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Professor of Theology and Philosophy  
Northwest Nazarene University

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—Reggie McNeal  
*Author of Missional Renaissance and Get Off Your Donkey!*

“Throughout the centuries humanity has grappled with its understanding of God. Often God becomes clouded in the context of Christian practices and the secular world. Fringer and Lane challenge us to strip away the trappings we may have inadvertently brought into our relationship with God and find a sense of renewal so that our lives can be reflections of him.”

—Carla Sunberg  
President, Nazarene Theological Seminary

*“Theology of Luck* will rock your world and will move to the front burner the honest conversation all kingdom-minded believers long to have about God, fate, prayer, career, choice, sovereignty, God’s part and our part in his redemptive mission, and above all the theology of luck. Thank you, Rob and Jeff, for this gift. May it spawn conversations and actions that change us and change the world.”

—Eric Swanson  
Leadership Network  
Coauthor of *The Externally Focused Church* and *To Transform a City*

“Religions from around the world have attributed luck and fate to the gods. They have tried to manipulate ‘the gods’ through magic, rituals, and incantations. So, if this tends to be what happens in religion, is Christianity just another conception of fate, luck, and magic? Fringer and Lane challenge this notion head on. For our authors, thinking Christianly is based on different assumptions about God, events in the world, and our responses as people who base our actions on faith in Jesus Christ. I highly recommend this thoughtful yet accessible discussion of our interaction with God in a world filled with uncertainty.”

—Ron Benefiel  
Dean of the School of Theology and Christian Ministry  
Point Loma Nazarene University

Theology  
*of*  
LUCK

Fate, Chaos, *and* Faith

ROB A. FRINGER *and* JEFF K. LANE



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# INTRODUCTION



It is said that what we believe determines how we live. Is this axiom true? Many looking at the church from the outside do not believe this to be the case. They look at the church and see no marked difference between those inside and those outside. Why?

Option No. 1: The axiom is not true, and belief does not truly determine action.

Option No. 2: Those outside the church have an erroneous understanding of what we believe, which has led to unrealistic expectations of how we should live.

Option No. 3: We do not fully believe in this God or in the Word, and something deep within us actually prevents us from fully giving our lives over to God.

Option No. 4: Our lives actually do reflect the God in whom we believe.

There is likely some truth in each of these options as well as other possibilities not listed. However, the concern of this book is with options 3 and 4, which are closely related. The following story will help disclose our point.

In James A. Michener's bestselling novel *The Source*,<sup>1</sup> he tells the story of Urbaal and his second wife, Timna, who live in Makor, a fictitious town in western Galilee, around 2202 BC. During a time of impending war, Timna's firstborn son, at only six months old, is selected along with seven other firstborn sons to be sacrificed to Melak, the god of death and war. Timna is a foreigner to this land and does not necessarily believe in their gods. For this reason, she is devastated by the decision and wants her husband either to rebel against the priests who have made the selection or to flee from Makor to save her son. Urbaal, however, has grown up in these lands and is fully convinced of the various gods' powers. Furthermore, he has already offered three other firstborn sons, who came from his first wife and two of his slave girls.

Though Urbaal has some remorse, his mind is preoccupied by the realization that his willing obedience had bettered his chances to win the yearly Astarte contest. Astarte is the goddess of fertility, and each year one lucky man wins the privilege of making an offering to this goddess by spending a week with a sixteen-year-old virgin who has been selected as the newest temple prostitute. With the pain of her son's death still fresh in her mind, Timna watches as Urbaal is selected the winner and exuberantly claims his prize.

"And while others celebrated she walked away slowly homeward, seeing life in a new and painful clarity: *with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man.*"<sup>2</sup>

This fictional story is both sad and insightful. Timna's conclusion reveals a profound truth—namely, that the gods we believe in and serve often define our reality. While this truth

will resonate with many readers, other minds will quickly move toward thoughts of other religions and other gods.

But what about our God? Who is the God we serve? What do Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience actually reveal about this God, and is it consistent with what we believe, what we have been taught, and what we have taught others?

For far too long, Christians have accepted pictures of God that are not only scripturally fictitious but also harmful to our world. The results have been twofold: Either the inconsistencies and unfathomability of our particular picture of God have prevented us from fully embracing God (option 3), or we have fully embraced a false picture of God and, therefore, had our lives conformed to that image (option 4). The former has led to a lukewarm and complacent church that has seen many walk away unsatisfied. The latter has led to horrific acts of war, injustice, and hate, such as the Crusades, the Holocaust, and—more recently—the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas.

Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon are correct that the church has been preoccupied with apologetics, trying to prove the existence of God in an attempt to combat atheism. However, “Christian theology should be preoccupied with the more biblical question, What *kind* of God exists?”<sup>3</sup>

Inconsistent and unhealthy pictures of God have led to inconsistent and unhealthy followers. With a different God, we would be different people. We therefore seek to deconstruct false pictures of God and reveal a healthier, more consistent, and more scriptural picture of God. Before we can convince the world that this God exists, we must first evidence a God

worthy of belief, a God who can actually transform lives and the world.

For this reason, our book begins with the assumption that the God introduced in the Old Testament and made known through Christ in the New Testament does, in fact, exist. Admittedly, our primary audience consists of those who already believe in the existence of this God and who probably already have some type of connection to this God.

However, we hope that all who read this book, whether or not they believe God exists, will consider the feasibility of the God we describe and the impact that belief in this God could have on our world. It is our humble conviction that this particular God is in fact the hope of the world and that as Christians start to grapple with the nature and character of this God, and begin to wholeheartedly embrace this God, they will give their lives over to this God and to God's mission in this world.

The second focus of the book is to discuss our response and responsibility to this God and this world. It is our hope that as we unfold this particular picture of God, readers will fall deeply in love with God, either for the first time or all over again. We believe an embrace of this God will instill within each person a deep desire for commitment to the mission of God in this world. We hope this book will move you to deeper relationship and deeper community.

The book is divided into three sections, each suggesting a movement away from a particular understanding and toward another and each seeking to answer two specific questions related to God and humanity.

Section 1 (chapters 1, 2, and 3) explores the movement from *fate* to *faith*, seeking to answer these questions: What kind of God is this? and What kind of system did this God create?

Section 2 (chapters 4, 5, and 6) explores the movement from *magic* to *mystery*, seeking to answer these questions: How is God active in the world? and What is our place in this world?

Section 3 (chapters 7, 8, and 9) explores the movement from *destiny* to *desire*, seeking to answer these questions: What is our response to this God? and What is our responsibility in this world?

**SECTION 1**

THE MOVEMENT  
FROM FATE TO FAITH



**What kind of God is this?**

**What kind of system did this God create?**

# 1 FREEING GOD



## Written by God?

“Did God break my neck?”

Joshua Prager<sup>1</sup> has struggled with this question for more than half his life. It is the question that has made him stop believing in God. On May 16, 1990, Joshua and his companions were traversing a winding hill in Jerusalem when a runaway truck carrying four tons of ceramic tiles hit them. One person was killed, many sustained serious injuries, and Joshua was paralyzed from the neck down.

Plagued by questions of *why*, Joshua set out twenty-two years after the crash to find the man who had been driving the runaway truck, seeking answers and some semblance of closure. Yet Joshua’s encounter with Abed, the driver of the runaway truck, left him well short of settled. Instead of showing remorse, Abed spent most of their conversation complaining about his own suffering, taking no responsibility for his part in the tragedy. But the most difficult part for Joshua was Abed’s suggestion that everything that happened that day was

*maktoob* (the Arabic term for “letter,” or “written,” which communicates the idea that events are fated to occur for divine purposes). Abed described how he had lived an unholy life before the crash and how God had ordained this wreck to transform his journey. From where Abed sat, Joshua and all of the victims in the crash were part of a grand scheme that had been written by God to get Abed’s attention.

Overcome by a multitude of emotions, Joshua had to come to terms with the possibility that God might have caused these events. As difficult as this idea was, it actually provided him with some momentary relief. After all, if God had his hands in every activity, then there was likely some purpose behind it all, and at least Joshua had some answers.

Yet it was hard for Joshua to say thank you to this kind of God, especially in his current situation. The words of this reckless truck driver continued to haunt him. How could it be said it was God’s will? Eventually Joshua abandoned that belief. As he began to reflect and research, he realized that what others saw as divine orchestration could simply be a perfect storm of potentialities. Today, when he is asked about the cause of the accident, he describes how his neck snapped because of the lack of a proper headrest in his seat. He speaks about how the driver of the runaway truck had twenty-six driving violations, how the road they traveled was notorious for tragic accidents, with more than 144 reported and many casualties, and how bad the weather conditions were that day.

