetheless they rise in silent private objection. How, we wonder, can trouble become a window opening into joy? And how is it that we can be changed through suffering into a person of strength with increased ability to meet the challenges of life? At times of crisis, these verses can appear almost nonsensical. Experience teaches us that loss and grief lead more often to bitterness than to joy; we know that pain and suffering lead more often to exhaustion than to strength and energy. What the text *says* is plain enough, but faced with pain and suffering we are none too certain what the text *means* in practical terms of everyday living.

Redemptive Management

A client whose daughter had been murdered came to me for help in the early weeks of her grief and struggle. In her first appointment she noticed a Bible lying open on my desk and burst out in angry tears.

"Don't read me Bible verses about praising God or verses that say God took Lindy because He wanted her with Him. I don't want a therapist who will read me verses like that."

"No. I won't read you verses like that," I told her gently. "I understand this is not the time for that."

Our first hour together was clearly not the time for that. Nevertheless, rightly understood, and in the right time, James's characteristic bluntness expresses a radically wonderful truth. God means for us through His grace to *redeem* our pain—to use it as a journey into joy and maturity. He means for us to be more than survivors; He means for us to be conquerors in every circumstance of life, however difficult that circumstance may be.

No matter how terrible the events through which we must live, it is God's intention for us to be transformed, not destroyed. Now *that* is good news.

However, we have a part in bringing about God's remarkable intended outcome. Transformation is not a matter of heavenly magic. Neither is it solely the result of human will power. It is a mysterious joint project in which God invites us to participate. And invite is precisely what God does. While God desires our participation, He does not coerce. We discover that at the core of participation lies something far different from a blind obedience to rules. Participation is relational; it is a call to know God [3] and the fellowship of His suffering (Philippians 3:10). And it is this participation through relationship with Him that changes our hearts, alters our view of the world, and transforms the outcome of our pain.

Wise Management

It is not coincidental that James's instructions about dealing with trouble were followed by the often-quoted promise of God's gift of wisdom to those who ask in faith.

> If you need wisdom—ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking. But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver, for a person with divided loyalty is as unsettled as a wave of the sea that is blown and tossed by the wind. Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Their loyalty is divided between God and the world, and they are unstable in everything they do. (James 1:5–8 NLT)

It takes more than human wisdom to implement good stewardship of life's painful experiences. Only God's wisdom can enable us to grasp and hold a God's-eye view of circumstances in the chaos and suffering that life can bring. In the joint project of transformation, human knowledge and common sense are necessary, although at times in the thick of things we sometimes find them in short supply. However, in themselves knowledge and common sense are not enough; we need the wisdom that comes from God. Gaining this wisdom, James explains, is a matter of steady faith. None of this wind-tossed-wave behavior for James, or for us, if we are serious about a plan for pain management that prescribes more than an aspirin and a good night's sleep.

Effective stewardship of pain includes many practical matters. It includes commonsense things like paying attention to rest, exercise, and sleep.[4] These actions may not be easy to take when we are feeling overwhelmed and disoriented, but they are for the most part straightforward and easy to understand. Other steps, such as facing and dealing with the pain of failure, are less easy to describe and more difficult to translate into concrete life skills.[5] But simple or complex, the development of these skills begins with an initial faith-based choice that has at its core an agreement with God.

An Agreement with God

The idea of an agreement with God may appear at the outset to be a very bad idea. There is a good reason for thinking this. We are often faced with taking this initial step when we are personally uneasy with the whole idea of faith and more than a little angry with God. We may feel that God is absent and

unresponsive and has failed to keep His word. In this case, we are likely to raise a good question: *Why should I make an agreement of any kind with this God who has, from my point of view, failed to keep me from harm's way?*

This initial agreement does not ask that we pretend that these issues do not exist. It does not require us to tell God that we think our pain is a good idea. Neither does it require us to tell God we approve of the way our lives are going nor the way (from our perspective) He is managing things. This agreement assumes that the questions and feelings about God that initially come with suffering will be changed through the process of our experience.[6] We cannot expect to feel and think at the beginning in ways that will come only after we have lived into new answers and ways of thinking. While faith based, this initial agreement with God does not require skills or wisdom that we can acquire only through the process of the journey itself.

