

Therapeutic Theology for Hurting People

by Robertson McQuilkin

I arrived just as my sister, Virginia, was lifted from the ambulance, strapped to a metal stretcher. When she saw me, her greeting was simply, “God has abandoned me.”

Maybe you'd feel that way, too, if your husband had died an agonizing death of cancer less than a year before and this was your second car accident in that same year—the one you knew intuitively would end your driving forever. But her voice was flat—no wail of self-pity or angry accusations against God. It wasn't the first time my sister had felt abandoned by God.

Actually, she's felt that way periodically over the past 20 years since Margie, her only daughter and the joy of her life, was brutally killed. It didn't help that her murderer had killed before and had just been released from prison on the advice of a court-appointed psychiatrist. It didn't make sense that a young woman who loved God and people so intensely should be snuffed out by a madman. Perhaps God abandoned her too!

Why do I never feel that way? I thought to myself. Some judge that I have cause enough, but I have never had those feelings. This started a train of thought about other things I've never felt: despondency, depression, anger with God. Then I began to think of feelings I *have experienced*...and I wish I hadn't: unforgiveness, impatience, numbness of spirit. Why the difference? As I thought about my inner responses to external circumstances, I was drawn irresistibly to the theology factor. What I truly believe seems to have set me up—both for success and for failure.

When asked to share some of my life experience for an audience of professional counselors, I thought, *I'm no counselor. What can I contribute? I've spent my life working at theological reflection, not psychological.* But then I realized my life story might demonstrate the interface between the two, a connection theologians seldom consider and counselors might be tempted to bypass. So without trying to explain how that interface should work for either theologian or psychologist, I will tell my story.

Theology Provides Protection

More than therapy to heal the broken, perhaps, theology builds an immune system to keep a person from breaking in the first place. Here's how it worked for me.

I believe I'm finite!

I didn't always believe that. Oh, I would have admitted to finitude if asked, but my youthful self-confidence led me to believe I had a corner on “the truth.” Then, in my early 20s, I entered the dark tunnel of agnosticism—from knowing “everything” to knowing nothing for sure, especially about God and his book. I wasn't arrogant, affirming that no god existed, just that I, at least, couldn't find him. When by God's grace I emerged from that dark tunnel I had great confidence in the basics: that God is, that the Savior actually saves, that God has purpose for my life. But I was shorn of any pretense of infallibility about the details. My expectancies—for myself and others—were lowered to the realities of human finitude.

I exulted in the confidence of what God has revealed for sure—so sure that all believers of all time would affirm it. But I concluded that most things I would never have figured out no matter how long I investigated and contemplated—things about God's infinities and things about my finitude. Like the meanings of my past, the hopes of my future, the reasons for my circumstances, the goings-on of my inner self. I'm comfortable with that ambiguity about life, now, though I recognize others may not be. Some seem to need to have everything settled for sure.

For an inquisitive thinker and an intense activist, the realization of one's finitude can be a marvelous relaxant and stabilizer. Besides lowered expectancies of oneself, the acceptance of finitude is a doorway to making room for others. Maybe they're finite, too. That realization could make a peacemaker out of a person. For example, when Mack set out to get rid of me as leader of the ministry, I didn't have to try to “be good” and not get angry, fight back, or hold a grudge against him. After all, he saw things differently than I. Besides, maybe he was right. I didn't think so, but neither did I conclude he was devilish. Our finitudes had clashed and we both thought we were doing God's own service. My theology had protected me in the crisis.

I believe I'm fallen.

And so are others. So I expect them to behave that way and that helps me make allowances for their failures, which doesn't come to me naturally. What comes naturally is to be easy on myself and hard on the other fellow. So it's a trick to be realistic about my fallenness without justifying my own ungodly behavior because I've been easing off on the other fellow. I haven't figured out all the ramifications of the doctrine of the Fall for protecting me from wrong thinking about myself and others, but on the larger scale, that doctrine has been a powerful deliverer in my life.

Here's how. The whole of creation is under the curse of the Fall and I'm not exempt, by being loved of God, from the consequences of living in a world of vicious cancer and violent winds. Nor am I exempt from a world of finite and fallen people who inflict harm on me, wittingly or unwittingly. I expect the worst and rejoice when, by God's grace, it usually doesn't happen! Sometimes when I wake in the morning, I ask, *Lord, lots of folks died last night. Why not me?* At my stage of life so many of my dearest family and friends suffer painful, debilitating illnesses and agonizing deaths. Why not me? That's the only reasonable “why” question for one who lives in a fallen world.