Joshua’s story may sound outlandish, but it is just one of many similar episodes. The times, places, and events are different, but the basic stories are the same. People faced with disease, death,

or loss cry out for answers, and the best this world can give them is either purposeless chance or divine, random purpose.

*God must have had a reason for the death of that child.*

*God must be trying to tell you something through the loss of that job.*

*That tragedy was meant as a judgment by God.*

*God is in control; everything happens for a reason.*

These types of phrases and our reactions to them say a lot about our understanding of God. (Or is it a misunderstanding?) Do we really believe God causes events like these as part of some divine plan? Do we really believe our lives, the good and the bad, are already written by God?

## **A Tale of Two Gods**

We are not the first people to ask these questions. Throughout history, people have struggled to understand what God is like and how God intervenes in our world. From Augustine to Calvin, Luther to Barth, great Christian thinkers have tried to give us pictures of who God is and how we can describe and interpret divine activity in the world. Theologians have wrestled with many questions about what God predestines, determines, and allows in our present reality.

One of the great points of interest for theologians is the relationship between God's goodness, God's sovereignty, and the recurrence of evil in the world. The question of whether God causes tragedies such as earthquakes, diseases, or even broken necks for some divine purpose is traditionally called *theodicy*. This term was coined by Gottfried Leibniz, a seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician, in an essay where he

sought to articulate the relationship between the freedom of man and the justice of God.<sup>2</sup> The word itself is a combination of the Greek words for “God” and “justice” and expresses the often presumed tension that exists between the two terms. Just as the persons involved in Joshua Prager’s bus accident, Leibniz struggled with whether events were written by God. He wrestled with the relationship between God’s power and character and the seeming lack of justice in the world.

Leibniz believed theodicy could be explained by exploring three particular beliefs about God in the world: God’s power, God’s goodness, and the presence of evil. Leibniz attempted to provide a landscape for how these three realities exist. He postulated that nothing happens without the permission of the universally almighty God, whose every action is consistent with “goodness, justice and holiness.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, though our reasoning fails to understand the permitting of evil, that does not dismiss the reality that the world must be as God intended, and because God is good and all-powerful, the present reality must also be “the best of all possible worlds.”<sup>4</sup>

Leibniz’s views help articulate a popular view of God, one on which people often call when trying to come to grips with the presence of suffering in the world. This first image is what we’ll call the *God of control*. Envisioning God as a God of control helps express the powerful nature of God. This God is the one the psalmist speaks about as the Lord who “reigns,” who makes the “mountains melt like wax” and “guards the lives of his faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps. 97:1, 5, 10). This God has the whole world in his

hands. This is not a God to be taken lightly, because there is no doubt that this God is in charge.

Every image we use to try to express our vision of God has a measure of payoff to it. If there were no benefit to thinking about God in a particular way, then we would abandon that vision for another, more helpful or rewarding one. The positive outcome of these differing views of God is what we'll call *gospels*. The gospel—or good news—of the God of control is that God has a plan, and if we are connected to God, we can rest assured that God will take care of us. In this case, the God of control offers a *gospel of acquiescence*. This God of control is often spoken of in terms of having events predetermined or predestined. This gospel of acquiescence grants a measure of predictability about the world and a comforting simplicity that everything happens for a reason—namely, whatever purpose this God of control has determined should be.

However, though there may be a sense of comfort from the certainty that comes from envisioning this God of control, there is also the potential that this vision creates a level of apathy and complacency among its followers. If we buy into the vision of the God of control, we probably have a theology that settles for a sense of inevitability that this God is at work; therefore, we don't have to be. This is what we'll refer to as a *theology of certainty*. We are willing to trade in some freedom for the comfort that someone greater than us has everything under control, and there is certainly a level of relief that comes from this vision. But is it the best? What kind of life comes from having such a vision of God?

The theology of certainty is present in many of the historical voices of the Christian faith discussing God's control over events of the past and God's influence over the events of the future. From Augustine to Calvin, we see the benefit of understanding the sovereignty of God. We do not suggest that the God of control has no validity in the Christian tradition. In fact, this God seems pretty close to the God we see in the work of Leibniz.