The terms of this initial agreement are quite simple. We elect to agree with God's radical, countercultural message: Good can potentially come from pain, and we agree to seek that good. We first agree with God that out of pain and loss, new life and good things *can* come; we then commit to managing our pain in ways that help to bring this about. While these terms are easy to understand, it is admittedly no easy agreement. If in our lives we are already caught in the pain and disorientation of a Good Friday experience, when death prevails and it seems all hope is lost, it is no small thing to agree to live as though Easter, a day of rebirth and new life, were coming. We sense that there may be more of this agonizing Good Friday yet to endure; there may be that terrible silent Saturday yet to come. From this place we cannot see the empty tomb; there is no evidence that Easter is coming.

What our agreement calls us to do is *to agree that Easter can come and then live as though it were going to do so.* What we agree with God about is *the potential good outcome* of pain, and we commit to do our part to bring this good about. We say, in effect, "God, this pain and loss make no sense to me. But you can see a potential I cannot see, and I agree to take your word for it. And more—I agree to cooperate to bring this outcome about."

In essence, we agree to agree with God and to keep on agreeing with God even when circumstances around us and our responses to those circumstances point to a vastly different bottom line.

This is not a program of passive acceptance. A client working on her agreement with God made this important distinction one day in a way that made me smile. She said seriously, "Well, I can agree with God and still argue with Him. I mean I think I can be with God like I am sometimes when I'm out hiking with Jim [her husband]. My sense of direction isn't very good, so sometimes I say things like 'I know you think this is north, but it sure seems like south to me. I'll go this direction with you but *I* don't think we're going in the right direction. And do we have to walk so fast? And you should have brought more water.' I think I can agree with God and criticize and argue with Him too."

I laughed and then assured her, "You've got it right. The Psalms are full of God's people telling God that they don't think that He's doing it right and arguing with God while at the same time they are walking along with the God with whom they're arguing."

This agreement rests on the logic of faith: It is the character of God, not the content of our circumstances, which makes our choice to agree with God a logical one. It is reasonable to assume that God, because He is the God of the Exodus and the God of Easter, knows what He is talking about, that suffering *can* be a

window into joy, part of the journey into a new place. We assume that we *can,* by God's grace, both survive *and* thrive whatever the circumstances of life. And, hearing James's caution about the futility of a doubtful mind, we commit to holding this God's-eye point of view no matter how contrary it may feel to our experience at a given moment.

At the same time, we hold fast to our understanding that this agreement exists within a relationship that allows for protest. Unlike responses in some of our human relationships, expression of criticism, doubts, and disagreements does not alter God's acceptance and love. Indeed, with God, the dialogue of protest can serve as a faithful expression of covenant, as we shall see.[7]

The agreement is straightforward. We agree with God about the potential good outcome and to cooperate in bringing this about. We then begin to express this agreement through action, to take the practical steps that turn our faith into experiential reality. The process of linking faith and work that was so dear to James's heart lies at the core of good stewardship of our pain. We assume God's point of view by faith, and then we undertake the work of learning, sometimes in the grinding grip of despair, new ways of thinking, new choices; we take whatever small step we *can* take by God's enabling grace. At the beginning hope is often only an inaudible whisper, but, cliché or not, the journey of a thousand miles *does* begin with a first step, no matter how tentative. And the journey's joyful end pivots ultimately upon the succession of steps—some small and many weary—that follow that first step no matter how uncertain it may have been.

Good stewardship of our pain entails affirming by faith *God's radical and counterintuitive goal*—joy through the pain—strength and wholeness through suffering and loss—the new thing springing up from the rubble of destruction. Then, having

agreed with God about the end of the journey, we *act*, taking the practical steps by which this transformation comes about.

The Journey

The journey is neither quick nor easy; it is often long and marked by many dark nights. Nearly a year after her daughter's death, Barbara came for her appointment. She sat silently for a time and then said, "I didn't cry this morning while I drank my coffee. And I felt glad about that good coffee taste." She paused. "Do you think God counts this for joy in the morning (Psalm 30:5)? I cried again by nine." It counts. Indeed, it counts. While this is not the end of Barbara's story, it provides a realistic if unwelcome picture of the process by which transformation comes. In this regard stewardship of pain is much like good stewardship of money. There are no reliable get-rich-quick schemes in management of money. There are no sainthood shortcuts in effective management of pain.

