

## **GLORIOUS RUIN**

### **Q & A with Author Tullian Tchividjian**

**Q: Tell us about your own personal suffering.**

**A:** My story opened with a phone call that initiated a painful journey that would turn my life and faith upside down. After two years living in Knoxville, TN, my family and I were returning home to sunny South Florida to plant a church, and we were excited. It was not going to be easy, but it was going to be a lot easier *there* than it would be anywhere else. You see, in my hometown I was more than an anonymous pastor. I was a Tchividjian. My parents were well established in the community, my mother as a nationally renowned speaker and author, the daughter of Billy Graham, my father was the sophisticated European psychologist whose practice had helped countless people in the area, not to mention the country. My pedigree would be a huge boost. So when I heard my father's voice on the line, telling me that he and my mother were separating after 41 years of marriage, I didn't know what to say. In my own life, I had put my parents up on a pedestal. As far as I was concerned, they hung the moon, and as long as I was their son, I told myself, I was *someone*. So when they announced their separation, it threw me. I felt like my whole world had been turned upside down. I began to question everything: who I was, what I'd been taught, even the validity of their faith. It was almost like the movie *The Sixth Sense*; I had to go back and reinterpret my entire life. It was painful. Far too many people have suffered the sort of tragic reversals that I have been spared, and no one but God knows or understands the full extent of another person's pain. At the same time, people who haven't experienced major setbacks sometimes feel that their hurts are somehow less legitimate or real. The sincere hope of my book *Glorious Ruin* is to explore how the reality of human suffering, in all its forms, might relate to the truth of God's liberating grace in a way that is both honest and comforting.

**Q: Why another book on suffering?**

**A:** I agree we have enough books that attempt to explain why God allows suffering, presumably in a way that lets God off the hook. And while much smarter men than I have constructed elaborate systems in this pursuit, they are by definition exercises in speculation. To know the "Why" would be to grasp the mind of God, which is something none of us can do. And certainly we also have enough books tackling the "How". That is, *how* suffering can and will transform my life, *how* we can leverage pain and tragedy to make us better people. *How* God is refining my personality through this pain. Results, results, results! Pain would not be pain if we could harness it for personal gain, though the tendency is a universal one. Thankfully, this is not one of those books either. This is not to say that "How?" and "Why?" are not honest questions. Of course they are! But *How* and *Why* can also be a prison leaving us cold and confused, just as they left Job cold when his friends tried to formulate their own tedious answers. Information is seldom enough to heal a suffering heart. The question I would like to emphasize instead--and the only one that will ultimately point us toward the truth--is the *Who* amidst our suffering. Which is fortunate, since it is the only question that God has seen fit to answer, concretely, in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

**Q: You are proposing that the question we should ask when facing suffering is "Who?"**

**A:** Absolutely. We don't need answers and explanations as much as we need God's presence in and through the suffering. For the life of the believer, one thing is beautifully and abundantly true: God's chief concern in your suffering is to be with you and be himself *for* you. The Gospel is not ultimately a defense from pain, it is the message of God's rescue *through* pain. In fact, it allows us to drop our defenses, to escape not from pain but from the prison of "How" and "Why" to the freedom of "Who?" We are not responsible for finding the right formula to combat or unlock our suffering. The balm of Gilead does not

consist of theological assertions or some elaborate religious how-to manual. The balm is Jesus himself, the man of sorrows, the crucified God who meets us in our grief. Indeed, information, even information about Jesus, is relatively useless when it comes to the aching soul. Only the Holy Spirit can comfort a person in the depths of grief.

**Q: The idea that the Holy Spirit comforts us in our grief is not uncommon but what does the Gospel – the story of God’s limitless grace, mercy and forgiveness – really have to do with suffering?**

**A:** Everything! The Gospel frees us to speak honestly about the reality of pain, confident that nothing is riding on our ability to cope with or fend off suffering. Before we can even begin to grapple with the frustrations and tragedies of life in this world, we must do away with our faithless morality of payback and reward. We must reacquaint ourselves with the biblical weight of the problem that we less-than-perfect human beings contend with in the face of a holy and righteous God. We must return to the beginning (and end) of the whole affair: the Cross. And by the power of the Holy Spirit, we must pray that our eyes would be opened, that we would see the Crucifixion for what it is, not looking away, or through, or past it. Because that’s when we begin to realize how amazing His grace really is. Thank the Lord that He doesn’t count our sins against us! Praise God for settling the score and closing the accounts, once for all! Hallelujah! Grace is the opposite of what we deserve, and it is exactly what we get.

For those who are suffering, my hope is that clearing away the clutter of this nefarious idea of cosmic payback is a relief. If you have suffered the loss of a family member to chronic disease, if you suffer debilitating seasons of depression, if you have lost your job and livelihood, gone through a divorce that came out of the blue, know that God is not punishing you. He is not waiting for you to do something. You are not obligated to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and find a way to conquer the odds, to be stronger or transform yourself into some better version of yourself. The pain you are feeling (whatever the degree) may be a reminder that things are not as they should be, in which case it is appropriate to mourn the gravity of that brokenness.

My prayer for anyone who reads my book is they will begin to comprehend the height, depth, and length of the love of Jesus right in the very middle of their present suffering.