However, Leibniz tries to hold so tightly to the affirmations that God is all powerful and all good that, in a sense, he fails to take seriously the reality of evil. Instead, he seems to dismiss evil as simply part of the plan of this God of control. This flippant dismissal makes him the subject of great critique by the contemporary voices of his day. Voltaire (1694–1778), a renowned historian, philosopher, and prolific writer, was one of these critics and wrote the well-known satire *Candide*<sup>5</sup> in reaction to Leibniz's deterministic God.

The story revolves around a hero named Candide, who is incredibly naïve about the world and its potential dangers. He is greatly influenced by a sage named Pangloss, whose mantra ("things cannot be otherwise than as they are; for as all things have been created for some end, they must necessarily be created for the best end")<sup>6</sup> is a mockery of Leibniz's famous phrase. Through his narrative, Voltaire seeks to disqualify any divine justification for the suffering of humanity by challenging Leibniz's contention that suffering should be accepted as full of meaning and purpose because it comes from the hands of an all-powerful and all-benevolent Creator.

Like many other philosophers of his day, Voltaire was a deist. He was a proponent of God's existence because of the orderly system of the universe, the necessity of a first cause in creation, and the necessity for judgment of good and evil in the end; but he viewed this God as no longer actively participating in the world. For Voltaire, things were not written and were certainly not in their best possible state. Voltaire represents for us the *God of passivity*.

The God of passivity is a completely different vision than the God of control. The God of passivity is still a powerful God but one who has made the choice, in God's vast wisdom, to keep a good distance and let things play out. This is the God who allows death, suffering, and tragedy to occur, not because there is purpose, but simply because that is how the world has been made. This is what we refer to as a *theology of absence*. Theology of absence does not suggest that God is incapable of intervening; simply that God chooses not to intervene. This passive vision of God is best understood as the God who chooses not to show up, and remains silent in the presence of tragedy.

Something positive about the God of passivity is that humanity is allowed to live as it desires. In fact, a theology of absence places a high value on human authority because a theology of absence assumes that no one is coming to the rescue, so we will need to take care of things ourselves. Therefore, the good news from the God of passivity and the theology of absence is the *gospel of autonomy*.

The gospel of autonomy can provide an invigorating sense of pride at the potential of human capability to effect change and progress in the world. It can free us from the burden of in-

evitability, the doom that things are already written, the weight that robs us of the power to choose our way in the world. This passive vision of God sees the benefit of giving up certainty for the potential of freedom.

However, though many of us may see the gospel of autonomy as a potentially admirable vision for the world, we must also consider the downside. There is no guarantee that this absent God has a plan in place when we want delivery. So, when we cry out with the psalmist, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? My God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, but I find no rest” (Ps. 22:1-2), we cannot live in the certainty that the God of passivity will come to the rescue. We must also recognize that having a vision of God as absent can often lead to an inflated sense of arrogance in human progress, leaving us vulnerable to our own potential for moral misgivings.

Are the God of control and the God of passivity the only options? Or is it possible to find a third way to understand and respond to the power of God and the presence of evil in our world? Is it possible God needs to be freed from having to fit nicely into either of these two categories?

## **Setting God Free**

The idea of God needing to be set free is, in itself, a little amusing. Nevertheless, these two visions of God are too small, too simplistic, too black and white. Does God either have to be controlling or passive? Could it be that God is more dynamic than that, more relational, more personal, and more complex?

Many of us subscribe to one of the other two models because they are safe. They present a God we can define and, thus, a God we can manipulate or ignore. These are not the picture of God we see in Scripture, however.

A third view presents itself in a *God of relationship*, who partners with creation, working in and through us to bring about beauty in the midst of tragedy. While this idea is not new, the relational nature of God is often ignored, downplayed, or given lip service without application. Why?

Maybe we are scared to talk about God in relational ways because we feel this makes God too much like us. And if God is like us, then how can God save us? We equate *relational* with *human* and *human* with *weakness*, *vulnerability*, and *fallenness*. Yet we cannot define relational from our perspective. God is the one who first existed in relationship (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and who first created relationship (humanity); therefore, God must be the basis for our definition of what true relationship means and what it looks like.

Arguably, the clearest picture we have of the very essence of God, one that exemplifies God's relational nature, is found in the incarnate Christ, the God who became flesh (John 1:14). The Christological hymn of Philippians 2:6-8 provides us with a panoramic view of God in a microscopic look.

[Christ,] Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be  
used to his own advantage;  
rather, he made himself nothing  
by taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,  
 he humbled himself  
 by becoming obedient to death—  
 even death on a cross!