Survivors report consistently that the journey through grief and loss and the disorientation that pain brings is not marked by magic or by instant healing. It is better described as a long obedience in the same direction, to borrow Eugene Peterson's apt use of Friedrich Nietzsche's phrase.[8] But at the same time the journey through pain is filled with epiphanies in which—often in sheer astonishment—we find that while weeping has indeed endured through the night *again,* joy *has* come in the morning, no matter how brief its initial stay may be.

It is not easy to agree with God's view regarding the human experience of pain, particularly in the midst of the chaos and suffering. We can view rain as a blessing much more easily when we are sitting by the fire eating toasted muffins. It is much more

difficult to do so while watching our house float away in the flood. Learning to think and act in ways that lead to spiritual competence and emotional mastery is an ongoing challenge. When our lives are filled with pain and disorientation, the task becomes much like learning to put up a tent in a tornado at a time when all we want to do is run from the storm. There should be no misleading expectations at this point. Discipleship is a joyous experience, but, practically speaking, discipleship is not built on easy automatic responses. God calls us to an effective stewardship of pain in the face of the worst that life can bring. Carrying out this stewardship is a challenging task, but it is possible by God's enabling grace. "Work hard to show the results of your salvation, obeying God with deep reverence and fear," Paul exhorted the Philippians. "For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (Philippians 2:12–13 NLT). Since effective stewardship of our pain is a joint project with God, it remains a reasonable, doable goal despite the difficulties we may experience in the process.

Getting Stuck on "Why"

But the beginning point itself can cause considerable confusion. In dealing with pain, people are far more likely to begin by asking "*Why* is this happening to me?" than by asking "*How* can I manage this constructively?"

The problem does not lie in our desire for meaning. In fact, good stewardship requires that we must eventually grapple with the meaning of pain. *Theodicy* is a specific field in theology that seeks to explain human suffering in a way that does not compromise the loving character of God or His power and sovereignty.

But grappling with the theological problem of pain does not necessarily produce good skills in managing our pain. It is dangerously easy to get stuck at the "why" question and never move on. But there is a second reason to be cautious about the "why" question. Interestingly enough, it is possible to develop a theologically sound answer to the problem of pain, as C. S. Lewis phrased it, but fail to develop the joy and maturity of which James writes. Perhaps for this reason God appears less interested in dealing with the "why" question than we sometimes think He should be. Somewhat to our surprise, God appears to think that coming through pain into a place of joy and maturity depends far more on our relationship with Him than on any answer to the "why" question that we may work out.

Job: Moving from "Why" to "How"

That is not to say that the way in which we think about God's character and His power in relationship to His suffering world is irrelevant to our journey—far from it. But Job's story gives an interesting God's-eye view of the "why" question. And in the context of good stewardship of our pain, Job's story makes clear that it was *not* God's response to his "why" question that moved Job through his pain and loss into a place of joy and peace, significant as God's conversation with Job proved to be.

The materials in the following chapters emphasize skills that increase effective management of pain rather than theologically sound explanations of it. But because Job's story provides a powerful insight into God's point of view, Job's struggle with the "why" question can be helpful in moving us from "why" to a "how" that results in a deepened relationship with God.

The text of Job's story opens with a cosmic confrontation between God and His adversary, the great fallen archangel, Satan. In the text, Satan was no small player in precipitating the confrontation between God and Job, but God too played a decisive role. We must consider the motivation and behavior of both God and Satan when we raise the "why" question in regard to Job's suffering. But the central dialogue of the drama plays out not between God and Satan, as we might expect from the opening scene, but between God and Job around the issue of Job's understanding and management of his pain.

In the text, Job's suffering, the agony of his body and his soul, is a matter of commanding concern to God. But the conversation between God and Job is challenging and confrontational—God feels no need to "make nice"—in deference to Job's terrible, inscrutable losses and his physical pain. At times, God appears to act more as Job's adversary than his friend. But when we pay close attention to the text, we see that God dramatically moves the conversation away from the "why" question to something beyond comfort or explanation. God's goal was relational.