I don't want to over simplify the problem of evil; a whole complex of theological issues intertwine. For example, if God made his own people exempt from the human condition, who wouldn't become a believer? But what kind of believers would they become? Again, when does God heal and to what end? For what purpose does God protect or remove the protection? The theological questions seem endless, especially when we're faced with personal tragedy, but the bottom line for me is this. I'm fallen and so is my world. Not “Why *me*, Lore?” when trouble strikes, but “Why *not me*, Lord?” when it so often misses.

Muriel was blessed with eternal youth—looking 40 when she was actually 55. But that's still far too young to fall before Alzheimer's, the disease of the old. “Early onset” they called it in clinically sterile terminology. Early onset of what? Of grief for me, who must watch the vibrant, creative, sparkling person I knew dimming out. No grief for her, however, except for momentary frustrations quickly forgotten—she never knew what was happening.

So, why us, Lord? There are various theories. One alumnus said it was God's judgment on me for allowing contemporary Christian music on our radio station. I don't feel guilty about that, but I do know circumstances contrary to our desires are always intended to make us more like Jesus, and God has surely used these two decades of lingering grief to correct me in several deficiencies in my model-of-Jesus role in life. Perhaps God wanted new leadership at Columbia International University, though the Board and administrators didn't buy that theory. Of late, I've begun to wonder if the Lord put me under “house arrest” so I'd do something my busy life didn't allow much of: writing books and articles. Of course, whatever other purposes God has in sending or permitting adversity, there is always the purpose of bringing God glory, either through his mighty deliverance from suffering or his mighty deliverance in suffering. And that he has done in wonderful ways I'll never fully understand. So it's obvious I have contemplated the “why” question.

But why have I not fretted over the answer? Why have I not demanded healing from God or frantically pursued the many cures friends and strangers have suggested? The bottom line is this: we live in a fallen world—what else did you expect? Theology protects from destructive inner turmoil.

Yet I believe I'm of value.

I live with the acute realization of my own finitude and fallenness, but the contemporary world assures me I can't be truly free and fulfilled if I put a low value on self. A low self-image will ruin it all. But “low” and “high”—who decides? Where is the price list? We need a reality check, for only recognizing true value will liberate and open the way to fulfillment. An inflated view or a deflated view, distorting reality, will surely tie me up tighter than ever and shut out the possibility of fulfillment. But if I measure my worth by what I own, how much fun I'm having, and how successful people recognize me to be, I've given in to the world's values system and have doomed myself to bondage and unfulfillment, because those things—no matter how abundant—cannot liberate me or fill me up. If a therapist persuades me I really am significant, no matter what those around think about me, such counsel can be permanently liberating only if it's true. And the truth is that I'm worth a lot!

- I'm a designer brand. I'm valuable not because of what I own or have done but because of how God designed me. He created me on his pattern. I have his insignia stamped on me. I'm an image bearer of the Infinite One and that's impressive, no matter what others may think of me.
- I have a very high sticker price. God himself valued me so highly he paid an outrageous price to buy me back from my slaveholder, my bondage to stuff, and an

inflated self-image. I'm of infinite worth to God, not for my achievements or possessions, but because he invested in me the life of his own Son.

- Those values are shared by all believers, but I have a value no one else shares. I have a unique destiny. God not only created me to bear his family likeness, he not only purchased me with the life of his only Son, he did so on purpose. He has a purpose for me, something he wants to accomplish on earth through me. No matter how the world or the church may evaluate my contribution, the grand Designer valued me enough to plan my unique role to bring him the greatest possible honor. That's why I'm proud to be a homemaker. I try to be the best cook, housekeeper, gardener, and nurse I know how. I'm not the best at any of those, to be sure, but I give it my best because it's my assignment, God's purpose for me. And I greatly enjoy it, never fret about what I'd rather be doing, about what might have been. Much less do I compare my "value" to others with higher callings and greater gifts.
- And there's something more. Worth is often judged by the company a person keeps. And I'm a member of high society—the highest! Incredible as it may seem, God has planned my life around him: uninterrupted companionship with the greatest Lover who ever lived. Talk about self-worth! If that knowledge of who I am in Christ doesn't liberate and fill life to the full, what will?

Created on the pattern of God, not a monkey.

Purchased by the most precious commodity this world has ever known, the blood of God

Living a life planned by the master Designer of the planets, the suns, and every atom

A constant companion of the King of kings

Indeed, theology can liberate and fill a person full.

I believe in God.

But what kind of God? In my 30s, I discovered three stories in the Bible that focused on the kind of God I didn't have. The hired mourners knew the child was dead, so they ridiculed the God-man who said it would be all right. The distraught father, finding Jesus' disciples failing of the press releases, said to the all-powerful One: "If you can, please heal my son." The disciples, veteran sailors, despaired of life as the winds howled and wakened the sleeping passenger. "Don't you care that we're dead men?" Some doubted his wisdom—they knew better. One doubted his power—"If you can," he said. And some doubted his love—"Don't you care about us?" When this snapped into focus, I realized that when I worried about my impossible circumstances—death, illness, storms—I was calling into question the character of God. Am I really smarter than God to know what is best? Is he truly impotent in the face of my impossible circumstances? Or maybe he just doesn't care that much about me? What blasphemy!