We look at this passage and are awestruck by the sure absurdity and profundity of it. It presents us with a picture of the self-emptying God who humbled himself to the point of taking on flesh and being a servant, and giving himself on the cross. Here we do not see a dominant and controlling God; neither do we see a passive and distant God. Here we see a God who suffers right alongside creation.

But why would Christ give up everything he had to come and die for sinful humanity? Many who have a view of God as either controlling or passive will wonder why God would act so ungodlike. Herein we miss the main point that a relational view of God can teach us about God's nature. It is not that Christ acted ungodlike, or even abnormal. Rather, Philippians 2:6-8 reveals the very character of the relational God.

Michael Gorman captures this reality in his interpretive paraphrase:

Although Messiah Jesus was in the form of God, a status people assume means the exercise of power, he acted *in* character—in a shockingly ungodlike manner according to normal but misguided human perceptions of divinity, contrary to what we would expect but, in fact, in accord with true divinity—when he emptied and humbled himself.<sup>7</sup>

Christ's very nature is service and sacrifice because Christ's very nature is love and relationship. Moreover, the incarnation and the cross are proof of these realities. It is not the exaltation

of Philippians 2:9-11 that prove Jesus is God but rather the incarnation and the cross.

Jesus' exaltation is not the divine reward for his incarnation and death as God's suffering servant (as this text is normally interpreted), but divine recognition that his suffering-servant behavior is in fact truly "lordly," even godly, behavior.<sup>8</sup>

What about Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament? Does he also share in the loving, serving nature that defines Christ? Or is Richard Dawkins correct in his caricature:

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.<sup>9</sup>

Dawkins is not alone in his critique of the Old Testament God, nor does the criticism come from atheists and agnostics alone. Very early in the church's history, a bishop named Marcion (ca. AD 85–ca. AD 160) wrote a small work called *Antithesis* that outlined the differences he saw between the Old Testament deity and the New Testament God.

This god (Yahweh) is the author of evil—there must be another God, after the analogy of the good tree producing its good fruit. In Christ is found a different disposition, one of a simple and pure benevolence—which differs from the Creator. In Christ a new God is revealed. The Creator God is judicial, harsh, and mighty in war. The Supreme God is gentle and simply good and excellent.<sup>10</sup>

Likewise, many Christians today hold similar views, even if they do not verbalize them. It is evident in their lack of attention to the Old Testament, or at least to parts of the Bible that are difficult to swallow.

But is this antithesis warranted? After all, we do not believe in two Gods or even three Gods but, rather, in one God, *tres personae, una substantia*<sup>11</sup> (three persons, one substance). We believe in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who together form a perfect community and define relationship; who together are involved in creation, redemption, and sanctification; who together are holy, righteous, magnificent, just, eternal, faithful, forgiving, merciful, sovereign, wise, infinite, self-sufficient, unchanging, and sacrificial; and who together define and encapsulate love!

Therefore, we cannot speak of the character and nature of Christ in the incarnation and cross as displayed in Philippians 2:6-8 as antithetical to that of the Father. Rather, Christ reveals to us the Father (John 1:18; 14:6-11). He reveals the heart of the Godhead, who from Genesis to Revelation pursues his creation, desiring a love relationship and inviting his creatures to embody his love to the world (see, for example, Gen. 1:26-28; Deut. 7:9; Ps. 23:6; Jer. 29:11-13; Zeph. 3:17; John 3:16; Rom. 8:37-39; Eph. 2:4-5; 1 John 4:9-10; Rev. 21:2-5). Surely, we can agree that this God is not the passive god of Voltaire. This God is too active, too involved, to be described as absent or indifferent. What about the controlling god of Leibniz? Does our description of God as relational disprove that God is deterministic, controlling all things—even evil?

Let us return to the incarnation from a different angle. While few would disagree that the incarnation of Christ was part of God's master plan, how do we explain the collateral damage that came along with it? In looking at the larger story of Jesus's birth in Matthew 2:16-18, we read about how God warns Joseph to flee to Egypt to escape the tyrant Herod, who fears this new child will threaten his throne; he therefore orders his legions to kill infants and toddlers, in hopes that Jesus will be one of the casualties.

Is this part of God's master plan? Has God determined in advance for the magi to encounter Herod? Does Herod have a choice in his cruel actions? Has God ordained the death of these infants? Is this just part of the providence of God? Is this just the cost of our salvation and the cost of relationship with this God?