In the text it is clear that God meant to change the relationship between Him and Job and to change Job's understanding of God and of himself. Since Job's friends had also assigned themselves a large role in the drama (although apparently uninvited), God dealt with them as well. Before matters were settled, God clearly expressed His view of the opinions of Job's friends in a fashion that must have altered Job's relationship with them forever as well. After Job's meeting with God, nothing—his family, his friends, his faith, or himself—remained the same.

The text, even at the cursory level considered here, is utterly absorbing. Here is God—He who made the great leviathan and

cast the stars into the boundless void of unmarked space, the creator and sustainer of the universe—in face-to-face controversy with the great dark angel, Satan himself. The stakes in this vast cosmic conflict?

The relationship between God and Job.

Job is being required to live through catastrophic loss, the grief that accompanies these devastating losses, the injustice and inscrutability of an apparently hostile providence, physical pain and suffering, and the utter angst of his questioning soul: *Where are you, God? And where am I with you? What is the sense of what is happening here?*

It is difficult to overemphasize the relational risk for God and Job. Can pain and the inscrutable malignancy of what appears to be a blind, uncaring providence sever the connection between God and Job? Is Satan correct? Does the relationship between God and His people require a "good life" as the *sine qua non* for its existence? And are Job's friends correct? Is suffering the inevitable consequence of sin and personal culpability? And can God legitimately be held to account for His acts?

There are few finer summaries of the dialogue between God and Job than that provided by Frederick Buechner. Buechner writes:

> [Job] asks some unpleasant questions . . .
>
> God doesn't explain. He explodes. He asks Job who he thinks he is anyway. He says that to try to explain the kinds of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little-neck clam . . .
>
> Maybe the reason God doesn't explain to Job why terrible things happen is that he knows what Job needs isn't an explanation. Suppose that God did explain. Suppose that God were to say to Job that the reason the cattle were

> stolen, the crops ruined, and the children killed was thus and so, spelling everything out right down to and including the case of boils. Job would have his explanation.
>
> And then what?
>
> Understanding in terms of the divine economy why his children had to die, Job would still have to face their empty chairs at breakfast every morning. Carrying in his pocket… a complete theological justification of his boils, he would still have to scratch and burn.
>
> God doesn't reveal his grand design. He reveals himself. He doesn't show why things are as they are. He shows his face. And Job says, "I had heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see thee." Even covered with sores and ashes, he looks oddly like a man who had asked for a crust and been given the whole loaf.
>
> At least for the moment.[9]

A redemptive stewardship of pain does not depend upon the answer to the "why" question that we may ultimately work out. Our part in bringing about a good outcome is not simply a matter of thinking differently *about* pain, although that too happens on the journey. Redemptive stewardship is faith-based living—head *and* heart—into and through the pain. It is living the questions in such a way that we live our way into a new relationship with God and with ourselves. It is living into a new kinship and community with each other and into a new understanding of the world and the journey by which we have come into a new place.

And the joy to which James encourages us does not lie in an explanation of pain as such. It lies in the relational consequences of living through the process. Listen again to Job.

"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee" (Job 42:5 KJV). "I have seen him," Job says. "I have seen him. And that is enough."[10]

The patterns of thinking and behaviors suggested in the chapters that follow are intended, by God's grace, to aid those on the journey to move into and through their trauma and pain in a way that permits them, like Job, to say, "I have seen him. I have seen him and that is enough."

Happy Endings—Guaranteed?

Job's story can pose a serious problem, however. It has a happy ending.

At the end, God makes a spectacular entrance—riding in on a whirlwind, no less—and talks with Job directly, face to face. In the conversation God does not explain Job's suffering or address Job's questions regarding divine justice. However, at the close of his encounter with God, Job's new understanding of God's goodness and his own limitations leaves Job at peace with these unanswered questions. But talking to Job is not all that God did. God confronted (and scolded) Job's friends and publicly affirmed Job's relationship with Him. Then, to wrap things up, God made Job prosperous again, giving him twice as much as he had before. What an ending—a face-to-face encounter with God that made Job's unanswered questions immaterial, a confrontation with Job's doubting friends that produced public vindication of Job's integrity, and then double restoration of Job's lost wealth and family, crowned by a long life of honor and respect.

