

The power of God's grace reaches even the most desolate valleys of despair.

Finding Peace on the Dark Side

CRAIG E. ANDERSON

A friend reminded me that M. Scott Peck thirty-three years ago began his bestselling book *The Road Less Traveled* with only three words: “Life is difficult.” Not that any of us needs to be reminded of that. Those words are, of course, only a part of the story, but for many it is life’s most pressing reality. Our days overflow with blessings, but there is a shadow side to that good fortune. Gerard Manley Hopkins, the great English poet, called it “the dark side of the bay of [God’s] blessing.”

A number of years ago, my wife and I stood by the open grave of our eldest daughter who died due to complications related to a pregnancy and giving birth. It was a difficult time for our family. The previous four weeks we were at her bedside hoping that the competence and resources of the medical team would be able to preserve our daughter’s now fragile life. We prayed that God would work through the doctors and nursing staff to make her well again, and whatever they were unable to do, we asked God to accomplish by his own special touch.

Often during those long days and nights, unable to talk because of the tubes in her mouth and throat, she spoke with that entreating face and those pleading eyes that I will never forget. She seemed to say to me, “Can’t you do something, Dad? Can’t you help me?”

All of us who are parents know the anguish

of those times when our children are hurting and there is nothing we can do. Times when they are ill. Times when they suffer from fractured relationships. Times when they suffer from faltering self-esteem or from the consequences of bad decisions. We want so much to manage their problems—to fix them—like we did when they were younger. But we are without power to do a thing.

Our daughter never returned home from the hospital. The ache of that loss has been profound. It is unnatural when we as parents are called upon to bury our own children. We know the truth of William Alford’s words: “It is a fearful thing to love what death can touch.”

I cannot imagine navigating through this loss without my faith and the meaning and hope Christ gives. The journey has at times been difficult and not without questioning and doubt. I must confess in the immediate wake of our daughter’s death I found it difficult to read the Bible and pray. Sometimes when we are broadsided by loss and overwhelmed by sorrow we are left numb and unable to do much of anything. But what I discovered anew is that even when we can’t muster the stuff to ask for what we need, God knows our needs and draws near with grace and comfort.

Author Frederick Buechner reminds us that the ambiguities of life are so real and sometimes so agonizing that the mystery of it all



of the Bay

takes on the appearance of an enemy. God can seem distant, even uncaring. We cry out in frustration and sometimes even in anger. Sometimes there is no answer. The heavens are silent to our anguished and unspoken cries. But then in an unsuspecting moment, a voice speaks out of the silence. There is a break in the dark sky. The grace of God shines through the confusion and contradiction, and the darkness does not overcome it. One

sees anew the precariousness of our existence in the light of the cross and the empty tomb. And you know, deep down, that all is not lost.

There is a persistent theme in the writings of Buechner that the worst thing that can happen to us is not the last thing. Not the death of a child, not the death of a spouse or a parent, not the loss of a fortune, not the loss of a job, not the ravaging effects of a hurricane or oil spill. So often these

events appear like a concluding word, like a final word—but they aren't. If death on the cross was the worst thing that could happen to Jesus, it was nevertheless the penultimate and not the ultimate ending. There was Easter morning. Even the worst things are redeemed, and they can sometimes be redeeming.

Many of us discover on our grief

Craig E. Anderson is a retired Covenant minister. He lives in Punta Gorda, Florida.

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journeys that there are surprises along the way. I think what surprised me most were the places where I encountered the ministering presence of God. I found it not so much in the traditional places—word and sacrament, Bible study, and prayer—but in the more ordinary sectors of life. I am not suggesting that those sacred disciplines had no effect on me. Certainly they did. But I discovered that Christ touched me with healing through more commonplace things—my companionship with my wife, for example, as we walked our Emmaus Road together. A deepening relationship with our other daughter as we shared this common loss. The sparkle and spring-like resilience of our granddaughter who at that time was only four years old and had lost so much. The rhythm and necessity of my work in the church. In all of these relationships and experiences, God ministered to me almost without my realizing it.

And then there was the support of the community of faith. I don't know what people do without the church family. Of course there are other groups and other networks that sustain people in crisis, but the support of the family of God is very special and, I think, unrivaled.

I also found a consolation I couldn't have anticipated in the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Jesuit priest and poet who lived in the last half of the nineteenth century. Since my college literature classes at North Park, I have had a special affinity for Hopkins. Shortly after our daughter's death, I discovered a volume of his poems in a used bookstore in Chicago. As I began to read the poems, something happened within me. God touched me at the very core of my being at a time when my grief

was fresh and my wounds deep. His words and faith nourished my faith and brought renewed hope.

Hopkins's poetry has a distinctive voice that even today, more than 120 years after he lived, remains fresh and original. I am captivated by the sound of it. I am attracted to his vision of God whose glory is veiled behind nature, "under the world's splendor and wonder," but which flashes "like shining from shook foil." But what really lays hold of me is his unswerving confidence in the sovereignty of God, whose presence is known and whose purpose is found even in the dimness of calamity.

Giving his words a ring of authenticity is the poet's own private and melancholic journey through darkness and desolation. He was a wounded healer. Through his poems, the Holy Spirit touched me, and still touches me, with solace and hope.

Hopkins writes in his great ode, "The Wreck of the Deutschland"

Thou mastering me
God! Giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead....
Over and again I feel thy finger and
find thee.

...Beyond saying sweet, past telling
of tongue,
Thou are lightning and love,
I found it, a winter and warm;
Father and fonder of heart thou
has wrung:
Hast thy dark descending and
most art merciful then.

God sometimes seems like a cold Minnesota winter, but then again he comes to us like the warm and healing winds of early summer. The God who seems to strike like lightning or permit our hearts to be wrung is also God who loves us with a parent-like

affection. When the darkness of our sorrows seems impenetrable, at those very times we will find God most gracious and full of mercy.

In ways surprising and past asking, Christ came to me anew in those months after our daughter's death with comforting grace and journeying mercies. His grace is sufficient. There are still moments of occasional question and regret, but they are much fewer now.

Frederick Buechner writes in words that are both stirring and winsome: "A Christian is one who points at Christ and says, 'I can't prove a thing, but there is something about his eyes, and his voice, there is something about the way he carries his head, his hands, the way he carries his cross, the way he carries me.'" That is also my experience.

A few years ago my wife, Dotty, and I stood outside the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that in 1963 was bombed and four African American girls were killed. It was a dark moment in the history of the United States and in the struggle for civil rights. The great Martin Luther King Jr. said in the final words of the funeral service for those children a few days later: "Now I say to you in conclusion, life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments.... Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of its summer and the piecing chill of its winters. But if one will hold on, [you] will discover that God walks with [you] and that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope and transform even the dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace."

This we believe. ■