It is important to recognize that events like these are much more complicated than a simple yes or no in relation to God's activity. It is never as simple as hard determinism or passive deism. Frank Tupper, writing on this passage, suggests that "the entanglement of the purpose of God with givens which thwart that purpose remains inevitable. God's good work seldom does not awaken new possibilities of evil."<sup>12</sup> The God who is present in the protection of Jesus and the death of infants is the God who acts, "but God is not the sole shaper of events in human history. God does not control everything, and God does not control anything completely."<sup>13</sup> So, then, the God of the universe is the God who has demonstrated a willingness to initiate but a hesitance to dominate.

This is a difficult concept for many.

What kind of God is this? What kind of God initiates actions that awaken possibilities of evil?

A good God!

What kind of God does not seek to control everything?

A servant God!

What kind of God refuses to dominate and instead gives in to the domination of a cross?

A suffering God!

What kind of God creates with purpose but also with possibilities?

A loving God!

A relational God!

## **Free Will and Free Grace**

Relationship requires freedom—freedom to love and freedom to be indifferent, freedom to accept and freedom to reject. This is the dynamism of the God we serve. The God we serve is not a God of passivity or a God of control. The God we serve creates humanity for relationship then frees us to choose. At least this was the story before the fall.

Prior to the fall, humanity (Adam and Eve) roam in the garden with God, free to do anything they want, even free to disobey (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:6). But this disobedience has consequences that have been made known prior to the act. Disobedience ultimately leads to death, but before that, it leads to a loss of free will. Prior to the fall, humanity is free to sin or free not to sin. As a result of the fall, humanity is no longer free not to sin. Yet this sin does not define us!<sup>14</sup>

This foreign object we call *sin* infected and enslaved us (Rom. 5–6). But this is not the end of the story. God did not abandon us after the fall; God reached out to us, through Christ, with grace—a grace that allowed us to be free once again.

John Wesley (1703–91), the father of Methodism, captures this reality when he writes:

And although I have not an absolute power over my own mind, because of the corruption of my nature, yet through the grace of God assisting me I have a power to choose and do good as well as evil.<sup>15</sup>

Wesley termed this grace *prevenient*, the grace that goes before. Thus we understand that while we are no longer under free will, we are still under free grace. That is, through Christ, our freedom is now due to God’s prevenient grace, not human ability—and so it is best to call this freedom free grace.<sup>16</sup> Thus God still allows us the freedom to choose God or reject God—because God desires authentic relationship with us.

Still, our freedom does not come without ramifications for God. For us to be truly free, God must intentionally limit himself. God must limit his actions so as not to control or manipulate humanity. Paradoxically, though, God must also intervene in order to bring about salvation and restoration. As aforementioned, God’s intervention, as good as it is, “awakens new possibilities for evil.”<sup>17</sup>

We have come full circle to the problem of evil. Evil is the inevitable reality of free will. If humanity is given a choice, it will at points choose wrongly (sometimes intentionally, other times unintentionally). This wrong choice—that which is contrary to the heart of God—is sin, and it leads to broken rela-

tionships and broken people and death. God could have taken free will away and made us all robots who always make the right decisions. God could have created us with free will, then abandoned us.

Instead, this relational God, who desires nothing more and nothing less than authentic, intimate relationship with creation, gave us free will. Then, when we messed up, God offered us free grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now, if we choose to disobey, God will still pursue us with unassailable devotion and love—yet never control.

Evil is certainly a problem, and it does not make sense. It, like love, is a mystery. Our questions abound about this world, and our place in it, and the puzzling and hurtful actions of others (as well as our own hurtful actions); and one day we may have all the answers, but for now, we must wrestle with this loving, dynamic God who is ever present through the pains and the joys.

## **A God Who's Willing to Wrestle**

At its core, love is expansive, which means it must reach out, must create, must envelop. Herein lies the answer to the question you have all been thinking as you read through this chapter: *Why did God do it?* If what we have claimed is true:

1. If God created us with free will and now continues to give us free grace;
2. If God knew we would inevitably disobey and that this would unleash all hell;
3. If God knew that in creating us he must limit himself;
4. If God knew that he would also have to suffer . . .

. . . then *why*? Why create humanity?

LOVE.