**Q: You explained that the Gospel frees us to speak honestly about our pain and to grieve without shame. Can you share more about that?**

**A:** The emotional realism of the Bible took on a new urgency for me when my father was dying in late 2009 and early 2010. Before he died, he lived in the intensive care unit in for about five months, following liver transplant surgery. I remember going to see him in the hospital one night after a meeting at church. It was the first time I had been to see him after his surgery. And I walked into the intensive care unit and burst into tears—it was almost uncontrollable. There were tubes coming out of every part of his body, he was bloated, he was discolored, I had never physically seen my father look like this. He looked dead. It was devastating. Job’s friends must have had an image in their minds of what their friend looked like and who he was. Then they saw him, and even from a distance they didn’t recognize him. And when they finally recognized him and saw how disfigured and undone he was, they wept aloud, just like me in that hospital room.

**Q: Your emotions in that situation were completely understandable, but doesn’t the knowledge that God is in control dictate a control valve for expression of those deep emotions?**

**A:** In reality, no. The good news here is that Christianity is in no way a stoic faith. It fundamentally rejects the “stiff upper lip” school of thought. Unfortunately, some Christians are guilty of throwing out an equivalent sentiment when they play the “God is sovereign” card as a way to trump every evil that comes your way.

"Sure, trouble will come, but don't cry" says the Sovereignty Card Stoic "don't allow yourself to feel deep, painful emotions. After all, God is in complete control. If you show lack of self-control, you must not be living in faith."

Instead, in our deepest places of pain and suffering, there is an invitation of grace.

God is inviting you today to appropriately grieve your pains and losses and to acknowledge the world is seriously broken. This does not mean casting yourself exclusively as the self-pitying victim of circumstances beyond your control, or indulging in entitlement when it comes to God and our fellow sufferers. Make no mistake, we are all both victims *and* victimizers. Just as everyone suffers, no one is innocent of causing suffering themselves. It simply means owning up to the reality of your own suffering and need, which is 100%.

God is not interested in what you think you *should* be or feel. He is not interested in the narrative you have constructed for yourself, or that others have constructed for you—even the one that your church has constructed for you. He may even be using suffering to deconstruct those narratives. He is interested in you, the you who suffers, the you who inflicts suffering on others, the you who hides, the you who has bad days (and good ones). And He meets you where you are. Jesus is not man at the top of the stairs, he is the man at the bottom, the friend of sinners, the savior of those in need of one. Which is all of us, all of the time, praise be to God!

**Q: How did you begin to really understand the true meaning of the Cross?**

**A:** I'm not proud—but I am grateful—to say that despite having been in ministry for most of my adult life, it took the painful trial of our church merger to teach me the true meaning of the Cross. First, however, God used the crucible of suffering to disillusion me about who I was. The pain cleared my vision, and once it was taken away, I realized just how much I'd been relying on the endorsement of others to make me feel like I mattered. I had turned personal validation into my primary source of meaning and value (what theologians call the basis of my self-justification), so that without it I was miserable and depressed. I had made something good—the approval and admiration of others—into an idol. As if that weren't enough, I became frustrated with myself for not being as sturdy and unquestioning as I knew a man in my position should be. And the pressure I put on myself to exhibit strength and faithfulness only exposed my frailty and faithlessness all the more. What kind of Christian leader was *I*? How could *I* allow these circumstances to get *me* down the way they had? Where was *my* faith? Where was *my* trust in God?

Martin Luther once defined sin as "mankind turned inward." And sadly, somewhere along the line, my understanding of the Christian life had become terribly narcissistic. I was spending too much time thinking about how I was doing, if I was learning everything I was supposed to be learning during this difficult season, whether I was doing it right or not, taking my spiritual pulse, etc – my inner lawyer was working overtime. I dwelled on my failures and brooded over my momentary successes. In short, I was spending way too much time thinking about me and what I needed to do, and far too little time thinking about Jesus and what he had already done for me. What I discovered was that the more I focused on my need to get better the worse I actually got—the more neurotic and self-conscious and self-absorbed I became. And so God took me up on my unwitting invitation to the congregation and gave me the gift I never meant to ask for: he gave me the gift of suffering. God did not rescue me out of the pain, He rescued me through the pain!

**Q: What do you mean by saying your were "rescued through the pain?"**

**A:** I had to learn the hard way (the only way?) that the gospel alone can free us from our addiction to being liked—that Jesus measured up for us so that we wouldn't have to live under the enslaving pressure of measuring up for others—including ourselves. I finally understood what Paul meant in Romans 10:4 when he

wrote that Christ is the “end of the law.” Because of Jesus’ finished work for me, I already had the justification, approval, acceptance, security, freedom, affection, cleansing, new beginning, righteousness, and rescue I was longing for. There was nothing left to prove or protect, no one to impress or appease. I could be okay with not being okay. I was freed from the burden of trying to control what other people thought about me, from the miserable, unquenchable pursuit to make something of myself. I was free to be honest, with others, with myself, with God. Indeed, I even found that the Gospel freed me having to understand my freedom adequately in order to possess it. We are not justified by our understanding of God’s grace, after all, we are justified by the death and resurrection of Christ!

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