Immersed in our own struggle, this happy ending can tempt us to a sour-grapes attitude. We may think that we too could demonstrate heroic faith if we knew that the end of the story

included a face-to-face talk with God, public vindication, and the joy of losses restored. The text, however, does not support such grumbling.

God's choice to supply a happy ending for Job's story does not lessen the severity of Job's suffering or the significance of Job's integrity. Job did *not* anticipate a triumphant resolution to his ordeal—to the contrary. In the presence of his friends, we hear Job wishing for death to come quickly and bring an end to his pain. The text describes Job's faithful perseverance *without* assurance of a happy ending and in the face of God's inscrutable silence. Indeed, the silence of the hidden God was one of the things Job found most difficult to bear. Job's greatest joy at the end of his experience was not centered in God's vindication of his point of view or in the restoration of his wealth and family. Job's joy lay in his new relationship with God, in his experience of seeing God face to face. Job's story did indeed have a happy ending, but Job lived through his ordeal without any expectation that he would be vindicated and his losses restored.

But there is another point at which Job's happy ending can provide a problem. If we regard the happy ending of Job's story as a promise that if we too are faithful, our story will have a similar spectacular ending, we open ourselves up to a major crisis of faith. Some stories, like Job's, do have happy endings in this life. But that is not always the case; it is not even frequently the case.

In this life, the end of the story for many people is nothing at all like Job's. These stories are marked by losses that are not restored and unanswered questions that continue to spin endlessly in the dark of sleepless nights. In many of these stories, at the end as at the beginning, faith continues to be challenged by God's apparent hiddenness and silence. What then? How then

are we to understand the stories that do *not* have a happy ending? Does God have anything to say about stories like these?

He does, indeed. A famous chapter in the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 11, deals with this hard reality with straightforward honesty. The chapter begins with a roster of the great heroes of faith; the writer begins with the stories of those who, like Job, came by faith into a happy ending of their story. There is Enoch, who escaped death; Noah, who saved his family and the human race from extinction; Abraham, who after years of being childless became the father of descendants as numberless as the stars; Sarah, who mothered the child of promise after years of barrenness; Moses, Joshua, the prostitute Rahab, David—the writer continues a long list of those who, "gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies. Women received back their dead, raised to life again" (Hebrews 11:33–35 NIV).

Then—taking a long breath, so to speak—the writer launches into the rest of the story, the story of those who in faith were tortured and *not* released, who were flogged, chained, imprisoned, stoned, sawed in two, put to death by the sword, who went about destitute, persecuted, mistreated—wanderers whose homes were in caves and holes in the ground. God makes it very clear that, humanly speaking, there was no happy ending in this world for these folk. Yet these people, the writer points out, also belong in the roster of the heroes of faith, commended by God. If we find our life story marked by trouble and pain, the writer encourages us to remember those who have also suffered, and, so that we do not become weary

or lose heart, to consider the experience of Jesus himself, who endured the cross (Hebrews 12:1–3).

The point of the writer of Hebrews was not that some of God's people do not have happy endings; the point was rather that not all stories end happily *in this life.* In God's loving embrace at death, in the great eternal company of the redeemed saints—the ending of the story for all of God's people encompasses life and joy beyond our imagining, but that ending comes in a world far different from the one in which we live through our struggle to manage pain well. However, the goal of living though pain without becoming weary or losing heart in this world is not what most of us have in mind. Humanly, if we cannot avoid pain, what we want is a formula that at least insures a happy ending. We want a story like Job's in which in this present world God puts in a visible appearance, vindication of faith is publicly established, and all losses restored. But good stewardship of pain cannot rest on such a hope. We have no promise of that.

Profitable management of our pain—good stewardship—is not a matter of following a process that predictably produces a happy ending. Good stewardship, in contrast, entails living with suffering in ways that we become people whose joy and distinctive strength does not lie in the power to make life turn out wonderfully but in the ability to live triumphantly when it doesn't.