Love is the only answer. Because God *is* love (1 John 4:16), and love is ever-expanding. Love seeks out relationship, and where there is none, love creates the potential for it. However, love does not force itself, because that would not be love. The greatest attribute of love is not what it does or does not do, not what it says or does not say, but, rather, that it is present.

Interestingly enough, this is the most dominant picture of God throughout Scripture: God is the God who is present—in the midst of celebration and in the midst of suffering. In fact, this is the essence of God’s holy name. The Hebrew name *Yahweh* derives from the Hebrew verb meaning “to be.” God is the great “I AM” (Exod. 3:14), which is another way of saying that God is a present God.

When you look at God’s interactions with his people, you see that God continually tries to place himself in the middle of them. Whether it be the ark of the covenant or the tabernacle; the temple or the commandments; the judges, priests, kings, or prophets; or Jesus himself, God continues to insert himself in our midst in an attempt to reveal God’s love for us and God’s desire for genuine relationship, at great cost to himself.

God does not desire relationship because God is self-consumed, and it’s certainly not because God is needy. God does not seek to force himself upon us or coerce us; God is not trying to guilt or shame us. But God is trying to persuade us. God is trying to reveal the extent of his love to us and, in so doing, draw us to himself. In fact, as we shall see, this God does not mind wrestling with creation and does not mind when creation

wrestles back, as long as it is motivated by love and the desire for genuine relationship.

True love is always messy. It is not the fairy tale we read about in made-up stories. It is a give-and-take, up-and-down, struggling-for-understanding kind of love that is genuine and painful at points but full of joy and hope and peace. This is what God invites us to.

The God we have been speaking about is the God who offers us the *gospel of participation*. Not only does this God love us enough to die for us, but this God also loves us enough to involve us in God's redemptive plan for the world. This loving partnership does not guarantee that life will not be messy, but it also reminds us that this God has proven he will never leave us alone.

This space to work together calls us to take on the responsibility of being God's people in the world. This vision of wrestling with God leaves room in our philosophy for a *theology of luck*. The presence of that luck is what reminds us that we serve neither the God of control nor the God of passivity but, instead, a God of relationship who serves, sacrifices, and remains present. The good news of this relational God is that he calls us to real participation with him to bring about the world as he desires. This vision of God is what we invite you to explore with us.

### **Questions for Further Reflection or Small Group Discussion**

1. What tragic experiences have you had in your own life?  
How have these experiences shaped your view of God?

2. How do you think you would have responded if you were Joshua Prager, and Abed told you that your injury had a divine purpose?
3. Have you ever heard of the term *theodicy*? How was it defined for you?
4. If you had to choose between Leibniz's view of God and Voltaire's, whose would you choose? Why?
5. Reread the two versions of Philippians 2:6-8 that we have provided (the NIV version as well as the Gorman paraphrase). What differences do you notice? Which one resonates with you more deeply?
6. What was your first reaction when you read the description of God from Richard Dawkins? Have you ever thought of God in those terms?
7. Do you believe that relationship requires freedom—even the freedom to reject God?
8. Do you like the idea of being in a relationship with a God who wrestles with us? Why or why not?

## For Further Study

### Beginner to Intermediate

- Boyd, Gregory A. *Is God to Blame? Beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Suffering*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Oord, Thomas Jay. *Science of Love: The Wisdom of Well-Being*. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2004.
- Taylor, Richard S. *What Every Christian Ought to Know: Basic Answers to Questions of the Faith*. Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2002.

## More Advanced

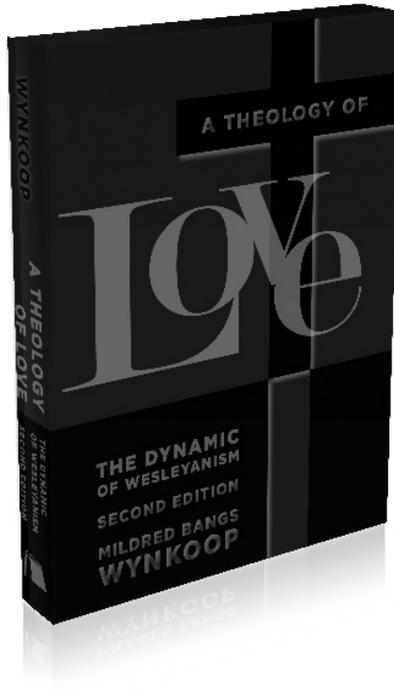
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Gorman, Michael. *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009.

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