Muriel was a chain worrier. One stormy night she was totally stressed out about her three teenagers who were out in the fringes of the hurricane. She was just as distraught over the last two when the first arrived in good cheer, unscathed, and still immobilized by fear for the third after the second appeared. As she writhed in an agony of worry on her bed, harassing the Lord with her unbelief, he seemed to say to her, *Do you want to spend the rest of your life living like this?* Startled, she cried out, “Oh no, Lord! I truly don't. Please deliver me!” And, as she never tired of testifying, he did. In an instant. For most of us it takes a bit of growing, but not for Muriel. She just quit once she got focused on who God really is. Later she wrote this couplet:

Anything, any time, anywhere,
I leave the choice with you.
I trust your wisdom, love, and power,
What e'er you say I'll do.

I may not know what God's purpose is in sending or permitting difficulty in my life, but that he has a purpose I am confident. And a God with wisdom to know what is best for me, love to choose that best, and power to carry it through, I can trust. I can never be a victim, except a “victim” of God's love. Self-pity can't even get a hearing! Shake my puny fist in the face of God, as some testify? They must not fear the infinite, holy One. Or perhaps they've not watched the agony on the Father's face as his only Son hangs helpless, crying out, “Why have you abandoned me?” Why indeed! For my sake it was! That's how much the Father and the Son love me. How often, when I've tried to untangle the reasons God seems to have abandoned me, have I returned finally to Calvary and whispered, “Dear Jesus, how could those hands pierced for me ever allow anything truly evil to pass through to touch me? Help me trust you when I can't figure out the why.”

Theology does indeed protect from the ravages of ungodly responses!

I believe in love.

“How does God enable you to love Muriel when there's so little left to love?” I was being interviewed on camera, but I knew the young anchorwoman didn't make up that question. She'd been given it by the production manager, who had asked me similar questions during the last 24 hours. I waved for the cameras to cut.

“I'm sorry, but I don't know how to answer that question,” I said to the producer. “How would you feel if I said you were very difficult to like but that God was giving me supernatural ability to like you anyway? Not much of a compliment! I know that anything of merit in me comes as a gift from God, to be sure, but I love Muriel because she's altogether lovable. I can't *not* love her. She's my precious.”

“OK,” the producer responded, “that's fine. Just say that.” And the cameras rolled.

She loved me passionately for 40 years and stored away countless memories that still flood me with joy. And on those mornings when our eyes connect and she flashes that glorious

smile for a fleeting moment, my heart leaps. She's so gentle and contented—oh, I can't explain love. But I believe in love.

Theology seems to have built up my spiritual and psychic immune system. But when that immune systems fails, I've discovered theology also has the power to heal, to correct wrong thinking, to renew.

Theology Rehabilitates

I believe in grace.

But I haven't always. Some would say that's because I had a strict, old-fashioned mother who periodically chastised me with a bamboo cane. Or perhaps they would point to my parents' philosophy of life—never compliment the boy lest he be seduced by pride. I can't remember a single affirmation. Show of affection? I never saw my parents embrace. Furthermore, my father would today be called “absentee,” he was so busy and so often traveling. And my mother was also often teaching the Bible in some distant place when I returned home from school. Yet I knew they loved me dearly, believed in me. I don't know how, but I guess you could say they somehow built a “strong self-image.” So I've never bought into those theories about my parents bunting up my little ego. Furthermore, I understood grace from that day at age six when I was delivered from the fear of hell—well-deserved, I was certain—and ran to embrace Jesus. Guilty feelings—except when there was some unresolved guilt—were never a problem. But somehow I had a lot of growing to do in understanding grace. Two areas come to mind: (1) lack of passion in my love for God, sort of settling for a formal correctness, and (2) forgiveness—not God's forgiveness of me, but my forgiveness of others.

(1) I don't like to admit it, but it was two decades after my salvation encounter before I ever shed the first tear over my own sin. I was reflecting on Calvary and suddenly realized it was my sin that nailed Him there—not Hitler's, not Stalin's, but *mine*, my very own sanitized, civilized, damnable sin. And it broke up the hard granite of a semi-grateful heart. Then, for the first time, I exulted in his grace.

A few years later, the ministry for which I was responsible was not doing well, not doing well at all. I cried out to God for deliverance and victory but it seemed my prayers weren't getting through. So I went out on the mountainside—perhaps with no ceiling those prayers would rise higher! But still the line was dead. Then a thought broke through: *Try praise*. I was so out of practice in praise, I ran out of thanksgivings and praise in five minutes. But my soul was uncaged, and I discovered that *the weary spirit rises on the wings of praise*.. And no wonder—to focus on God sets me free from my own finitudes and fallenness. I say I learned it, but I have often had to return to relearn it.

My beloved was being taken from me little by little in the 80s, and then the blow fell: my eldest son was killed in a tragic diving accident. All accidental deaths are tragic, no doubt, but this one was so preventable. Two years later I resigned the presidency of Columbia International

University to care for my beloved, leaving my life's work at its peak. I was numb under the blows of life. Not angry, not despondent, just numb. My faith might better be described as resignation, as Kierkegaard once said. The passion in my love for God had evaporated, and I was left with the residue of a sure but formal relationship. This was a call to do what I learned early in ministry—off to a mountain hideaway to be alone with God. There, as I focused again on him, I discovered that indeed the heavy heart lifts on the wings of praise. Theology helps rehabilitation.

(2) Forgiveness. One of the greatest pains of life is betrayal. To discover a trusted friend scheming to bring you down can unleash all kinds of ungodly responses. But I who had experienced forgiveness was ready to make allowances and forgive—not holding against him what I considered evil and he considered good. But it took years to face the fact that though I wanted to forgive and forget, I didn't want God to! *Father, forgive them . . .* I found no echo in my soul for the gracious response of Jesus on the cross or of Stephen under assault. I might not seek retaliation nor even rejoice in some trouble in the life of my nemesis, but God surely will bring justice. *Don't let him off the hook, God!* I realized that I wasn't so Christlike after all and asked God to cut out the cancer that was eating away at my soul. The healing began when I noticed what the disciples asked for when Jesus told them to forgive the same offense 490 times. They didn't ask for more love; they asked for more faith. I was doubting God's ability to handle the situation properly. When I turned it all over to him, asking him to let my “friend” off the hook, healing began. But I hadn't yet gotten the theology of forgiveness worked out.

Years later when a ministry for which I had great hopes was deliberately snatched from me by nefarious scheming, I was consumed with the inner struggle to forgive. I discovered my “rehabilitation” wasn't complete. So I returned to the hook and made a thorough study of forgiveness in Scripture. Once again I found that theology does indeed rehabilitate.¹ It taught me of grace. God's grace, yes. But also how I must grace my brother.

I believe in victory.

When I became a new person in Christ, I was given new potentialities. Whereas before I could do right but couldn't consistently choose the right, the new me can choose wrong but need not. Besides, the Holy Spirit took up residence, and in that new relationship I'm empowered to win out in the battle against temptation. Oh, I'll not be sinless till I meet him in person, but in the meantime I have power to say “yes” to God and “no” to sin whenever I have the conscious choice. But then there are those involuntary sins and my uninterrupted falling sort of god's glorious character. In those areas the Spirit promises to change me, to grow me up more and more into the likeness of Christ, if I only let him. I believe this because Scriptures teaches it, but also I believe it because I've seen it in my life.

Take patience, for example. As a teen I'd shoot from the lip and occasionally settle things with my fists. But gradually I came to abhor this, and by the age of 18 I began to ask God

¹ “The Two Sides of Forgiveness,” *Moody Magazine*, November 1994.

daily to deliver me and give me patience. I saw a remarkable spurt of growth and thought I'd been delivered. Until, following marriage, my wife and I disagreed on how our first child should be disciplined. I didn't say anything in anger, but I seethed inside for days. Three days, to be exact. When I could stand it no longer, I confessed my heart attitude to God and asked him to deliver me. This happened three times during the first decade of our marriage, until finally I had a showdown. "Oh, Lord," I said, "how can I give these Japanese people the hope of salvation when you haven't saved me from my own temper? If you don't deliver me, I'm out of here." God knew I meant it. He heard and delivered—never again did that evil spirit intrude into my relationship with Muriel. But God wasn't through with me. Our children became teens and I found that patience was not yet the natural fruit of my spirit. After that it was a board of directors, then certain faculty. And now I'm in a graduate program in patience with a beloved wife who is in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's. God's didn't give me the instant deliverance I longed for and begged for. But he did do what he promised and transformed me "from one degree of glory to another by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor 3:18). I believe in victory. I'll never settle for lockdown into some intractable dysfunction of spirit.

I've shared a sampler from my life in an effort to demonstrate how theology works to help hurting people see themselves and their world more nearly from God's perspective. Theology has played a major role in who I have become and continues to play a major role in what I am yet to become. It has protected me from wrong feelings and attitudes, and it heals when I fail. I call it "therapeutic theology."

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